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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Polarizing transition? Opposition strategies and the rise of Péter Magyar and the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) in Hungary

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Abstract

This article develops a constructivist–realist framework to analyze how challengers operate under regime uncertainty in electoral autocracies, using contemporary Hungary as a crucial case. Building on theories of democratic resilience, opposition strategies, and political polarization, it introduces a nuanced conceptual framework for classifying democratic and polarization counterstrategies, focusing on how opposition actors interpret their environment and adjust their tactics. The approach advances a typology of opposition strategies ranging from conventional institutional adaptation to disruptive extra-institutional rupture, showing how democratizing movements often combine modalities across electoral, civic, and symbolic arenas. Empirically, the study contrasts the established opposition in Hungarian politics, which relied on incoherent mixes of parliamentary protest, ad hoc extraordinary gestures, and strategies of reciprocal polarization or passive depolarization, with the new trajectory opened by Péter Magyar and his TISZA Party. TISZA's rise in 2024 marked a rupture: through norm-breaking institutional challenge, grassroots mobilization, and transformative repolarization, it built a cross-cutting coalition that disrupted the regime's stability. Yet this breakthrough provoked fierce backlash, as the government escalated "traitor" discourse and signaled readiness to foreclose competition. The Hungarian case demonstrates both the potential and fragility of a norm-breaking challenger's transformative repolarization in hybrid regimes, offering broader insights into the prospects and limits of democratic resilience under authoritarian pressure.

Keywords Péter Magyar · TISZA party · Orbán regime · Opposition strategies · Political polarization · Transformative repolarization

For my mother

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Introduction

Since 2010, Hungary has epitomized the new, ballot-driven face of twenty-first-century autocratization. During the mid-2010s, the Orbán regime consolidated what Benedek (2025a) terms a populist electoral autocracy (PEA): a regime fusing exclusionary populist rhetoric with structures of "electoral authoritarianism" (Schedler 2006, 2013), maintaining a façade of competition in the name of the people (Bozóki and Benedek 2024). After the 2018 general election, this configuration weathered multiple shocks—COVID-19, economic downturn, and the war in Ukraine—yet still secured another two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2022. Underpinned by constitutional parliamentary dominance and a heavily skewed media environment, the regime appeared insulated from domestic challenge.

By the mid-2020s, however, stress accumulated. External pressures—renewed recession, soaring inflation, suspended EU funds, and war-related diplomatic isolation—intersected with rising domestic discontent and the rapid emergence of the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) led by former Fidesz insider Péter Magyar. Within months of its 2024 launch, TISZA won nearly 30% in the European Parliament elections and, by year's end, led Fidesz in several independent polls. In competitive authoritarian contexts, the conjunction of external shocks and credible opposition mobilization can generate windows of vulnerability and a rare opportunity for democratization (Donno 2013). This situation therefore constitutes a new "critical juncture" in Hungarian politics, marked by heightened uncertainty about regime stability (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007).

Critical junctures do not foreordain outcomes. Comparative work on "U-turns" in autocratization (Nord et al. 2025) identifies three types of trajectories: authoritarian manipulation (controlled liberalization by incumbents to preempt deeper losses), democratic reaction (effective opposition–civil society resistance), and international intervention (external leverage or guarantees). Which prevails depends on who seizes initiative as an entrenched ruler's grip loosens. For Hungary, another central challenge is deep, mutually delegitimizing polarization, in which adversaries cease to recognize each other's legitimacy, undermining the minimal consensus required for restraint and institutional trust. Such polarization can sustain authoritarian resilience and impede democratic consolidation even if electoral turnover occurs in 2026.

At the same time, deeper autocratization remains plausible: democratization is neither automatic nor inevitable in regime crises, but depends on the strategic interactions of political actors (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986; Carothers 2002). Since early 2024, governmental responses have not signaled self-initiated liberalization but a drift toward tighter control: intensified rhetorical delegitimization of opponents, proposals for selectively enforceable funding "transparency" rules, and legal investigations targeting Péter Magyar and TISZA. These moves raise even the possibility of the disqualification of key challengers from competition. Parallels with other cases—such as escalating constraints on municipal challengers in Turkey or Russia's post-2012 trajectory—offer instructive warnings about how electoral autocracies reduce uncertainty while preserving formal elections. A third scenario is that the Orbán regime may ultimately neutralize this unprecedented challenge within the

framework of electoral autocracy, preserving its core structures while adapting its mechanisms of control.

Comparative scholarship suggests that in periods of high uncertainty the causal weight of agency increases (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Therefore, Hungary's trajectory will hinge not only on institutions but also on the coherence and credibility of opposition mobilization, and on how actors manage the dynamics of (de- and re-) polarization across regime constituencies and challengers. Agency will thus be decisive in shaping the 2026 elections and their aftermath.

To gain a deeper understanding of the current critical juncture of Hungarian politics, this article evaluates opposition strategies—especially those of the emergent TISZA—with particular attention to democratic and polarization counterstrategies. Methodologically, the study combines theory-guided process tracing with qualitative content analysis of elite discourse, examining the interplay of regime signaling and opposition response.

The contribution is twofold. Substantively, the article places opposition strategy at the center of analyses of democratic resilience, complementing regime-centric approaches. Analytically, it integrates polarization research with the study of opposition under electoral authoritarianism, treating democratization as a contingent outcome of strategic interaction rather than as structural inevitability (Schedler 2024; Riedl et al. 2025). The framework also offers comparative leverage beyond Hungary by specifying observable implications about how alternative opposition repertoires interact with autocratization and polarization dynamics.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section "Conceptual framework" develops an integrated conceptual framework linking regime strategies, opposition responses, and polarization dynamics. Section "Methodological and operational considerations" outlines the methodological and operational considerations. Section "Orbán regime at a crossroads" applies the framework to Hungary, tracing the trajectories of the established opposition after 2010 and the rise of TISZA from early 2024 to spring 2025, while also briefly summarizing the regime's responses. Section "Conclusion: the outlook of democratization in Hungary" concludes with implications for theories of democratic backsliding and lessons for practitioners confronting contemporary autocratization.

Conceptual framework

Authoritarian stabilization and democratic counterstrategies

If the Orbán PEA regime combines electoral authoritarian settings with polarizing populist discourse, any attempt at regime change must confront two challenges simultaneously: structural manipulation of competition and identity-based polarization, particularly during critical junctures of regime uncertainty.

