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Representative strategies of opposition MPs in an electoral autocracy: a typology of young Hungarian parliamentarians

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representative strategies of young Hungarian opposition MPs to improve our understanding of opposition behaviour in electoral autocracies. Based on fifteen semi-structured interviews, four ideal-typical strategies are identified. These offer different ways of reconciling democratic ideals of representation with limited institutional influence and reflect distinct socialisation experiences and interpretive orientations. The results show that opposition representation is neither uniform nor solely defined by parliamentary marginalisation, but also highlight the limitations of adaptive innovation: even when opposition actors experiment with new representation forms, these practices tend to perpetuate limited modes of opposition rather than generate broader systemic transformation.

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Introduction

Contemporary representative democracies are increasingly characterised by declining public trust, weakening partisan attachments, and growing dissatisfaction with traditional representative institutions. Citizens across a wide range of political systems increasingly express a sense of distance from their elected representatives and question whether parliaments and political parties are acting in their best interests (Guasti and Geissel 2019; Van Biezen, Mair, and Poguntke 2012; Weßels 2015). These developments have fuelled intense scholarly debate on the transformation and reconfiguration of political representation, particularly in relation to processes such as personalisation, audience democracy, and the expansion of mediated politics (including digital platforms) (de Beus 2011; Hendriks and Reid 2024; Manin 1997; Papacharissi 2015).

These challenges are especially pronounced in regimes undergoing democratic backsliding and autocratisation. Since 2017, more countries have shifted toward autocracy than toward democracy, making electoral autocracy the most prevalent regime type worldwide (Levitsky and Way 2020; Nord et al. 2025). Although electoral autocracies retain the formal structures of representative democracy, such as multiparty elections,

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parliaments, and opposition parties, the actual functioning of these institutions is systematically undermined. Executive dominance constrains institutional autonomy, while highly unequal access to media and communicative resources reshapes the conditions under which political representation is enacted (Demmelhuber and Youngs 2023; Martínez and Morgenbesser 2020; Schedler 2002). In such contexts, opposition actors must confront not only the general challenges affecting contemporary representation, but also the regime-specific constraints that place them in structurally asymmetric and adversarial positions.

Existing research on opposition politics under electoral autocracy has focused predominantly on party-level dynamics, including coalition-building, electoral coordination, and organisational survival within semi-competitive elections (e.g. Gandhi and Reuter 2013; Laštro and Bieber 2021; Windecker, Vergioglou, and Jacob 2025). While this literature offers important insights into how opposition parties navigate authoritarian constraints, considerably less is known about how individual opposition representatives enact political representation between elections – when formal power is minimal, institutional influence is structurally constrained, and visibility, legitimacy, and relevance must be actively produced through everyday political practice.

This gap is particularly salient in the case of younger opposition Members of Parliament. Entering parliamentary politics already under conditions of democratic erosion, young MPs construct their representative roles in a political environment where constrained legislative influence and asymmetrical power relations constitute the structural baseline rather than a temporary disruption. Unlike preceding generations, they lack experiential reference points to periods in which opposition parliamentary work could plausibly translate institutional engagement into substantive policy impact. At the same time, as a generational cohort, they are socialised in a highly digitalised and mediated political environment shaped by personalisation, continuous visibility, and audience-oriented communication – developments that characterise contemporary representation well beyond autocratic contexts. This combination creates a distinctive representational situation in which severely constrained institutional positions coexist with access to communicative repertoires that may expand the range of ways in which representation is enacted, justified, and potentially reimagined.

Accordingly, this article examines the representative strategies of young opposition MPs as an empirical entry point into a central tension of opposition politics under electoral autocracy: how political representation is sustained when institutional effectiveness is structurally constrained. Rather than assessing political change directly, the study focuses on how this tension is articulated in actors' own interpretations and practices. By analysing how young MPs define their representative ideals, interpret the constraints they face, and construct strategies to manage the gap between the two, the article assesses whether prevailing forms of opposition representation primarily reflect routinised adaptation or also contain elements of experimentation and bounded reorientation.

Empirically, the study draws on fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in 2025 with current and former opposition MPs aged 18–40 in Hungary, the only electoral autocracy within the European Union (Bozóki and Zoltán 2024; Nord et al. 2025). From an analytical perspective, representation is approached as a dynamic and performative process, examined through the arenas, modes, and substantive focuses through which it is enacted. While the primary emphasis lies on identifying patterned strategies of

representation, the analysis also situates these strategies – at a secondary level – within broader socialisation experiences and political thinking, adopting a multilevel integrative perspective.

The findings contribute to the literature by developing a new typology of opposition representation under electoral autocracy. Based on the experiences of young Hungarian MPs, the analysis identifies four ideal-typical representative strategies – *the Constituency Builder*, *the Activist*, *the Political Influencer*, and *the Institutional* – each reflecting a distinct way of navigating structural constraints and asymmetries shaped by specific socialisation experiences and interpretive orientations and highlighting the coexistence of distinct democratic imaginaries within a single opposition field.

The typology shows that opposition representation in electoral autocracies is neither monolithic nor reducible to parliamentary marginalisation but consists of qualitatively different representational logics that respond to eroding institutional effectiveness in divergent ways. Yet even innovative and adaptive forms of opposition representation remain embedded in the broader logic of electoral autocracy, tending to stabilise constrained modes of opposition rather than generate systemic transformation.

The article begins by outlining the theoretical framework and research design, before moving on to the empirical analysis and implications of the findings.

Rethinking opposition representation under electoral autocracy

General transformations of representation in the context of electoral autocracy

Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualises political representation as a dynamic and performative process of claim-making, rather than as a fixed institutional relationship. From a constructivist perspective, representation consists of recurring public acts through which political actors articulate who they represent, what they stand for and the arenas in which their claims should be validated (Castiglione and Pollak 2018; Disch, de Sande, and Urbinati 2019; Saward 2008; 2010). This approach widens the analytical focus beyond parliamentary decision-making, encompassing mediated communication, symbolic action, constituency engagement and public presence as meaningful sites of representative activity, and foregrounds representation as something that must be continuously enacted rather than institutionally assumed.

This reconceptualisation is closely linked to broader transformation of representative democracy. The decline of partisan attachments, the weakening of intermediary organisations, and growing distrust toward representative institutions have increased pressures on representatives to demonstrate responsiveness and relevance through continuous visibility and audience-oriented communication (Manin 1997; Michailidou and Trenz 2013). In what Manin famously termed “audience democracy”, legitimacy is produced in the public sphere through performance, narration, and mediation rather than through parliamentary deliberation alone. Digital platforms further intensify these dynamics by privileging immediacy, emotion, and personalisation, thereby reshaping how representative claims are articulated and evaluated (Neihouser 2023; Papacharissi 2015).

Electoral autocracies are not exempt from these broader developments of contemporary representation. The decline in the importance of parliamentary work and the growing significance of non-institutional and mediated spaces are also evident in such regimes. However, electoral autocracy does not merely reproduce these trends; it also reshapes

and distorts them. Although elections, political parties and parliaments formally continue to exist, the dominance of the executive, resource imbalances and the systematic weakening of oversight fundamentally alter the way in which representative practices can be implemented (Levitsky and Way 2020; Schedler 2002). These structural conditions also reshape the role of citizens within the representational relationship. Instead of participating in deliberative processes, citizens are increasingly positioned as audiences to orchestrated political performance. This transformation has been conceptualised as a form of “illiberal spectatorship”, capturing how autocratising regimes turn substantive citizenship into managed spectatorship (Sata and Karolewski 2023).