Autocratic stabilization often proceeds incrementally, through seemingly legal and piecemeal reforms that generate institutional asymmetries (Levitsky and Way 2010) and create interpretive uncertainty for opposition actors about the regime's actual nature and future trajectory (Schedler 2013; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). They must

continually reassess the nature of the regime and, in turn, what forms of politics are legitimate, effective, or possible. The very logic of electoral authoritarianism is to blur democratic appearance and autocratic substance, complicating assessments of whether extraordinary resistance is justified or whether conventional participation retains transformative potential. Therefore, as Schedler (2024) stresses in his reconceptualization of democratic subversion, scholars must go beyond structural analyses and consider actors' perceptions, dilemmas, and strategies under creeping autocratization. The perceptions matter beyond elites: recent survey evidence from Hungary shows that even basic evaluations follow partisan lines: about 80% of governing Fidesz's supporters express satisfaction with state railways, compared to only 40% of opposition or undecided voters.[1]

This constructivist-realist lens also applies to democratic counterstrategies. Restoring democracy is not linear but a contested struggle shaped by actors' interpretations of the regime and their visions of the future. Somer and Tekinırk (2024) describe this as "regime uncertainty": when not only the rules of the game but also the regime's direction become unclear. Opposition forces then face dilemmas over whether to engage in *normal* or *extraordinary* politics. Gamboa (2022) highlights the contrast between radical and moderate opposition goals across *institutional* and *extra-institutional* arenas. Puleo and Coman (2025) similarly differentiate arenas, adding the goals of dissenters (policy vs. regime-oriented) to develop a broader typology of opposition. While such frameworks provide much-needed analytical precision, this study focuses on how *regime perceptions* shape opposition strategies—whether actors behave as if the system remains democratic or has already become autocratic—and the dilemmas that follow.

Strategic ambiguity generates three main orientations. *Alarmists* call for immediate extraordinary action; *cautionaries* cling to normal institutional rules; and *strategic alarmists* recognize erosion but fear radicalism's risks (Somer and Tekinırk 2024). Oppositions are often judged as too soft or too extreme (Somer 2025). This divide fosters destructive tensions: pessimists are dismissed as hysterical, optimists as naive (Schedler 2024). However, adaptive and proactive strategies can be useful, whereas purely reactive ones may ease authoritarian consolidation (Cleary and Öztürk 2022). As Milačić (2025) emphasizes, the effectiveness of democratic resistance depends not only on recognizing the "authoritarian playbook," but on acting upon it. Timely identification of authoritarian tactics—as in Poland and Israel, where Hungary's experience served as a warning—enabled opposition actors to frame government measures as part of a broader illiberal script. This reduced ambiguity, prevented paralysis, and allowed for earlier mobilization than in Hungary, where delayed recognition had already given Fidesz a decisive advantage.

The central theoretical insight is that opposition strategies cannot be examined in isolation from regime perception. Building on Somer and Tekinırk's framework and Schedler's agency-centered approach, this study proposes an ideal-typical matrix that links perceptions with action. The framework distinguishes *regime perception*

[1] "A fideszesek vonata nem késik, tiszta és légkondicionált a Publicus felmérése szerint" "[Fidesz supporters' trains are never late, clean and air-conditioned, according to a Publicus survey"]. *Telex.hu*, https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/08/17/publicus-mav-felmeres (accessed October 2025).

(democratic/autocratic), *political logic* (normal/extraordinary), and *mode of action* (institutional/extra-institutional). Combining these dimensions yields eight strategic orientations. As Table 1 summarizes, *conventional opposition* (1A) actors assume democratic normalcy and seek change through routine parliamentary means, while *democracy defenders* (2A) recognize democratic decay but use exceptional yet still institutional instruments such as cross-camp electoral coalitions or referendums. *Civil society watchdogs* (1B) and *reform-conforming protesters* (2B) focus on bottom-up (diagonal) accountability and mobilization, though the latter place greater emphasis on confrontational methods to push for reform. Under autocratic regime perception, *strategic adapters* (3A) exploit the remaining openings without overtly challenging

Table 1 Matrix of democratic counterstrategies

	Normal politics	Extraordinary politics
Democratic regime perception	1A. Conventional opposition (institutional) • *Self-perception*: Competing democratic alternative • *Goal*: Government change through elections • *Instruments*: Parliamentary tools, legal action, traditional electoral alliances • *Narrative*: The system is malfunctioning but remains reformable	2A. Democracy defender (institutional) • *Self-perception*: Defender of the democratic order • *Goal*: Defending democracy through exceptional institutions • *Instruments*: Impeachment, judicial activism, parliamentary walkouts, cross-camp electoral coalitions, referendums • *Narrative*: Democracy is in crisis, thus a temporary state of emergency is needed
	1B. Civil society watchdog (extra-institutional) • *Self-perception*: Democratic conscience • *Goal*: Promoting transparency, accountability, and policy correction • *Instruments*: Whistleblowing, petitions, sectoral strikes, issue-based campaigns • *Narrative*: The system is correctable through sustained civic pressure	2B. Reform-conforming protester (extra-institutional) • *Self-perception*: Reformist pressure movement • *Goal*: Forcing democratic reforms • *Instruments*: Mass protests, union networks, nonviolent civic pressure • *Narrative*: Without substantial societal pressure, no reform is possible
Autocratic regime perception	3A. Strategic adapter (institutional) • *Self-perception*: Survivor and builder under constraints • *Goal*: Political presence and mobilization • *Instruments*: Electoral participation, campaign-based engagement, exploiting legal loopholes • *Narrative*: The regime is distorted but exploitable: use the cracks while they last	4A. Norm-breaker challenger (institutional) • *Self-perception*: Ethical founder of a new political community • *Goal*: Peaceful regime change • *Instruments*: Moral critique combined with institutional action, taboo-breaking discourse • *Narrative*: The regime is illegitimate, but still vulnerable to internal collapse
	3B. Anti-regime civil actor (extra-institutional) • *Self-perception*: Civic counterpower and regime critic • *Goal*: Delegitimizing the regime, fostering self-organization, preparing transition • *Instruments*: Exposure, alternative media platforms, grassroots organizing • *Narrative*: The regime is illegitimate and that can be made visible	4B. Systemic disruptor (extra-institutional) • *Self-perception*: Radical agent of regime transformation • *Goal*: Founding a new political order and legitimacy • *Instruments*: Direct and confrontational action: blockades, general strikes, civil disobedience, coups, armed resistance • *Narrative*: The regime is fully closed, only radical external pressure can produce change

legitimacy. *Norm-breaker challengers* (4A) seek to rebuild the political community from within, combining moral critique with institutional participation. *Anti-regime civil actors* (3B) construct alternative civic spheres outside institutions to delegitimize the regime, while *systemic disruptors* (4B) adopt direct and often radical methods such as blockades or civil disobedience to impose rupture.

The categories are not fixed. Political actors shift positions as perceptions, repression levels, and opportunities evolve (Tilly 1978: 98–137). Korkmaz (2025) shows in Turkey that moving from rigid, identity-driven opposition to more flexible alliances and inclusive discourse enhanced contestation, though risking diluted identity or regime legitimation. Furthermore, opposition strategies rarely succeed in isolation. Riedl et al. (2025) demonstrate that resistance under democratic backsliding is most effective when coordinated across electoral, institutional, and societal arenas, echoing Bunce and Wolchik's (2011) findings on color revolutions. Tomini et al. (2022) stress the role of cross-sector coalitions linking parties with civic groups, and the importance of sequencing tactics strategically. Howard and Roessler (2006) highlight that democratic breakthroughs emerge when vertical (electoral), horizontal (institutional), and diagonal (civil society) accountability mechanisms converge and reinforce each other.

Comparative research from the Western Balkans further underlines these dynamics. Pollozhani and Bieber (2025) show that institutional strategies such as pre-electoral coalitions rarely succeed in competitive authoritarian regimes unless complemented by large-scale protests. Van Lit et al. (2024) argue that democratic defense is strongest when elites and citizens act simultaneously, creating virtuous cycles of mobilization across arenas. In sum, opposition requires more than pure electoral logic: it must generate a political vision displacing authoritarian logic and re-legitimizing democratic norms (Somer 2025).

This study's typology therefore offers a nuanced conceptual map of democratic counterstrategies under authoritarian entrenchment. By moving beyond a binary distinction between regime insiders and outsiders, it highlights the diversity of oppositional pathways and clarifies how actors interpret their environment, choose instruments of resistance, and frame their struggle for legitimacy. Moreover, while this framework is developed with particular attention to hybrid regimes marked by severe regime uncertainty, its perception-centered logic allows even broader applicability. Actors' self-understandings, rather than external regime classifications, determine their strategic positioning: populists in Western Europe often frame themselves as democracy defenders (2A), actors like Orbán in the late 2000s—who portrayed the entire post-1990 order as a failed "neoliberal elite project" and called for a comprehensive national realignment—exemplified norm-breaking challengers (4A), and radical mobilizations like the January 6 U.S. Capitol attack illustrate systemic disruptor (4B) dynamics.

Political polarization and counterstrategies

While institutional asymmetries constrain democratic opposition, an equally critical obstacle is entrenched polarization, especially in Hungary. In PEAs, polarization is not incidental but central to autocratic control. V-Dem evidence shows that

democratic backsliding becomes much harder to reverse after a decade of consolidation (Riedl et al. 2025). By then, populist polarization has not only eroded "basic democratic trust" (Schedler 2023a) but actively entrenched autocratization (Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Prushankin and Kaltwasser 2024). Democratizers must therefore confront not only structural distortions but also the polarizing logic that sustains authoritarian resilience.

Yet polarization is not inherently destructive. Research differentiates its forms and explores when and how it becomes toxic to democratic competition. Three dimensions are central (Schedler 2023b; Benedek 2025b). *Ideological polarization*, rooted in Sartori's "polarized pluralism" (2005: 116–128), refers to value-based conflicts articulated by elites (Fiorina et al. 2008; Druckman et al. 2013; Barber and McCarty 2015) and often linked to classical cleavages such as class or religion (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). However, ideological disagreement can enhance accountability and responsiveness, and—when properly institutionalized—help clarify alternatives and foster participation (Lijphart 1984; McCoy and Somer 2024).

Affective polarization reflects identity-based antagonism driven by emotional and symbolic attachments more than policy preferences (Iyengar et al. 2012, 2019; Somer and McCoy 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019). Building on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) and partisan identity theory (Kinder and Kalmoe 2017), it describes how partisan identity becomes a singular moral marker (McCoy et al. 2018: 16). Citizens come to view opponents with hostility and mistrust (Levendusky 2009; Mason 2018), undermining the support for democratic norms (Kingzette et al. 2021).

Thirdly and most dangerously, *pernicious* (McCoy et al. 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019; Somer et al. 2021) or *democratic polarization* (Schedler 2023b) emerges when political conflicts escalate into mutual delegitimization around extraordinary conflicts and the "fundamentals of politics" (Sartori 2005: 14). Opponents no longer dispute policy but deny each other's right to participate (Schedler 2023: 352), undermining the normative foundations of democracy (Lipset 1981: 78–79). Here, elites cast rivals as existential threats, justifying abandonment of democratic restraints (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This moralized antagonism arises when political competition is no longer structured merely by societal or ideological cleavages, but by elite-driven strategies that realign and weaponize divisions from above (Bartolini and Mair 1990: 15). Using V-Dem data, Somer et al. (2021) show that such polarization is strongly correlated with processes of autocratization. Cross-national evidence from 2000 to 2020 demonstrates that higher levels of both partisan and ideological polarization systematically weaken democratic accountability across Europe (Patkós and Plesz 2025).

In the Orbán PEA, all three dimensions are present, reinforcing each other. The Orbán regime has reshaped partisan competition around favorable cleavages, embedding ideological exclusion, affective animosity, and elite-driven pernicious polarization (Vegetti 2019: 92). Opposition actors are portrayed not merely as rivals but as illegitimate threats. Polarization thus serves as a core mechanism of regime stabilization, not a byproduct. As Table 2 summarizes, each dimension generates specific risks under authoritarian conditions and requires tailored democratic responses—from bridging emotional divides to redefining democratic conflict on inclusive grounds. The overarching challenge is to counter polarizing logic without reinforcing it, restoring trust while sustaining mobilization.

Table 2 Types, risks, and responses for polarization

	Core characteristics	Risks under authoritarianism	Strategic response options
Ideological polarization	Disagreement over policy and ideological principles	Can be exploited by incumbents to divide the opposition	Promote inclusive ideological discourse, highlight policy over identity
Affective polarization	Deep emotional division, identity-based hostility between camps	Erodes social trust, facilitates scapegoating and repression	Bridge emotional divides with shared civic narratives, emphasize common threats
Democratic / pernicious polarization	Mutual delegitimization of political actors and democratic norms	Destroys democratic consensus, justifies authoritarian behavior	Reject zero-sum framing, establish new unifying democratic cleavages

Therefore, opposition actors face a central dilemma: whether to mirror the regime's divisive logic for short-term mobilization or to pursue integrative strategies with longer-term payoff. These choices are rarely straightforward. Somer et al. (2021) argue, opposition actors must navigate the tension between reactive and proactive tactics, and between preserving the status quo ante and generating a new social contract. These two axes yield four strategic orientations: *reciprocal polarization*, *passive depolarization*, *active depolarization*, and *transformative repolarization*.

Reciprocal polarization mirrors populist-like rhetoric, mobilizing identity camps and reinforcing binary "us-versus-them" logic. It can energize bases and increase turnout but entrenches zero-sum conflict, alienates moderates, and legitimizes exclusionary strategies. Short-term gains come at the cost of reinforcing moral delegitimization that sustains democratic erosion. In contrast, *passive depolarization* lowers tensions by avoiding confrontation and divisive frames. While it can preserve institutional space or delay repression, it risks co-optation, demobilization, and narrative loss. In hybrid regimes where incumbents dominate media, passivity often signals weakness. Thirdly, *active depolarization* seeks to build trust through cross-cutting ties, broad alliances, and non-demonizing discourse. By reframing debates and fostering pluralistic dialogue, it can erode divisions and rebuild cohesion. Yet it requires sustained coordination and relative openness in the public sphere—conditions often lacking in electoral autocracies.