Under these conditions, representational marginalisation has a precise meaning: it refers to the systematic reduction of the opposition’s capacity to influence agendas, translate parliamentary activity into policy outcomes, or access the primary channels through which political claims become publicly salient (Helms 2021, 2023). Opposition representatives therefore face a dual challenge. On the one hand, they must respond to general contemporary demands for visibility, responsiveness, and continuous public engagement. On the other hand, they must do so in a context where institutional effectiveness is structurally limited and communicative resources are unevenly distributed. This combination makes representation less a matter of institutional authority than of sustained public claim-making under constraint.

Even under authoritarian conditions, parliamentary representation is not rendered irrelevant; it is merely reconfigured. When legislative influence is limited by design, parliaments continue to serve as platforms for signalling, scrutiny and controlled contestation, where claims to representation can be articulated and assessed publicly (Simison 2020; Wiebrecht 2021). For opposition actors, parliamentary activity therefore has a primarily communicative and symbolic purpose: rather than shaping policy outcomes, it demonstrates dissent, preserves oversight norms and sustains an ethos of accountability in an environment where institutional effectiveness is predictably limited.

Existing scholarship suggests that when parliamentary tools lose efficacy, democratic opposition actors often turn toward extra-institutional repertoires. Electoral or legislative boycotts may serve to express dissent or symbolically delegitimise institutions; however, their political impact typically depends on external leverage, most notably international mediation (Aras and Helms 2021; Helms 2023). By contrast, protest mobilisation can have more consequential effects, particularly when it is embedded in broader civil society coalitions that transcend partisan boundaries and shift public attention beyond routine parliamentary politics (Buttorff 2019; Hauser 2019; Laštro and Bieber 2021; Mikola and Santos 2025).

As institutional space narrows, opposition actors increasingly rely on hybrid repertoires that combine parliamentary presence with extra-parliamentary mobilisation and mediated communication (Somer, McCoy, and Luke 2021; Yabancı 2024). Rather than constituting innovation for its own sake, these practices are best understood as compensatory strategies that emerge when conventional parliamentary instruments lose efficacy and agenda-setting power becomes concentrated in the executive. At the individual level, MPs may also rely on constituency service as an alternative channel of credibility and accountability; evidence from contexts such as Morocco suggests that opposition MPs can strengthen their representative position by providing targeted local services even under authoritarian constraints (York 2024).

Comparative research supports this interpretation by showing that opposition representatives in authoritarian and hybrid regimes often operate within a narrow corridor shaped by risk, control, and limited institutional leverage. In such contexts, MPs frequently find themselves positioned between representing societal interests and accommodating regime constraints, producing bounded and ambivalent forms of representation rather than straightforward resistance or withdrawal (Somfalvy 2020). This perspective highlights how representative roles are reworked under authoritarian conditions through a combination of institutional signalling, extra-parliamentary engagement, and mediated claim-making.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest that opposition representation under electoral autocracy cannot be understood in terms of institutional capacity or strategic adaptation alone. Instead, it emerges at the intersection of normative expectations regarding democratic representation and the limited conditions in which these expectations can be realised in practice. Opposition MPs must therefore continuously navigate the gap between what representation should entail and what can be achieved within authoritarian institutional environments. This enduring disjuncture provides the conceptual starting point for analysing opposition behaviour not simply as resistance or accommodation, but as patterned forms of representative practice. The following section conceptualises opposition behaviour as patterned representative strategies shaped by this enduring disjuncture, providing an analytical entry point for this tension between representative ideals and empirical realities.

Ideals, realities, and representative strategies – conceptual framework

Building on the preceding discussion of representational transformation under electoral autocracy, the aim of this study is to provide a nuanced insight into individual opposition representative strategies, moving beyond reductive or dismissive accounts of opposition politics by illuminating the dilemmas, constraints, and significance of representative activity in electoral autocracies.

It is assumed that young opposition MPs possess ideal conceptions of representation, yet due to the limitations imposed by the particularities of the electoral autocratic political system, these conceptions cannot be realised. Consequently, these representatives must adapt these conceptions to the prevailing social and political circumstances. The manner in which these conceptions are realised is termed a “representative strategy” within the framework of this study, emphasising that strategies are not merely tactical choices but structured responses to enduring constraints.

In this conceptualisation, a distinction is drawn between ideals and realities. The term “ideals” is employed to denote the normative visions held by young MPs with regard to the nature of representation in a democratic context, resonating with the broader tradition of representation theory that distinguishes between normative conceptions and empirical practices (Pitkin 1967; Rehfeld 2009; Saward 2008). The term “realities” refers to the challenges and constraints that MPs identify as the most significant obstacles in their political activity, which in turn shape the strategies they develop. The crux of this tension lies in the question of how MPs are able to maintain their legitimacy, visibility, and efficacy as representatives, despite operating within contexts that systematically undermine conventional democratic channels.

Representative strategies provide patterned responses to this tension. They signify not simply individual styles or personality traits, but coherent configurations that organise how MPs allocate effort, justify their role, and seek legitimacy under constraint. Analytically, these strategies can be decomposed into three interrelated dimensions that map onto contemporary representation theory: arenas, modes, and focuses. The term “arenas” is employed to denote the spaces in which MPs fulfil their representative functions, and the relative importance they ascribe to each. This builds on work that situates representation across multiple and overlapping sites, from parliaments to protest arenas (Diehl and Saward 2024; Disch, de Sande, and Urbinati 2019; Lappy 2025). Under electoral autocracy, the relative weight of these arenas becomes a strategic choice: a key question is how opposition MPs assign significance to different channels of representation, and how they balance institutional, extra-parliamentary, and mediated arenas in sustaining representative legitimacy and agency under constraint.

“Modes” of representation captures the heterogeneity of practices through which MPs articulate and enact their representative function (e.g. legislative scrutiny, questioning, speeches, constituency service, symbolic protest, media work, digital communication). These modes matter because they reveal how MPs navigate structural constraints in everyday representative practice: when direct policy influence is limited, a key empirical question concerns which activities MPs prioritise and how these choices are justified (Ilonszki and Edinger 2007; Simison 2020; Wiebrecht 2021).

Finally, “focuses” refer to the different kinds of constituencies and issues MPs claim to represent – whether defined territorially, socially, or ideologically (Celis et al. 2008; Eulau et al. 1959; Neihouser 2023; Saward 2010). This dimension connects classic role conceptions to constructivist claim-making, highlighting that constituencies are not simply given but actively constructed and prioritised. Under conditions of electoral autocracy, a key question concerns which groups and issues can plausibly be claimed as representative objects, and how these choices shift in response to political opportunities, risks, and constraints.

By disaggregating representative strategies into these three dimensions, the study links micro-level representative practices to the macro-level constraints of electoral autocracy, allowing us to examine how opposition MPs navigate the tension between normative ideals and constrained realities, and how they utilise various arenas, modes and focuses in their efforts to maintain legitimacy, visibility and political agency in challenging circumstances.

In line with the extant literature, representative strategies are understood to be shaped by both past and ongoing processes of socialisation and by political thinking as an intermediate interpretative layer linking experience to practice (Kormaz 2024). Adopting a multilevel and integrative theoretical perspective (Barrett and Brunton-Smith 2014), this study conceptualises political socialisation as operating across four interacting levels – macro, meso, micro, and individual – which together provide the background conditions and experiential inputs shaping representative behaviour.

The macro level refers to the broader socio-political and economic context, including the historical legacies of past regimes and the characteristics of the current political system (Chrysoschoou and Barrett 2017). The meso level encompasses institutional settings such as political parties, educational institutions, and the media, which structure opportunities for political participation and representation. The micro level includes

interpersonal relationships and primary socialisation environments – most notably family and peer networks – while the individual level concerns personal dispositions, motivations, and accumulated political experiences (Muxel 2022; Renström and Bäck 2022).