Finally, *transformative (constructive) repolarization* offers the most promising route under authoritarian conditions. Rather than mirroring regime narratives or appealing to superficial unity, it redefines conflict by constructing an alternative cleavage such as democracy vs. autocracy, hope vs. fear, or justice vs. impunity. Instead of depoliticizing, it mobilizes disaffected constituencies around inclusive values and a democratic horizon (Somer et al. 2021: 90). Its logic resembles heresthetic and framing strategies: shifting criteria of political judgment to forge a new majority (Plesz and Körösényi 2024). It targets a narrow ruling elite, aiming to undermine the autocrat's moral monopoly while deliberately avoiding the demonization of broader social groups. In doing so, it undercuts zero-sum logic and reclaims the normative terrain of democratic politics. Transformative repolarization thus reframes conflict, rebuilding trust and redirecting political competition toward democratic renewal. Historical precedents illustrate this logic. For instance, the U.S. civil rights movement combined nonviolent direct action with an inclusive democratic framing to advance equal citizenship (Somer et al. 2021). By confronting injustice while articu-

lating a unifying horizon, it demonstrated how polarization could strengthen democracy rather than destroy it (McCoy and Somer 2021).

As Table 3 shows, the success of transformative repolarization depends on coherence, credibility, and the ability to link democratic values to everyday concerns. Despite risks—such as regime backlash or challenges in maintaining message discipline—it remains the most viable route to democratic renewal in deeply polarized and institutionally constrained environments. Crucially, its success depends on avoiding moralizing or exclusionary rhetoric, functioning instead as an inclusive, democracy-oriented form of polarization (McCoy and Somer 2024). This approach is especially vital where entrenched cleavages have paralyzed public discourse, as in Hungary.

Methodological and operational considerations

The typologies demonstrated so far are deliberately usable but not over-engineered. Classifying opposition strategies is unavoidably uncertain: boundaries blur, intentions are opaque, and the regime itself often cultivates ambiguity, especially in electoral autocracies. These regimes are "normatively ambiguous by design, not by accident" (Schedler 2013: 102). This does not render measurement futile; it makes transparent rules and careful triangulation essential. The framework should be treated as an analytic toolkit, not a mechanistic scorecard: it structures judgments, surfaces edge cases, and generates testable claims, while acknowledging that some cases remain "mixed."

Episodes of action and discourse by identifiable actors (party leaders, parties, campaigns) are analyzed through three combined lenses—how actors speak, what they do, and how they justify it. First, *regime perceptions* are inferred from actors' discourse: depictions of fundamentally rigged rules or blocked alternation point to an authoritarian reading, whereas portrayals of flawed yet reformable institutions suggest a democratic one. Second, *political logic* can be discerned from modes of engagement: "normal" logic centers on routine campaigning, legislation, and litigation; "extraordinary" logic appeals to boycotts, mass disobedience, or foundational resets. Third, *mode of action* distinguishes institutional venues (parliament, courts,

Table 3 Counterstrategies to political polarization

Strategy	Core mechanism	Trade-offs and risks
Reciprocal polarization	Mirror the regime's polarizing axis and identity framing to mobilize in-group solidarity	Short-term mobilization vs. long-term entrenchment of zero-sum divisions, and justifying further legal exclusions
Passive depolarization	De-escalate rhetoric, avoid confrontation	Short-term de-escalation vs. risk of demobilization, loss of credibility, regime narrative dominance
Active depolarization	Build bridges across camps through inclusive civic initiatives	Long-term reconciliation vs. high coordination cost, vulnerable to co-optation, repression, and "divide-and-rule" tactics
Transformative repolarization	Cutting across old cleavages, redefine conflicts around democratic vs. authoritarian values	Reclaiming democratic initiative and moral authority vs. risks of backlash, dismiss as incoherence or abstract, and accusations of replicating the regime's polarizing techniques

elections) from extra-institutional ones (streets, civic networks, alternative media). Finally, polarization strategies are read from rhetoric and coalition appeals: reciprocal (mirroring exclusion), passive (avoidance), active (bridge-building), or transformative (reframing cleavages to assemble a more inclusive "we").

Measurement must avoid both relativism ('anything goes') and perfectionism ('only certainty counts') (Sartori 1987: 69–72), and to reason consistently about contested cases. Comparative illustrations show why boundaries and shades matter. In Turkey's 2019 Istanbul election, the opposition combined institutional contestation (elections, courts) with neighborhood-level service provision and community engagement—forms of extra-institutional politics that inclusively reframed the political divide in an actively depolarizing way (Demiralp and Balta 2021). In Poland (2017 rule-of-law protests), extra-institutional mobilization deployed constitutional language rather than enemy-centered moralization, showing that extraordinary methods need not be anti-pluralist (Matthes 2022). During the U.S. Civil Rights movement, nonviolent direct extraordinary and extra-institutional action sought expansion of equal citizenship, illustrating that tactic alone does not determine democratic intent; framing and credible commitments do (Tarrow 2011: 102–103, 146–147).

This framework thus holds strong comparative potential, enabling systematic analysis of how democratic and polarization counterstrategies interact to produce either reform or failure. However, this article is only a first step. Episodes could be segmented and patterns quantified, although not everything could be reduced to numbers. The primary value is to provide a coherent analytic repertoire for tracing how actors move across cells, and which counterstrategies travel across cases. From these considerations, two tentative hypotheses follow: (1) *reciprocal polarization boosts short-term turnout but reduces long-term coalition breadth and the prospects of a successful regime challenge*; (2) *hybrid institutional–extra-institutional episodes coupled with transformative reframing yield greater cross-camp reach*.

The empirical section adopts a theory-guided process tracing (TGPT) approach (Falleti 2006) to exploratively trace how these dynamics unfolded in Hungary and to reconstruct the evolving behavior of key political actors. The goal is not strict causal inference but a theory-guided narrative of recurring patterns and their implications for regime stability: sustaining authoritarian consolidation, fostering democratic resistance, and intensifying or reducing polarization.

Complementing this longitudinal mapping, the study conducts a qualitative review of *Magyar Infó*, TISZA Party's flagship online video series and central communication tool. Methodologically, qualitative content analysis is particularly suited to examining meaning-making, rhetorical framing, and emotional dynamics of digital discourse (Schreier 2012). This approach allows tracing how *Magyar Infó* constructs narratives of political renewal, portrays institutions and rivals, and mobilizes emotions such as hope, indignation, or moral responsibility.

Launched in July 2024, the livestream—broadcast via Facebook and YouTube—features Péter Magyar, primarily alone but occasionally with guests, addressing the public in a hybrid format of talk show, political address, and campaign vlog. It bypasses traditional media filters and allows direct narrative control. By May 2025, 22 episodes had aired—averaging 68 min and reaching between 77,000 and 204,000 views—which form the basis of this analysis. All episodes—over 200,000 words of

transcript—were analyzed for democratic and polarization counterstrategies. Transcripts were produced via automated tools, while corrected and translated manually by the author of this study. A full list of episodes is provided in the *Appendix*. To mitigate single-source bias, claims were triangulated with independent reporting and secondary data.

Orbán regime at a crossroads

Pre-TISZA opposition's democratic and polarization counterstrategies (2010–2024)

Following Fidesz's landslide victory in 2010, Hungary underwent rapid autocratization, consolidating a PEA regime fusing exclusionary populism with systemic manipulation of political competition (Benedek 2025a). Throughout this transformation, opposition forces struggled to recalibrate their strategies, while political science scholarship mirrored the regime's ambiguity with a proliferation of regime labels. Applying the typology of democratic (Table 1) and polarization counterstrategies (Table 3), this section maps opposition behavior up to the rise of TISZA in 2024.

2010–2014

In the early 2010s, most parties acted as if operating in a normal democracy, assuming the role of a conventional opposition (1A), but quickly confronted Orbán's authoritarian turn and shifted gradually toward democracy-defender (2A) position. Meanwhile, civil protests (1B/2B) gained importance as the government systematically captured and repurposed formal institutions (Coman and Puleo 2025). Over time, legal and rights-focused NGOs increasingly internationalized resistance by mobilizing European institutions and networks (Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi 2024).

The *Hungarian Socialist Party* (MSZP) mixed routine opposition (1A) with gestures of democracy defense (2A), such as boycotting parts of the 2011 constitution-making and joining the 2014 "Unity" list—an attempted transformative repolarization along democracy vs. autocracy cleavage that ultimately failed. The *Democratic Coalition* (DK), led by the divisive former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, sought to adopt a norm-breaking challenger stance (4A), denouncing the new constitution as dictatorial and engaging in reformist protests (2B), such as Gyurcsány's 2012 hunger strike. DK's strategy was built on reciprocal polarization—branding Fidesz a "criminal regime"—while occasionally coordinating tactically (partially active depolarization).

On the radical right, *Movement for a Better Hungary* (Jobbik) combined conventional institutional participation (1A) with an anti-system stance (4A) and 4B-style street pressure through its paramilitary Hungarian Guard. Anti-Roma, anti-Semitic, and anti-EU rhetoric deepened reciprocal polarization. In contrast, *Politics Can Be Different* (LMP), initially envisioned as an active depolarizing challenger (4A) prior to 2010, instead settled into conventional opposition (1A) and watchdog oversight (1B) after 2010, cultivating a "neither left nor right" identity (passive depolarization).

Occasionally it turned into extra-institutional reformist protest (2B), such as chaining members to Parliament's gates in 2011. The 2013 split within LMP created *Dialogue* (Párbeszéd), which emphasized cross-party alliances (2A with active depolarization) in contrast to LMP's independence.

Overall, the first phase relied mainly on conventional opposition strategies, with only occasional and partial democracy-defense and norm-breaking attempts. Coordination was weak, and forms of polarization often benefited Fidesz. In 2014, the fragmented opposition (Unity, Jobbik, LMP) won more list votes than Fidesz (51% vs. 45%) but failed to convert them into seats due to the Fidesz-revised electoral system, which had meanwhile been redesigned in a more majoritarian direction. During these years, civil society actors acted mainly as watchdogs (1B), using protests, petitions, and investigative journalism to limit government excesses (Gerő and Kerényi 2025: 176–182).

2014–2018

As Hungary shifted from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy between 2014 and 2018 (Bozóki and Benedek 2024), opposition strategies remained reactive and divided. Most parties relied on routine parliamentarism (1A) with occasionally extraordinary gestures (2A), but these responses were increasingly inadequate. As Korkmaz (2025) notes in Turkey, oppositions often remain divided even as authoritarian consolidation accelerates—a pattern mirrored in Hungary.

MSZP oscillated between these repertoires: it organized referendums on the Sunday shop ban, urged ballot-spoiling in the 2016 migration-related quota vote (passive depolarization), and even backed Péter Márki-Zay's 2018 mayoral candidacy, a cross-camp move supporting a right-leaning candidate (2A). In alliance with *Dialogue*, it fielded Gergely Karácsony for prime minister, attempting to reframe polarization as people vs. corrupt elite (transformative repolarization). *DK*, meanwhile, strengthened its norm-breaking rhetoric (4A), while also engaging in selective coordination through informal district deals. Although DK consistently maintained militant anti-Orbán rhetoric (reciprocal polarization), it nevertheless adopted a passive depolarizing stance during the quota referendum ('Stay at home, stay in Europe!'). *LMP* maintained a conventional opposition with watchdog profile (1A/1B), but its referendums on Paks II nuclear plant expansion and other issues nudged it toward democracy defense (2A). However, overarching coordination remained belated and informal during the 2018 election campaign. They also supported 2B-type civic mobilizations, including teacher protests, the anti–internet tax demonstrations, and resistance to the 2017 anti-NGO law (Mikecz 2023).

Meanwhile, *Jobbik* under Gábor Vona pursued strategic moderation (the so-called "people's party turn"), moving toward a strategic adapter stance (3A), although anti-system elements persisted (4A). It expelled radicals, dropped extremist language, and attempting active depolarization through outreach gestures: Vona apologized to Roma, greeted Jewish groups during Hanukkah, and reframed Orbán as the "true traitor." This envisioned transformative repolarization sought to broaden appeal but eroded internal cohesion and alienated hardliners.

Two new actors also injected energy in this period. *Momentum Movement*, founded with the #NOlimpia campaign in 2017, embodied extra-institutional mobilization (2B/3B) and active depolarization. Collecting over 260,000 signatures forced the government to withdraw Budapest's Olympic bid. As a party, Momentum attempted to present itself as a "new politics" challenger (4A), framing divides as old vs. young and corrupt past vs. hopeful future. While resonating with urban youth, however, it lacked national breakthrough in the 2018 elections. Secondly, the satirical *Two-Tailed Dog Party* (MKKP) expanded from micro community projects to mass civic resistance. They mocked anti-migration state propaganda through crowdfunded billboards, while urging spoiled ballots in the 2016 referendum (record invalid vote share). These humor-driven reformist protest (2B) and civic politics (1B/3B) strategies constituted an unconventional form of active depolarization, lowering conflict intensity while sustaining participation.

Despite these efforts, fragmentation persisted. Structural asymmetries, regime manipulation, and opposition missteps—belated coordination, inconsistent strategies, reluctance to pool resources—prevented a convincing and overarching electoral coalition (2A). No actor effectively combined a coherent 4A challenger role with durable 3B mobilization, and Fidesz secured another supermajority in 2018 by framing national sovereignty against a global liberal network and their alleged local allies.