Political thinking, in this conceptualisation, functions as an intermediate normative – interpretive layer between socialisation experiences and concrete representative strategies. It shapes how structural constraints are perceived, evaluated, and rendered meaningful, and how these interpretations are translated into choices of arenas, modes, and substantive focuses of representation. Accordingly, the analysis treats differences in MPs' socialisation trajectories and normative orientations of representation as conditioning factors in the formation of distinct representative strategies.

Research design

Hungarian case

Hungary provides a critical case for exploring the representative strategies of young MPs under conditions of electoral autocracy. Over the past decade and a half, the country has undergone a well-documented process of democratic backsliding, evolving from a consolidated post-communist democracy into one of the most frequently cited examples of electoral autocracy within the European Union (Benedek 2024; Bozóki and Zoltán 2024; Gora and de Wilde 2020). Since 2010, the repeated constitutional supermajorities of the Fidesz – KDNP alliance have enabled the systematic centralisation of executive power, the weakening of institutional checks, and the entrenchment of ruling-party dominance across parliamentary, media, and judicial spheres. Research on parliamentary functioning shows that these developments have reduced the visibility of contestation and limited the influence of opposition parties within parliament (Ilonszki and Dudzińska 2021; Várnagy and Ilonszki 2018), while also reshaping the arenas of extra-parliamentary political competition and representation.

As conventional parliamentary instruments have lost effectiveness, opposition actors have increasingly relied on performative, symbolic, and mediated practices, ranging from parliamentary protest and obstruction to extra-parliamentary mobilisation and digital communication (Political Capital 2023). Awareness of structural disadvantage has also fostered periodic strategic coordination, most notably during the 2019 municipal elections and the subsequent, ultimately unsuccessful, attempt at nationwide cooperation in 2022 (Hegedűs 2019; Manzenaro 2019; Mikola and Santos 2025).

At the same time, opposition actors have experimented with alternative modes of representation that blend institutional, extra-institutional, and online arenas. The 2018 “slave law” protests epitomised this convergence of parliamentary action, street mobilisation and online communication. As the government tightened its grip on mainstream media outlets, opposition actors increasingly turned to digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and TikTok to bypass official narratives and engage with citizens directly. Independent media outlets such as Partizán and MÉRCE offered additional spaces for oppositional discourse and the visualisation of dissent (Murphy 2022; Spike 2024).

Existing research, however, cautions against interpreting this digital turn as a sign of deeper democratic renewal within party organisations. Analysing the internal use of digital tools by Hungarian political parties, Oross and Paul (2021) show that digitalisation has primarily resulted in communication modernisation rather than a substantive

expansion of internal participation or deliberation. Digital tools are predominantly used to centralise messaging and strengthen top-down coordination, while meaningful participatory innovation remains limited to a small number of new, mostly left-liberal parties. This suggests that, rather than transforming party democracy, digital infrastructures primarily function as strategic instruments within a highly centralised and executive-dominated political environment.

Despite these insights, we still know little about how individual MPs navigate this hybrid communicative environment in practice, or how generational position shapes representative strategies under electoral autocracy. Addressing this gap, the present qualitative study examines how young opposition MPs interpret and enact political representation under conditions of electoral autocracy, with particular attention to how they distribute effort across arenas, prioritise modes of action, and construct representative focuses under asymmetric constraints.

Data and sample

The present analysis is based on fifteen semi-structured interviews conducted in spring 2025 with eleven current and four former opposition MPs, all of whom belonged to the 18–40 age cohort at the time of their parliamentary mandate. The data collection took place within the framework of the REDIRECT project (Representative Disconnect: Diagnosis and Strategies for Rectification; HORIZON-CL2-2022-DEMOCRACY-01 – 101095142). Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 min. Eleven participants were serving under the current Orbán government at the time of the interviews, while four had held parliamentary mandates during earlier Orbán governments; all provided informed consent. Depending on the participants' preferences and availability, the interviews were conducted either face-to-face (approximately one-third of the sample) or online (approximately two-thirds).¹

Respondents were drawn from across the parliamentary opposition and span the full ideological spectrum, ranging from left and centre-left to centre-right and far-right positions. Ideological positioning is captured using expert-coded left-right placement from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES; see [Table 1](#)), which allows the study to account for substantial ideological variation and differing organisational contexts in which representational strategies emerge, while avoiding the disclosure of individual party affiliations. In accordance with the provisions outlined in the informed consent forms, neither the precise age nor the political party affiliation of respondents is disclosed; instead, age is reported in cohorts, ensuring full compliance with data protection requirements without compromising analytical leverage.²

At the time of fieldwork, 22 of the 199 members of the Hungarian National Assembly were aged between 18 and 40. Of these, eight were affiliated with the governing parties, while the remaining MPs in this age group represented opposition parties. Importantly, there are substantial differences in the number of young MPs across opposition parties. Some opposition parties have no MPs in this age cohort at all (most notably the Hungarian Socialist Party, MSZP), while others are represented by only one or two MPs. By contrast, parties with a pronounced generational profile – most notably Momentum – are structurally overrepresented among younger parliamentarians (see Appendix, Table A1, for the age and gender composition of parliamentary party groups).

Table 1. Anonymised respondent characteristics based on age cohort and ideological position (CHES).

Respondent ID	Age cohort	Ideological positioning (CHES)
R1	36–40	centre-left
R2	31–35	centre-left
R3	36–40	left/centre-left
R4	36–40	left/centre-left
R5	36–40	centre-right
R6	36–40	centre-right
R7	36–40	centre/centre-left
R8	36–40	centre/centre-left
R9	36–40	centre/centre-left
R10	36–40	centre/centre-left
R11	31–35	centre/centre-left
R12	18–30	centre/centre-left
R13	31–35	centre/centre-left
R14	31–35	left/centre-left
R15	18–30	right/far right

Accordingly, the distribution of respondents across parties in the sample reflects the underlying generational structure of the Hungarian parliament rather than a sampling bias introduced by the research design. Given the very limited number of opposition MPs in the 18–40 age cohort, the interviews cover nearly the entire population of young opposition parliamentarians, rather than a selective or convenience sample.

The six parties represented in the sample emerged at different moments in Hungary's post-transition political trajectory. Jobbik, founded in 2003, began as a radical right movement and later sought to reposition itself as a conservative people's party, though it has since declined electorally. Our Homeland Movement, formed in 2018 as Jobbik's break-away, represents a hard-line nationalist and populist alternative that gained parliamentary representation in 2022. LMP, established in 2009, introduced environmental politics to the Hungarian party system, while Dialogue split from LMP in 2013 to advocate a more explicitly left-green agenda. The Democratic Coalition, founded in 2011 by former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, espouses a social-liberal, pro-European orientation. Finally, Momentum Movement, created in 2017 by a younger generation of urban professionals, emerged as a centrist, progressive, and strongly pro-EU party. These organisational trajectories and historical legacies matter not as party-specific effects, but as distinct socialisation environments that form an important backdrop to the representational strategies analysed in this study, even though individual party affiliations are not disclosed at the respondent level.

While participants came from diverse social backgrounds, all were highly educated – most holding degrees in the social sciences or humanities – and politically experienced. Roughly three-fifths had held local government mandates prior to entering parliament. Although gender imbalance persists in this cohort, the distribution is somewhat more balanced than in the Hungarian National Assembly as a whole: men account for around two-thirds of the group (64 per cent). By comparison, women hold only 31 of the 199 parliamentary seats nationally. This imbalance reflects structural constraints rather than sampling bias. To ensure confidentiality, further demographic details are withheld.

Methodological approach

The interviews aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how young opposition MPs perceive political representation, with a focus on how they interpret and fulfil their representative roles in the context of democratic erosion (see Appendix: Table A2). The interview guide functioned as a flexible framework, enabling participants to articulate their reasoning across multiple dimensions of representation. This design encouraged a dynamic and reflexive approach, capturing how MPs interpret, negotiate, and potentially reconfigure their understanding of representation in response to structural constraints. The format also encouraged reflection on how personal trajectories, party environments and generational experiences shape representational practices.