2018–2024

After the 2018 electoral defeat, the opposition finally shifted toward a 2A/3A synthesis, combining democracy defense with strategic adaptation under mounting voter pressure. Many politicians and public figures increasingly interpret the regime as hybrid-authoritarian and backed tactical coordination, which yielded opposition victories in the 2019 municipal elections with effective campaign messaging (Kovarek and Littvay 2022) and culminated in the 2021 opposition primary (active depolarization). Extra-institutional protest also escalated: opposition MPs occupied the state broadcaster (2B/4B) during "slave law" demonstrations in late 2018, dramatizing state capture but fueling reciprocal demonization. *Momentum* fused activism with institutional politics, spearheading the "slave law" and Fudan University protests alongside the leftist anti-establishment *Spark Movement* (Szikra). These drew broad coalitions (active depolarization) and forced concessions, yet Momentum folded back into mainstream adaptation (3A). Grassroots teacher and student protests expanded but lacked critical mass to shift systemic dynamics.

The 2022 campaign united the opposition under Péter Márki-Zay (*United for Hungary*), yet it faltered. Márki-Zay's oscillation between transformative repolarization ("not left or right, but forward"), technocratic reformism, and moral populism, sliding into mere reciprocal polarization. Meanwhile, Fidesz monopolized the Ukraine war frame, portraying Orbán as guardian of security, trapping the opposition in a no-win position (Plesz and Körösényi 2024). Without a coherent 4A challenger narrative, the opposition coalition suffered a decisive defeat in 2022, discrediting both the adapter strategy and the very idea of opposition unity. Research shows the primaries and coalitions themselves were pragmatic responses to backsliding rather than

genuine democratizing innovations in an electoral authoritarian context (Mikola and Santos 2025).

The 2022 loss deepened opposition impasse. Established parties could not articulate alternatives to Orbán's populist-autocratic logic. Most retreated into "3A minimalism," surviving in parliament with passive or reciprocal depolarization (e.g., *MSZP*, *Dialogue*). *DK* asserted leadership through a "shadow government" but intensified intra-opposition rivalry. *Jobbik*, absorbed into the left-wing alliance, lost identity; its moderation backfired as hardliners defected to *Our Homeland Movement* (Mi Hazánk), a far-right splinter from Jobbik. New party leader Péter Jakab only briefly managed to gain traction with a sharp brand of anti-Orbán populism. *LMP* tried third-way positioning, while *Momentum* and *Spark* emphasized civil activism (2B/3B), especially after the rise of TISZA by funding anti-government billboards and aid programs. Conversely, the satirical *MKKP* evolved toward a more formal adapter role (3A), treating the 2024 European and municipal elections seriously.

The 2010–2024 trajectories (Table 4) show that opposition actors tried nearly every counterstrategy, but poor timing (early radicalism or belated cooperation), incoherence, and adverse conditions undermined success. The table is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the most dominant positions of key actors across periods: weak early coordination, fragmented moderation and protest after 2014, coalition-building by 2022, and exhaustion thereafter.

The rise of Péter Magyar and the TISZA party

From whistleblower to movement

Comparative research shows that failed coalition attempts often strengthen incumbents: coming close yet failing to unseat an autocrat tends to provoke repression and retrenchment (Samet 2024), as Hungary's 2022 aftermath illustrates. By the mid-2020s, fragmentation and demoralization left the opposition in disarray, suggesting that only an untainted, agile outsider could credibly reshape the political landscape (Bozóki and Benedek 2024). However, the conditions for such a breakthrough rapidly converged: GDP has stagnated since 2023, EU funds have been suspended since 2022, inflation peaked at 25.7% in early 2023, and public disillusionment deepened. The turning point came in February 2024 with the "clemency scandal": a 2023 presidential pardon for an official convicted of covering up pedophilia triggered an immediate legitimacy crisis (Baranyai et al. 2025: 13), prompting the resignations of President Katalin Novák and former justice minister Judit Varga, Fidesz's then EP elections campaign leader.

While traditional opposition parties remained ineffectual and civil actors only briefly picked up momentum, Péter Magyar—a former second-tier Fidesz insider and ex-husband of former Justice Minister Judit Varga—stepped into the vacuum. He released recordings of his ex-wife that exposed systemic corruption, presenting himself as a credible whistleblower and moral reformer. Disillusioned voters, rejecting both Fidesz and the old opposition, rallied swiftly behind him. In April 2024 he converted his "Rise Up, Hungarians!" movement into TISZA, named after Hungary's second-largest river and symbolizing its values: *Tisztelet* (Respect) and

Table 4 Democratic and polarization counterstrategies in the Orbán regime (2010–2024)

Period	Democratic counterstrategies	Polarization responses
2010–2014	*Conventional opposition* (1A): MSZP, Jobbik, LMP *Watchdog oversight* (1B): LMP *Democracy defense* (2A): MSZP (boycotts, Unity list), Dialogue (alliance-building, split from LMP for unity) *Reformist protest* (2B): DK (hunger strike), LMP (chain-in protest) *Norm-breaking challenger* (4A): DK (illegitimacy frame), Jobbik (anti-system stance), LMP (only envisioned) *Systemic disruptor* (4B): Jobbik (Hungarian Guard paramilitary patrols)	*Reciprocal polarization*: DK (anti-Fidesz "criminal regime" rhetoric), Jobbik (anti-Roma, anti-Semitic, anti-EU) *Passive depolarization*: LMP ("neither left nor right") *Active depolarization*: Dialogue (cross-party alliance-building) *Transformative repolarization*: Unity (only envisioned: democracy vs. autocracy cleavage)
2014–2018	*Conventional opposition* (1A): MSZP, LMP *Watchdog oversight* (1B): LMP (anticorruption profile), MKKP (local civic projects) *Democracy defense* (2A): MSZP (referendums, cross-camp support in by-election), Dialogue (coordination), LMP (referendum pushes, informal coordination) *Strategic adapter* (3A): Jobbik (Vona's deradicalization) *Reformist and civil protests* (2B/3B): Momentum (#NOlimpia campaign), MKKP (satirical counter-billboards, invalid-ballot drive), NGOs (teacher protests, anti–internet tax, anti-NGO law resistance) *Norm-breaking challenger* (4A): DK (militant anti-Orbán rhetoric), Momentum (new politics brand, independent run), Jobbik (anti-system elements lingering)	*Reciprocal polarization*: DK (militant anti-Orbán rhetoric), Jobbik (partially retained radical tones) *Passive depolarization*: MSZP & DK (quota referendum), LMP (continued avoidance of left–right alignment) *Active depolarization*: Jobbik (Roma apology, Hanukkah greetings), Momentum (#NOlimpia cross-partisan), MKKP (parody billboards and invalid ballot drive), opposition cooperation across ideologies in the Hódmezővásárhely by-election *Transformative repolarization*: Jobbik (reframing divide as people vs. oligarchic Orbán), MSZP-Dialogue (Karácsony's inclusive rhetoric), Momentum (old vs. young, corrupt past vs. hopeful future)
2018–2024	*Democracy defense* (2A): Opposition-wide coordination (2019 municipal victories, 2021 primary), Péter Márki-Zay joint candidacy *Reformist protest* (2B/3B): Momentum (–2022) and Spark (Fudan protests, grassroots activism) *Strategic adapter* (3A): Joint opposition post-2022 parliamentary survival, Jobbik (absorbed into left-liberal alliance), DK (post-2022 shadow government), LMP (third-way experiments), Momentum (post-2022 return as mainstream), Spark and MKKP (opening to formal electoral participation since 2019) *Anti-regime civil protest* (3B): Momentum (2024-) and Spark (2022-) (issue-based activism, anti-government billboards, aid schemes) *Norm-breaking challenger* (4A): Márki-Zay ("not left or right, but forward", failed) *Systemic disruptor* (4B): 2018 MTVA occupation (brief escalation)	*Reciprocal polarization*: DK (militant anti-Orbán rhetoric, intra-opposition rivalry), Dialogue, Jobbik (Jakab's populist tones), Márki-Zay's campaign drift *Passive depolarization*: MSZP, LMP *Active depolarization*: 2019 municipal coordination, 2021 primary, Momentum and Spark (Fudan coalition, broad civic alliances) *Transformative repolarization*: Márki-Zay (attempted: "Hungarians of all stripes against a corrupt regime")