This study focuses specifically on direct and indirect questions concerning MPs' ideal conceptions of representation, their practical experiences of enacting these ideals, and the strategies they develop to reconcile tensions between normative expectations and constrained political realities. Particular attention is paid to three analytical dimensions: the arenas, modes, and focuses of representation.

Given the manageable volume of material, manual coding was applied, combining deductive and inductive reasoning to link the conceptual framework with interview evidence. Although more labour-intensive than automated methods, this approach enabled deeper contextual interpretation by keeping analytical categories closely tied to respondents' narratives. The interviews were analysed using a three-stage coding process based on Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). The first stage involved open coding, whereby words, meanings and experiences relating to the three central themes – ideal representation, practical experiences and proposed representative strategies – were identified and grouped into initial categories. The second stage, axial coding, examined the relationships among these categories and identified emerging patterns. In the final stage, selective coding was used to trace recurring patterns across the interviews. These patterns were then compared, differentiated and synthesized into broader dimensions, which formed the basis for constructing ideal-typical conceptions that capture the key variations.

The ideal types developed in this study function as heuristic analytical tools. They do not aim to capture the full complexity or diversity of individual political behaviour, nor to exhaust all possible trajectories of representation. Rather, they distil and illuminate the core logics through which young opposition MPs conceptualise and enact representation under conditions of electoral autocracy and democratic erosion, while also situating these strategies in relation to their socialisation experiences, political identities, and partisan contexts.

Importantly, the analysis indicates that all identified ideal-typical strategies are present across different ideological profiles, suggesting that the typology is not driven by party-specific organisational cultures alone but reflects broader generational experiences and structural constraints. By situating these strategies within the broader process of autocratisation, the study highlights how individual agency interacts with institutional and political limitations, thereby extending theories of political representation into the empirical terrain of electoral autocracy.

Mapping opposition representation: four ideal-typical strategies among young Hungarian MPs

A comprehensive understanding of the manner in which young opposition MPs in Hungary conceptualise and practise political representation is of paramount importance, as it offers significant insights into the dynamics of opposition politics in an electoral autocracy. In a political environment characterised by centralisation, constrained parliamentary influence, and limited access to resources, opposition politicians must continuously redefine their representative roles and legitimacy bases. The strategies employed in the representation of these groups are not merely a reflection of individual trajectories and political socialisation; they also constitute adaptive responses to the structural constraints and opportunities present within an asymmetric political field.

Based on the analysis of the interviews, four ideal-typical representative strategies were identified among young opposition MPs. The typology is constructed along four analytically distinct but interrelated dimensions: (1) *socialisation and experiences*, capturing macro-, meso-, micro-level and individual inputs; (2) *ideals and realities of representation*, reflecting how representatives normatively conceive their role and how they perceive and interpret the most salient constraints of electoral autocracy; (3) *political thinking*, understood as a normative and interpretive orientation; and (4) *representative strategies*, conceptualised as the observable outputs of these processes across arenas, modes of action, and substantive focuses. Together, these dimensions form a coherent explanatory framework that links background conditions and interpretive filters to distinct strategic patterns of representation.

In some instances, the analytical dimensions reveal ordinal differences, meaning that the ideal types can be arranged hierarchically along particular axes (for example, in terms of institutional embeddedness or reliance on formal parliamentary channels). The primary purpose of the typology, however, is not to establish a strict hierarchy, but to highlight the nominal distinctions between qualitatively different logics of representation.

The identification of four ideal types was guided by a principle of analytical saturation and parsimony rather than numerical symmetry. During the iterative coding process, additional configurations initially emerged but did not display sufficiently distinct and internally coherent patterns across the analytical dimensions to warrant separate ideal types. Instead, these configurations consistently clustered around four analytically robust and distinguishable logics of representation. From an analytical perspective, a four-type solution also provides a level of conceptual parsimony that remains transparent and interpretable, allowing the core variation in representative strategies to be captured without unnecessary fragmentation. Introducing further types would therefore have reduced analytical clarity without increasing explanatory leverage.

As is typical of most qualitative research, it is beneficial to provide an approximate sense of the distribution of the identified types within the sample. It should be noted that these proportions are applicable only to the selected group of interviewees and should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative. Within the sample, the *Institutionalists* constitute the largest group (five respondents), followed by the *Political Influencers* (four respondents), while both the *Activists* and the *Constituency Builders* are represented by three respondents each. However, it is crucial to emphasise that the

interviewees' narratives and experiences are characterised by a considerable degree of complexity and nuance, which cannot be fully captured by any ideal type. Participants have been observed to combine elements of multiple types; however, in the majority of cases, the characteristics of one dominant type clearly prevail, thus allowing for a relatively unambiguous classification.

The following subsections present and discuss the defining features of each ideal type in detail. The analysis is supported by illustrative interview excerpts. After the presentation of the four ideal types, [Table 2](#) provides a comparative summary of how distinct constellations of socialisation experiences, interpretive orientations, and perceived constraints translate into specific representative strategies across arenas, modes of action, and substantive focuses.

The constituency builder: reclaiming local representation

The *Constituency Builder* ideal type, accounting for roughly one-fifth of the interview sample, places the people of the constituency – their everyday concerns, local problems, and socio-economic needs – at the centre of representational activity. Among MPs associated with this ideal type, representation is articulated through a territorially grounded understanding of parliamentary work, emphasising close, face-to-face relations with citizens and sustained local engagement. This approach is most commonly adopted by MPs elected in single-member districts, for whom personal accountability and the maintenance of a continuous local presence are core elements of political legitimacy.

At the normative level, the *Constituency Builder* conceptualises representation primarily as a form of local public service, grounded in accessibility, responsiveness, and the practical resolution of everyday problems. Representation is understood less as ideological advocacy or national agenda-setting and more as an ongoing relational practice embedded in local social life:

"I ran as an independent candidate, so getting on the list was out of the question, and it still is. Basically, I have lived most of my life here [name of district]. I want to be able to represent the people who live around me – those with whom we go shopping, take our children to the playground, or whose children attend the same school as mine – and to represent their problems, because there are plenty of problems here." (R11)

This normative conception of representation is closely linked to how the *Constituency Builder* perceives the most salient constraints of electoral autocracy. Rather than identifying parliamentary obstruction or media exclusion as the primary limitation, MPs associated with this ideal type consistently describe the centralisation of decision-making, the erosion of local autonomy, and the narrowing of formal competences available to local authorities as the most restrictive features of the regime. In response, they seek to cultivate service-based legitimacy and use sustained local engagement as a strategy to reclaim limited spheres of democratic agency at the local level.

At the level of representative practice, the core arenas of political action are predominantly local: constituency offices, municipal institutions, town halls, community meetings, and informal encounters within the constituency. The main modes of representation include direct communication, case mediation, and the pragmatic resolution of individual

and collective grievances. Compared to other ideal types identified in the study, the *Constituency Builder* attaches relatively limited importance to social media and digital communication, demonstrating a clear preference for personal presence and offline interaction as sources of authenticity and credibility.