Szabadság (Freedom). Instead of focusing directly on democracy or the rule of law, TISZA targeted issues long neglected by both government and opposition—healthcare, education, poverty—while attacking corruption at the core of Orbán's system. Magyar framed Fidesz as an entrenched elite betraying national interests and pledged transparency and competence. His message resonated with the "dissatisfied crowds" (Szabó and Sebestyén 2024), for whom Orbán's narrative of stability and prosperity (e.g., the "Hungary is going forward, not back" slogan in 2022) had lost credibility. By the 2024 European Parliament elections, TISZA had already emerged as a viable challenger (Benedek and Sebestyén 2025).

Hybrid resistance: norm-breaking challenge and civic mobilization

However, it quickly became clear that Magyar had achieved even more: he introduced a fundamentally new strategic quality of opposition, combining a *norm-breaking institutional challenge* (4A) with intensive (extra-institutional) grassroots *civic mobilization* (3B). Moreover, instead of incremental adaptation or reciprocal polarization, TISZA embraced transformative repolarization, seeking to redefine the axis of political conflict, mobilize large democratic coalitions, and confront the regime's authoritarian logic directly.

TISZA became the first opposition actor since 2010 to articulate a coherent, future-oriented vision of regime change and democratic re-foundation (4A) that resonated with broad segments of the electorate. Magyar urged Hungarians to "Look at their own life (…) and decide whether this is truly the kind of governance they want," calling instead to "steer the cart—our homeland, our ship—in a different direction."[2] This forward-looking orientation illustrates transformative repolarization, which seeks to generate a new social contract (Somer et al. 2021). Similarly, a central innovation was the party's crowdfunding model. Through the "System-Change Card",[3] tens of thousands of citizens committed fixed monthly donations,[4] providing financial independence and cultivating a sense of collective ownership. In a political culture where opposition parties have traditionally relied on state funding, grassroots financial mobilization has typically occurred only in exceptional, ad hoc situations—for instance, when parties or individual politicians such as those from Momentum or independent MP Ákos Hadházy were fined for protest actions in the 2020s, or when Jobbik sought microdonations to cover penalties imposed by the State Audit Office in 2017. Against this background, TISZA's sustained and large-scale crowdfunding effort—explicitly tied to a broader project of systemic change—stands out as a novel phenomenon in contemporary Hungarian politics.

Magyar's rhetoric highlighted national unity over ideological antagonism by targeting the narrow ruling elite. He promised that "With determination, but peacefully, together with millions of Hungarians, we will replace Orbán and the system built by his inner circle."[5] Slogans such as "New regime change. New compromise. Genu-

[2] Magyar Infó, Part 11, (timestamp: 54:45)

[3] https://adomanyozas.magyarTISZA.hu/c/rendszervalto-kartya (accessed October 2025).

[4] Magyar Infó, Part 13, (timestamp: 02:02)

[5] Magyar Infó, Part 19, (timestamp: 75:13)

ine national unity"[6] embodied this inclusive ethos. His communication thus rejected reciprocal polarization and instead practiced transformative repolarization, redefining the political conflict as corruption versus moral renewal. As Péter Magyar put it: "Let us state clearly: nothing can continue as it has over the past 30 years. Hungary is in a moral, political, and economic crisis. Most Hungarians have lost trust in the entire political elite that has ruled the country for three decades. I believe that once the news of a new hope reaches (…) more and more people (…) and soon, perhaps the entire Hungarian nation will say together: let us build a new homeland. One where it no longer matters whether someone is conservative or liberal, religious or atheist, with a family or single, poor or wealthy, but only that we are all Hungarians and we love our country."[7]

This forward-looking reframing mobilized collective hope and transformed otherwise costly attacks into evidence of resilience and mission. A movement-centered "hero's journey"—*separation* from both regime and old opposition, *initiation* via leaks and smears, *return* as moral exemplar—converted supporters into co-producers of his narrative (Metz and Kövesdi 2025). His followers interpreted this arc as their own story of renewal, reinforced by participatory practices—digital engagement, symbolic gestures, and ritualized community events—that transformed political support into shared affective identity. Metz and Kövesdi (2025)describe this as a "spiral of fandom," where enthusiasm developed not into a cult of personality but into a participatory movement.

Regarding extra-institutional *civic engagement* (3B), the creation of "TISZA Islands"—local community hubs—reinforced the party's legitimacy through bottom-up and diagonal mobilization. These hubs organized non-partisan volunteer initiatives such as flood relief or animal protection, activities long absent from Hungarian opposition politics, especially outside major cities. The last comparably effective experiment in civic mobilization from below had in fact been launched by Orbán himself after his 2002 electoral defeat, through the "Civic Circles" movement, which helped reconstitute Fidesz's social base in the 2000s. The "Islands" cultivated trust and broadened participation beyond traditional partisanship (active depolarization), while simultaneously signaling a systemic challenge to the regime. Péter Magyar emphasized that their task was to "Work toward systemic change by building from the ground up,"[8] demonstrating how locally rooted activism could link everyday concerns to political transformation. They also functioned as spaces of charismatic bonding. Shared rituals, symbols, and collective experiences generated emotional solidarity, giving previously disenchanted citizens a political home, offering citizens more than the mere rejection of the regime (Metz and Kövesdi 2025). In this sense, TISZA's activism bridged instrumental politics and affective community-building.

[6] https://www.facebook.com/peter.magyar.102/posts/jelszavaink-val%C3%A1nak-haza-%C3%A9s-halad%C3%A1s%C3%BAj-rendszerv%C3%A1lt%C3%A1s-%C3%BAj-kiegyez%C3%A9s-%C3%A9s-a-val%C3%B3di-ne/9213414035359629/ (accessed October 2025).

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N0vl-Znvpko&ab_channel=MagyarP%C3%A9terHivatalos (00:50:55) (accessed October 2025).