Thematically, the *Constituency Builder's* representational focus centres on territorial and socio-economic responsiveness. Everyday issues and local embeddedness are framed not only as practical concerns but as the normative foundation of democratic renewal rooted in communities rather than central institutions. Representation prioritises the articulation of local interests and seeks to give voice to groups frequently overlooked by the central state:

"Well, if we were to idealize it, I think the most important things are local roots, local connections, local networks, and local recognition. So, I think you're lucky when you have a direct connection and people can really reach you, and you're also involved in the life of the place where things happen. (...) I believe that change starts locally. So, if the need arises locally, if the actors who start to deal with the issues come together, organize themselves and form groups on a regional basis, or along the lines of policy workshops, i.e. along themes and topics, then democracy can take root and society can organize itself. And politicians are credible when they are embedded in these processes and do not come in from the outside and say what would be good." (R1)

From a micro-contextual and socialisation perspective, interview narratives associated with the *Constituency Builder* frequently refer to experiences of social mobility and to social backgrounds marked by economic vulnerability, including growing up in working-class families or in lower-income urban neighbourhoods. These experiences are retrospectively linked to a strong sense of solidarity with those facing material hardship and to an intuitive understanding of everyday inequalities. Rather than functioning as deterministic factors, such backgrounds are articulated as formative reference points shaping how responsibility, legitimacy, and representation are understood at the local level.

At the same time, respondents often emphasised politically engaged family environments and early exposure to political discussion and local public affairs. Political involvement is described as combining aspirations of social mobility with a commitment to advancing immediate communities. At the meso level, party organisations function primarily as institutional frameworks for political and personal development rather than as sources of strong ideological identification. They shape educational choices, professional trajectories, and long-term orientations toward public service.

Career trajectories associated with this ideal type are typically described in gradual and cumulative terms. Respondents emphasise progression through party hierarchies – from local activism to more formal leadership roles – and portray politics as a profession to be learned over time rather than as a moral calling or disruptive mission. Political engagement is framed as a vocation privileging persistence, reliability, and institutional learning over dramatic gestures or ideological radicalism:

"There is a path, a well-trodden road that one must follow, or that one would be wise to follow. This may not be the general opinion, because it is easy to say, 'The young titans will come along, bang their fists on the table, and suddenly rise to prominence.' Of course, this can happen, but for someone to remain in politics for the long term, or for me to have a lasting opportunity to get into a position not only now, but also next year or in four years' time, then I have to follow the path." (R1)

Interview narratives associated with the *Constituency Builder* also emphasise the demanding and unpredictable nature of political life, described as a highly competitive field requiring constant availability, a work-centred mindset, and the subordination of private life to public responsibilities. Several respondents refer to prior experience in local government – as municipal representatives or mayors – as a formative stage that strengthened their commitment to localism and community-based legitimacy.

This career trajectory also helps to explain the resilience observed among *Constituency Builders*. Despite the structural obstacles imposed by electoral autocracy, they rarely express disillusionment or withdrawal. Instead, they articulate a belief that strengthening local representation and sustaining democratic practices within communities can preserve meaningful – if partial – spaces of accountability. Their attachment to institutions and preference for gradual change over confrontation are framed as strategic choices rather than signs of passivity:

“I think for every politician, a key question is how strongly they are attached to institutions or how much of a disruptive type they are. In my view, there shouldn’t be too many disruptors – you need one or two, but they should always remain a minority, preferably even within their own party. These are the people who should not be allowed to come to power; instead, their demands should be incorporated to some extent, and then institutions will gradually change in ways that are genuinely necessary.” (R13)

Ideologically, *Constituency Builders* are best characterised by pragmatic and adaptive orientations rather than doctrinaire commitments, prioritising effectiveness, realism, and compromise over ideological purity, with locality itself serving as their primary reference point. In this sense, the Constituency Builder represents a form of pragmatic democratic resilience, seeking to preserve democratic representation through everyday service, institutional continuity, and sustained local embeddedness rather than direct confrontation with the autocratic centre.

The activist: performing representation through protest and dissent

The next ideal type is provided by *Activists*, who – like the previous group – make up around one-fifth of the interviewed MPs. In contrast to territorially anchored or service-oriented forms of representation, the conception of representation held by *Activists* is explicitly issue-oriented and morally grounded. For *Activists*, the parliamentary mandate is not an end but a means – a strategic instrument for advancing democratic causes, civic struggles, and normative commitments. As one MP explained:

“The representative role cannot be an end in itself, only a means – a form that allows us to implement certain democratic methods.” (R3)

Within this ideal type, politics is understood to revolve around causes rather than careers. Representation is framed as action-oriented engagement aimed at sustaining democratic ideals in a context where formal political institutions are widely perceived as ineffective, hollowed out, or compromised. This orientation is reinforced by the constraints of an auto-cratizing political system, in which formal democratic procedures persist while their substantive capacity is systematically eroded. In this setting, *Activists* identify exclusion from policymaking, the delegitimisation of opposition actors, and the constant need to reproduce political legitimacy as the most severe constraints shaping their representative role.

Within this context, institutional participation alone is widely regarded as insufficient. As a result, Activists reinterpret representation as a form of public dissent and moral resistance rather than as conventional legislative work. As one respondent put it:

"It's practically only worth entering Parliament if I do something that will definitely get me punished by László Kövér [the Speaker of the National Assembly]; nothing else." (R9)

Interview narratives associated with the *Activist* ideal type express deep frustration with the decline of parliamentary deliberation and the symbolic emptiness of formal legislative procedures. Committee work and plenary debate are described as performative rituals devoid of substantive influence, reinforcing perceptions of institutional closure:

"The classic representative role, especially its parliamentary aspect, is completely ineffective: there are no real debates or committee discussions, and the opposition cannot push through any proposals." (R12)

In response to these constraints, *Activists* redefine representation as an extra-parliamentary practice aimed at sustaining democratic participation through visibility, mobilisation, and continuous public engagement. Legitimacy is no longer understood as something granted once through elections but as something that must be actively and repeatedly produced. As one MP explained:

"The NGO methodology must be pursued in a number of ways. In practice, civil pressure must be applied to realise the potential of parliamentary mandates. This can involve collecting signatures, using the media to exert pressure, holding demonstrations and engaging in civil disobedience etc. And this can achieve results. It is necessary to continuously reproduce legitimacy so that people can feel that political representation and action truly exist. I justify my engagement with certain issues by trying to mobilise people around them and to generate public reach and attention. Legitimacy must be constantly (re)produced not only in relation to decision-makers – that is, the government – but also toward the voters themselves." (R3)

This understanding captures the core of the *Activist* strategy: the performative reproduction of legitimacy through action. Representation is conceptualised as an ongoing process of symbolic contestation and civic mobilisation that reconnects citizens to otherwise marginalised opposition institutions.

At the level of representative practice, the primary arenas of action extend well beyond the legislature. The street functions as the central site of representation – a space for protests, marches, and civic assemblies where *Activists* directly interact with citizens and enact political dissent. Parliament remains a secondary but symbolically charged arena, used for issue-driven interventions, visual protests, and acts of disruption aimed at public visibility. Social media operates as a continuous arena for mobilisation and communication, ensuring sustained attention around selected causes.

The dominant repertoires of action include protest organisation and participation, alliance-building with NGOs and social movements, civic and political campaigning, and issue-based parliamentary interventions. The representational focus of *Activists* is consistently thematic rather than territorial: they claim to represent causes – such as democratic rights, social justice, environmental protection, and government accountability – rather than specific constituencies or socio-economic groups. Through these practices, they seek to maintain normative credibility and public relevance in a political environment where institutional representation has lost much of its efficacy.

From a socialisation perspective, *Activists* typically come from politically conscious, highly educated, and predominantly urban backgrounds. Many were raised in families where public affairs were openly discussed, and civic engagement was framed as a moral responsibility. Early exposure to protests, NGOs, and grassroots movements – often during adolescence – is a recurring element in their narratives. These formative experiences were reinforced in politically engaged educational environments, including secondary schools and universities where civic participation was encouraged and validated.

At the meso level, peer networks play a crucial role in shaping *Activist* trajectories. Respondents frequently refer to student movements, NGO circles, and politically active friendship networks as key spaces of political learning and mobilisation. During their university studies – often pursued at Western European institutions – many gained first-hand experience of pluralist, participatory democratic cultures. These transnational experiences strengthened their commitment to activism and sharpened their critical perspective on Hungary's political system, often serving as an implicit normative benchmark.

Ideologically, *Activists* are most commonly associated with progressive and movement-oriented party families. In CHES terms, they tend to be positioned on the left or centre-left, combining strong normative commitments to participatory democracy, civic empowerment, and green values. Their political orientation prioritises moral legitimacy and civic mobilisation over institutional pragmatism or career advancement.

In this sense, the *Activist* represents a form of performative democratic resilience. When formal representation loses its capacity to shape policy outcomes, legitimacy is enacted through protest, visibility, and moral positioning. By transforming causes into vehicles of participation, *Activists* sustain the experience of democratic engagement in a system where its institutional substance has been systematically eroded.

The political influencer: becoming a digital representative

The third ideal type identified among the interviewed MPs is that of the *Political Influencer*. This group consists primarily of young opposition representatives who have internalised the logic of digital media as the dominant framework of political communication. For them, representation is no longer defined by legislative work or constituency service, but by the ability to shape public discourse and influence perceptions through personal, ideological, and media-driven communication. As one respondent summarised:

"I don't necessarily put the public's interest first, but rather what I, as a person with ideological convictions, believe to be right. Even if people disagree, I have an ideological standpoint that can go against the majority if necessary. I don't care whether I gain or lose votes because of it – I speak and act based on my convictions. (...) I've reached the point where I say what I want. If it fits within the party, they'll keep me; if not, they'll throw me out, and that's fine." (R15)

This perspective reveals a form of value-based representation, where authenticity and ideological integrity take precedence over strategic calculation or party conformity. The *Political Influencer* conceives representation as a personalised and conviction-driven practice, translating abstract political principles into accessible and emotionally resonant narratives. Parliamentary speeches, committee interventions, and field visits are primarily treated as raw material for digital storytelling – recorded, edited, and circulated on social media platforms to maximise visibility and reach.

The emergence of this ideal type is closely linked to macro-contextual transformations in Hungary's hybrid media regime, characterised by state dominance, limited pluralism, and a disinformation-saturated public sphere. Opposition MPs operate in a media environment where government-aligned outlets dominate television, radio, and large segments of online news, while independent and critical voices are systematically marginalised. Under these conditions, social media platforms have become the primary arenas of alternative political communication, effectively substituting for a pluralistic media environment.

At the same time, *Political Influencers* identify media exclusion, algorithmic bias, and the volatility of digital attention as the main constraints shaping their representative role. While digital platforms enable direct communication with citizens, they are simultaneously saturated with government propaganda and coordinated disinformation campaigns, limiting organic reach and distorting public debate. As one MP noted:

"Today, the successful politician is the one who uses politics as a form of influencing – we need influencer-politicians in Hungarian politics. Those who thrive are the ones who know how to engage on social media, post three or four videos a day, and make themselves visible." (R14)

In response to these constraints, *Political Influencers* redefine representation as a form of digital resistance. Their political practice revolves around continuous online engagement aimed at countering official narratives, exposing injustices, and educating citizens about democratic values. Visibility and explanation become central representational functions, often realised through short videos and personalised commentary that highlight social problems, local grievances, or government misconduct, while also offering personal reflections on how politics and society should function:

"We need to do things that draw attention – both from people and from those in power – to the fact that the country is heading in the wrong direction." (R14)

A central feature of the *Political Influencer* strategy is the deliberate fusion of political communication with personal branding. As one MP explained:

"It's very important that my personality is present in my communication. You can't just transmit expertise anymore – no one cares about that alone. You need some kind of packaging that makes it interesting." (R8)

Through this performative personalisation, digital platforms become spaces of self-representation, where visibility, emotional resonance, and moral positioning substitute for institutional power. Political legitimacy is constructed through continuous presence, perceived authenticity, and ideological consistency, rather than through party backing or formal authority. Many *Political Influencers* manage their own accounts, edit their own videos, and write their own posts, blurring the boundaries between politician, communicator, and content creator.

Taken together, these dynamics produce a paradoxical digital battlefield in which *Political Influencers* must continuously fight for attention and authenticity within an algorithmically distorted and propaganda-saturated media environment.

From a socialisation perspective, *Political Influencers* typically come from ideologically conscious but non-partisan family backgrounds, where political discussion and moral

reasoning were central but not tied to stable party loyalties. Early experiences often combined civic engagement with high levels of digital literacy, reinforcing the belief that communication itself can function as a political tool. At the meso level, their trajectories are shaped by media-oriented peer networks, including journalists, activists, and digitally skilled political actors, fostering orientations toward visibility, independence, and ideological expression.

Ideologically, *Political Influencers* are characterised by weak institutional anchoring and fluid positioning across opposition parties and ideological categories. In CHES terms, they cannot be clearly located within a single party family; instead, their orientation is best described as value-based and conviction-driven. Political communication is treated as a moral practice rather than as an expression of partisan loyalty.

In this sense, the Political Influencer represents a distinct form of democratic adaptation to autocratisation. When access to traditional media and institutional influence is curtailed, representation is reconstructed through digital presence, ideological coherence, and authenticity. By turning communication into a central political practice, *Political Influencers* seek to keep democratic discourse alive within an information environment increasingly dominated by propaganda.

The institutionalist: defending the normative core of parliament

Institutionalists, the last ideal type, constitute the largest group among the interviewed MPs. Their political identity and representative practice are defined by a strong attachment to the normative ideal of parliament as the central arena of democratic representation. They defend the procedural integrity, deliberative functions, and symbolic authority of parliament even under conditions of democratic backsliding. For them, the legislature remains the professional, legitimate, and most meaningful site of representation – the place where issues can still be raised, articulated, and symbolically maintained within the public sphere. As one MP explained when asked to rank arenas of representation:

“Parliament is the legislative space where most of the representative work is done. Social media is where we communicate about it, seek feedback, and the street is where we maintain contact with citizens. That’s the order, but I don’t think any of these can or should be given up by an MP.” (R10)

Institutionalists see their primary task as keeping professional and policy-oriented issues on the public agenda through parliamentary questions, committee work, interpellations, and press conferences. As another MP put it:

“I think we can frame issues more effectively through a speech in parliament – it still carries weight, and the media picks it up. Of course, no one expects that an opposition proposal will be adopted, but at least we can raise issues that become uncomfortable for the government.” (R2)

Unlike Activists and Political Influencers, Institutionalists attach less importance to the performative or influencer-type dimensions of politics. They use social media mainly to disseminate information or respond to constituent messages, but their online presence is often managed by staff rather than by themselves. They tend to “filter out” irrelevant or aggressive comments and deliberately avoid excessive personalisation or

emotionalisation in political communication. For them, visibility is secondary to integrity.

Their representative focus is largely constituency-based: they prioritise direct citizen inquiries and local issues, viewing responsiveness and professionalism as moral duties. They emphasise that effective representation requires “doing the background work”, carefully investigating the problems raised by citizens, and seeking institutional solutions through formal channels. As a result, their activities are often less visible in media terms but more consistent with traditional models of parliamentary accountability.

Institutionalists also tend to subordinate individual ambitions to party loyalty. As one MP summarised:

“It’s always the party. If you look at election results, it’s clear that people don’t compare candidates individually; they vote for the party that’s more popular in their district, even if its candidate is weaker. For voters, it’s always the party that matters.” (R5)

This perspective aligns with a collectivist understanding of representation, where MPs see themselves as executors of party programmes rather than autonomous political actors. While some interviewees expressed disappointment with the limited legislative influence of the opposition, they nonetheless maintained that institutional endurance – rather than radical reform of the representative system – is the key to restoring democracy. As the same respondent explained:

“The real change should happen through education. Young people need to understand that politics is not what they see on TV – politicians tearing each other apart – but something that could work differently, with meaning. It could be taught through simulations or role plays. If we focused more on this in schools, maybe the next generation could bring real change.” (R5)

Socialisation patterns also distinguish this type. *Institutionalists* often described early political interests shaped by family discussions, respect for rules, and exposure to formal politics – such as watching parliamentary debates or prime ministerial debates as children. They were typically good students, inclined toward academic achievement and adaptation to established structures. Their educational trajectories reinforced institutional trust rather than anti-systemic attitudes, cultivating values of compromise, professionalism, and procedural fairness. This pattern transcends party boundaries: conservative upbringing and traditional civic socialisation can be found among *Institutionalists* from across the political spectrum. As one MP put it:

“When someone starts doing politics, change doesn’t happen in huge leaps but in very small steps. And when you’re in a community – a political party – you can never say 100% of what you think. You must adapt to others, to your party’s line, to your voters.” (R12)

Overall, the Institutionalists represent the archetype of the professional parliamentarian within an illiberal political environment – one who seeks to uphold the normative core of representative democracy through procedural consistency and moral perseverance. Their strategy is not revolutionary but preservative: defending the remnants of institutional order in the hope that the rules and norms of parliament can one day regain their substantive meaning.

To synthesise the main similarities and differences across the four ideal-typical strategies, [Table 2](#) below offers a comparative overview.

Outputs	Representative strategies	Arenas	Modes (repertoires of action)	Focuses	CHES-based ideological positioning and party family	Predominantly found in ideologically moderate party families; typically positioned near the centre or centre-left on CHES scales; and characterised by programmatic moderation and distance from ideological extremes	Most commonly observed in progressive and movement-oriented party families, associated with left or centre-left CHES positioning and strong normative commitments to participatory and green values	No stable association with specific party families; characterised by weak institutional anchoring and fluid positioning across opposition parties and ideological categories	Present across a wide range of opposition party families and CHES positions; this type transcends ideological divides and reflects a role-based rather than ideologically anchored pattern of representation
						Constituency offices; local governments; town halls; community meetings; and local visits	Primarily the street; secondarily the Parliament and social media	Primarily social media platforms; Parliament and fieldwork as source of digital content	Parliament as the primary arena; social media and local constituency work as complementary arenas
						Direct communication; case mediation; pragmatic problem-solving	Protest participation and organisation; civic and political campaigning; issue-based parliamentary interventions; alliance-building with NGOs	Digital activism; influencer-style communication, continuous online engagement, and self-managed content production	Parliamentary questioning and interpellations; committee work, press conferences, symbolic agenda-setting
						Territorial and socio-economic responsiveness; everyday issues; accessibility	Civic rights; social justice; environmental protection; democratic accountability	Countering propaganda; exposing injustices; ideological education; authenticity and transparency	Professional policy issues; procedural accountability; institutionally aligned communication

Discussion and conclusion

The present study redirected the analytical focus from the prevailing literature on opposition politics under electoral autocracy – which has primarily examined parties and coalitions – to individual representatives. Rather than evaluating opposition politics in terms of success or failure, the study addressed a more specific analytical question: how political representation is practised, justified, and rendered meaningful by individual MPs when legislative influence is predictably limited. By foregrounding representative strategies rather than institutional outcomes, the study developed an analytical framework capable of capturing meaningful variation in opposition behaviour even under conditions where conventional parliamentary “success” is structurally unattainable.

The analysis focused on young opposition MPs as a group offering particularly revealing insights into representative strategies under conditions of electoral autocracy. Entering parliamentary politics once democratic erosion had already become institutionalised, these actors encountered constrained legislative influence as a structural condition rather than a temporary disruption. At the same time, their representative roles were shaped by broader transformations of contemporary representation, including personalisation, digital communication, and audience-oriented visibility (Hamilton et al. 2023; Manin 1997; Papacharissi 2015). Taken together, this positioning makes young MPs a particularly informative group for examining how opposition representation is sustained under institutional constraint. The study thus provides insight into how representative meaning is constructed at the intersection of authoritarian constraints and wider transformations of democratic representation.

Empirically, the study examined Hungary and its young opposition MPs through fifteen semi-structured interviews and identified four ideal-typical representative strategies. A central empirical finding is that opposition representation under electoral autocracy is not organised around a single, uniform logic. Rather, young opposition MPs do not respond homogeneously to structural constraints but develop distinct and internally coherent representative strategies, each grounded in a specific understanding of what it means to “represent well”. These configurations are characterised by divergent representative ideals, by different interpretations of the core challenges posed by electoral autocracy, and by differentiated responses to the same structural conditions. Rather than ad hoc adaptation, they reflect structured interpretative frameworks, demonstrating that opposition behaviour at the individual level remains patterned, meaningful, and normatively anchored even when institutional influence is predictably limited. While grounded in a single national case, these strategies point to broader patterns of opposition representation under electoral autocracy.

Across the four strategies, representatives also assign markedly different weights to the arenas, modes, and substantive focuses of representation. While *Institutionalists* prioritise parliament as the normative centre of representative activity, *Constituency Builders* relocate representation to the territorial and local level; *Activists* privilege the street and civil society, using parliament primarily as a symbolic platform; and *Political Influencers* construct representation predominantly within the digital public sphere. Correspondingly, they diverge in what they consider meaningful political action – ranging from case-work and local presence, through protest and mobilisation, to narrative construction and procedural scrutiny – and in the sources of legitimacy they mobilise, whether service-

based trust, moral credibility, personal authenticity, or procedural integrity. Because each strategy anchors representative efficacy in a different arena, oppositional marginalisation is experienced and interpreted in strategy-relative terms: the same regime may curtail multiple arenas, yet representatives evaluate these constraints through the arena in which they locate visibility, legitimacy, and representative effectiveness.

As a secondary analytical focus, the study also shows that differences between representative strategies are closely linked to distinct patterns of political thinking that mediate between structural constraints and representative practice. Across the four ideal types, young MPs interpret electoral autocracy through recurring normative and cognitive lenses – such as institutional loyalty versus system critique, pragmatism versus moral maximalism, and collective party-centred versus personalised forms of representation – which shape how constraints are perceived and how representative action is justified. These interpretative orientations are informed by differentiated socialisation experiences, including family-level political norms, civic or movement-based engagement, and trajectories of institutional learning. In this sense, a shared macro-context of electoral autocracy is filtered through heterogeneous socialisation pathways, giving rise to distinct modes of political thinking that structure representative strategies and highlight the coexistence of distinct democratic imaginaries within a single opposition field. At the same time, these relationships remain exploratory and call for further comparative and longitudinal research.

Despite their internal diversity, the four representative strategies identified in this study share a common analytical horizon that connects them to broader debates on opposition politics and contemporary representation. What unites these otherwise distinct logics is not a shared repertoire of action or a common normative ideal, but a shared problem definition: how to sustain visibility, legitimacy, and representative efficacy when parliamentary power is structurally constrained. Consistent with constructivist and performative approaches to representation, the findings show that opposition MPs continue to formulate representative claims across multiple arenas – parliamentary, extra-parliamentary, and mediated – even when their capacity to translate these claims into policy outcomes is predictably limited (Disch, de Sande, and Urbinati 2019; Saward 2010). At the same time, the analysis highlights the limits of such adaptive strategies. While they preserve symbolic, communicative, and relational dimensions of representation, they do not fundamentally challenge the institutional asymmetries of electoral autocracy. Instead, these strategies tend to stabilise constrained modes of opposition by enabling representatives to remain visible, legitimate, and politically active within narrowed opportunity structures, thereby sustaining attenuated forms of democratic representation without generating systemic transformation. This stabilising effect is further reinforced under autocratising conditions through forms of managed and illiberal political engagement, which narrow opportunities for contestation and favour controlled political performance (Sata and Karolewski 2023). This reveals a central paradox of opposition representation under authoritarianised conditions: adaptation is indispensable for representational survival, yet it simultaneously restricts the scope for structural political change.

The findings also qualify expectations of generational renewal in opposition politics. Although young MPs often bring digital fluency, moral urgency, and innovative repertoires into representative practice, these capacities operate within tightly constrained institutional environments. Rather than producing a clear generational advantage, the

analysis points to a pattern of selective endurance, in which some representative strategies prove more sustainable over time, while others entail higher emotional, political, or institutional costs and are therefore more vulnerable to exhaustion or marginalisation. The study does not seek to normatively rank these strategies but demonstrates the analytical value of a typological approach that makes visible the trade-offs involved in sustaining political representation under conditions of systemic constraint.

Although this study is based on qualitative interviews conducted in Hungary, the typology developed here is intended to capture patterned representative strategies that are characteristic of opposition politics under electoral autocracy more broadly. The four ideal-typical strategies identified in this study are indicative of recurring ways in which opposition MPs navigate the tension between normative ideals of representation and structurally constrained institutional environments. It is therefore reasonable to hypothesise that these strategies should be applicable beyond the Hungarian case.

Concurrently, future research endeavours should explore the manifestation of these representative strategies across diverse electoral autocracies, their variation across generational cohorts, and their temporal evolution. The employment of comparative and mixed-method approaches would prove to be of particular value when assessing the scope conditions of the typology and analysing how visibility, legitimacy, and representative meaning are sustained under varying institutional and media environments.

Notes

1. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and translated by the author. All identifying details were removed during anonymisation.
2. We also sought to include young representatives of the governing parties as a comparative reference group. However, despite repeated attempts to contact them, potential interviewees either declined to participate or did not respond. Several prospective opposition interviewees likewise expressed concerns about being recorded, fearing that their participation could be used against them by the governing party, potentially compromising their political or personal standing. In response, we implemented enhanced data protection measures and provided explicit confidentiality assurances, emphasising that no data would be shared beyond the research team under any circumstances. These patterns of non-participation and apprehension underscore the authoritarian nature of the Hungarian political environment, in which engagement with independent academic research may be perceived as politically risky.

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Data availability statement

The dataset is embargoed until 01 February 2027. Due to the sensitivity of the data (pseudonymised transcripts remain personal data and fall under GDPR and UK GDPR legislation), access to the data is possible only upon request and subject to approval by the project managers: Magdalena Góra (Jagiellonian University Krakow; e-mail: mm.gora@uj.edu.pl) and Eline Severs (Vrije Universiteit Brussel; e-mail: eline.severs@vub.be).

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Appendix

A1. Age and gender composition of the Hungarian National Assembly by party affiliation (199 MPs)

Political party	18–30	31–35	36–40	41 or older	male	female	Total MPs
Fidesz–KDNP	0	2	5	128	117	18	135
Momentum Movement	1	3	4	2	8	2	10
Democratic Coalition (DK)	0	1	0	14	10	5	15
LMP – Hungary's Green Party	0	2	1	2	4	1	5
Dialogue – The Greens	0	0	1	5	4	2	6
Jobbik – Conservatives	0	0	0	7	7	0	7
Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk)	0	0	2	4	5	1	6
Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)	0	0	0	10	8	2	10
National Self-Government of Germans in Hungary (MNOÖ)	0	0	0	1	1	0	1
Total	1	8	14	173	168	31	199

Note: Age categories refer to MPs' age at the time of the 2022–2026 parliamentary term. LMP began the parliamentary cycle with five MPs as part of the united opposition list; however, the parliamentary group ceased to exist in February 2025 after its membership fell below the legally required minimum following the resignation of one MP. The table illustrates the highly uneven generational distribution across parties: while some opposition parties (e.g. MSZP, Jobbik) have no MPs in the 18–40 age cohort, others – most limiting Momentum – are structurally overrepresented among younger parliamentarians. This distribution provides important context for the composition of the qualitative interview sample.

A2. Interview topic guide

The topic guide is structured in three columns, linking the research objectives to introductory/main questions and follow-up questions (or probes).

Objectives	Main question	Follow-up questions
The conceptions of political representation held by politicians, understood as both a practice (representation in action) and a normative ideal (the ideal representative).	1. What does it mean <i>for you</i> to represent others? 2. According to you, what defines a good representative? If I ask you to list the three most important traits of a good representative, what would these be? 3. How do you, yourself, try to put these traits [summary respondent's answers] into practice? 4. According to you what is the most important venue or arena of political representation?	1.1. What do you find most challenging <i>yourself</i> when trying to represent others? 1.2. Do you think that your peers face similar challenges? (If yes: why do you think this is the case?) 2.1. Have you anyone in mind who meets these criteria? Do you have a role model? Who is your role model? 2.2. Do you think that your views on what it takes to be a good representative are widely shared among politicians? 2.3. Do you notice a difference, for instance, with the approaches of older generations of politicians? Or differences within your own party? 4.1. Many argue that the advent of social media has drastically altered practices of political representation. According to you, what is the impact of social media on political representation? 4.2. How do these trends (synthesis of their statement) affect you in your daily functioning? Have they caused you to alter your personal style or communicative strategies? If so, how?
The politician's views on citizens	5. What do you think that citizens look for in a representative? 6. Why do citizens look for these qualities (mentioned by the respondent) in their representatives? 7. According to you, what explains citizens' low levels of feeling represented? 8. Research suggests that young people are increasingly sceptical of electoral politics. How could we make parliaments and parties more attractive to them?	6.1. Have you ever experienced any conflicts between citizens' expectations and how you want to fulfil your role as representative? If so, how have you dealt with this? 6.2. How do you decide when and how to respond to societal contestation or demands put forward by civil society actors, such as activists and interest groups?
The politician's conception of the role of parties, parliament and personal background, and their interrelationships .	9. How are the feelings of citizens regarding their representation addressed within your party? 10. Within your own party, do there exist any ideas or strategies on how to improve representative relationships with the people? 11. How your personal background and life experiences affect your representative style and priorities. 12. Survey research has shown that many people believe that policies would improve if more women,	9.1. What would you, yourself, advise your party, or political parties broadly speaking? How could parties strengthen their connection with citizens? 9.2. According to you, is your party/are parties responsive to these suggestions? 11.1. If I may ask you, to what extent do your personal background and life experiences shape the policy issues that you prioritize? 11.2. In your experience, do these

(Continued)

Continued.

The topic guide is structured in three columns, linking the research objectives to introductory/main questions and follow-up questions (or probes).

Objectives	Main question	Follow-up questions
	young people, people with a working-class background, and people with a migration background were elected to parliament. What is your opinion on this? Do you share the belief that the quality of policies would improve if the composition of parliaments would become more diverse?	personal experiences make you more prone to represent specific groups in society? If so, which ones? 11.3. According to you, how well are these groups currently represented? What steps (if any) should be taken to improve their representation? 12.1. If the MP is in favour of descriptive democracy, continue with: Based on your experiences, how would such a diversification of representatives affect political representation? 12.2. What measures should be taken, if any, to improve the representation of these groups [refer to respondent's response]? measures (in political parties, in the parliament, ... etc.?)
The politician's views on the future of representative democracy .	13. We are heading towards the end of the interview. We have already discussed many aspects of political representation today. If I now, ask you about what your thoughts are on the future of democracy.	13.1. How do you think representative democracy should be modified to function better in the future? 13.2. Are there any specific steps that need to be taken? Or any challenges that, according to you, should be dealt with specifically?
Feedback questions	14. What did you think of the questions?	14.1. Should we make any changes, e.g. to the questions or interview style? 14.2. Do you have any further questions?