[8] Magyar Infó, Part 20, (timestamp: 63:08)

In sum, TISZA combined effectively an extra-institutional approach (3B) with a norm-breaking challenger stance (4A). This hybrid 4A/3B position marked a clear departure from the earlier dominance of conventional opposition (1A), democracy defenders (2A), and strategic adapters (3A). So far, TISZA has avoided the 4B systemic disruptor role: it has not embraced blockades or civil disobedience. Instead, it pursued transformation within institutional competition, balancing ambitious goals with peaceful political channels. Unlike earlier parties trapped in parliamentary minimalism or sporadic extraordinary protest, TISZA institutionalized civic energy within a vision of systemic change, combining electoral participation with community-based activism.

The birth of a transformative opposition: hope and unity against corruption and division

Regarding its counter-polarization strategy, the party centers on hope, renewal, and civic responsibility rather than grievance-driven politics. Magyar's Facebook profile bears the slogan "Do not be afraid," setting a tone of moral reassurance.[9] The movement's core motto, "The TISZA is flowing," encapsulates its ethos: collective momentum, renewal, and purification. As Magyar stated, "Hungarians, united with Hungarians, can come together to move forward and shake off the burdens of the past twenty years. (…). The time has come for unity. Join us now—let us be the force of change together and act for the future of Hungary and of our grandchildren."[10] Rather than replicating Fidesz's broad exclusionary populism, TISZA narrows its critique to the governing elite—often framed as the "3,000 janissaries"—while simultaneously adopting elements of active depolarization. Messages such as "No left, no right, only Hungarians" and appeals to disillusioned Fidesz voters explicitly reject binary antagonisms. In Magyar's words: "We welcome Fidesz supporters too, because it's not you who changed, but your prime minister and your party"[11] and "If we are afraid, then lies, division, and war will triumph over truth and love—and we cannot allow that, because we have only one homeland."[12] This reconciliatory tone was also central to Magyar's address at the October 23, 2025 national celebrations commemorating the 1956 anti-Soviet revolution, where he announced plans to introduce a symbolic "Law of National Reconciliation" after the elections, presenting his movement as a civic rather than partisan force committed to moral renewal, unity, and non-vengeful systemic change.[13]

This framing shifts political conflict away from entrenched ideological cleavages (left/right, international/national) and redefines it as a struggle between a "co-criminal system"—a twist on the regime's own label, the "System of National Cooperation"

[9] https://www.facebook.com/peter.magyar.102 (accessed October 2025).

[10] Magyar Infó, Part 13, (timestamp: 23:49)

[11] https://veszpremkukac.hu/magyar-peter-szeretnem-visszavenni-a-hazankat_unikum/ (accessed October 2025).

[12] Magyar Infó, Part 8, (timestamp: 65:02)

[13] https://www.youtube.com/live/znZvbEwfSQo?si=gp90xC_hl6EI_za1&t=8923 (accessed October 2025).

(NER)—and a corruption-free Hungary, committed to accountability (e.g., by joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office). By doing so, TISZA seeks to realign voter identities around moral and governance values rather than partisan or ideological camps: "Whether someone comes from the left, an old right-wing party, or from Fidesz, that is not a disqualifier (…). The TISZA Party is a clean community that will work for a completely different kind of Hungary."[14] The strategy proved effective in the 2024 EP elections, when the party—founded only months earlier—secured nearly 30% of the vote. Its cross-cutting appeal was evident: support came not only from established opposition constituencies but also from former Fidesz and far-right sympathizers as well as politically distrustful segments of the electorate (Kovarek 2025).

Digital and symbolic mobilization

Digital communication has been crucial to this breakthrough. Through livestream platforms such as *Magyar Infó*, Magyar fostered his charisma in the eyes of the followers and built a direct connection with his audience, bypassing pro-government media filters (Metz and Kövesdi 2025). Professional use of social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Discord), coupled with sustained coverage by independent media, reinforced visibility and reach. More importantly, the campaign exploited the algorithmic affordances of these platforms: short, emotionally charged content, interactive livestreams, and continuous dialogue generated solidarity and belonging. Online engagement itself became identity-building, a decisive break from earlier opposition efforts that lacked participatory and media-independent channels.

Symbolic politics further reinforced cross-cutting mobilization. TISZA reclaimed national emblems long monopolized by Fidesz (Palonen 2009): the tricolor, the ribbon (*kokárda*), patriotic imagery, and redeployed them in inclusive ways. Magyar's "One Million Steps" march to Nagyvárad,[15] one of the historical centers of the Hungarian minority living abroad in Transylvania, in spring 2025 exemplified this approach: it combined transborder solidarity with reconciliation, countering Orbán's nationalist framing.[16] The event also illustrates the online–offline synergy emphasized in social movement scholarship: digital mobilization gained traction only when linked to tangible community experiences and embodied acts of protest (Castells 2012: 10). A vigorous challenger capable of leading a 300-kilometer march contrasted sharply with an aging Orbán, who increasingly styled himself as a measured statesman with spectacularly slowing rhetoric (from 850 characters per minute in 2009 to 594 in 2025, own calculations). Beyond symbolic politics, TISZA's program[17] focuses on everyday realities such as living standards, poverty, healthcare, aiming to attract citizens whose political engagement stems primarily from dissatisfaction with the current regime rather than loyalty to any particular party. For many of these disillusioned voters, Magyar embodies a credible opportunity for challenging and potentially transforming the existing political order.

[14] Magyar Infó, Part 3, (timestamp: 42:30)

[15] https://egymilliolepes.hu/ (accessed October 2025).

[16] https://fb.watch/zNroC8Ztxw/ (accessed October 2025).

[17] https://magyarTISZA.hu/TISZA-program (accessed October 2025).

Despite smear campaigns, polls consistently show that Magyar benefits from a "Teflon effect" (Metz and Kövesdi 2025). By 2025, he was consistently rated more honest and competent than Orbán, especially on corruption and EU funding: voters across party lines, including independents, view him as the most capable political figure to deliver meaningful change.[18] His Fidesz background paradoxically strengthens his anti-system appeal: attempts to discredit him on these grounds failed, since many voters interpreted former insider status as proof of authentic knowledge and strategic autonomy rather than complicity.[19] As a whistleblower exposing corruption, Magyar reinforced his claim to authenticity. The affective shield provided by TISZA's participatory community protected him from delegitimization. Equally decisive has been his rejection of both Orbán's NER system and the "old opposition," especially Ferenc Gyurcsány (DK), whose negative legacy has remained deeply divisive. By labeling DK the "blue Fidesz," Magyar accused it of sectarianism and complicity in sustaining the regime. This dual moral distancing enables TISZA to present itself as a genuine alternative rather than another iteration of the political duopoly, resonating strongly with disillusioned citizens who refuse a return to pre-2010 politics.

The response of the Orbán regime

Observers debate whether the TISZA Party and movement represent sustainable democratic capacity. It seems that despite certain populist undertones, Péter Magyar and TISZA currently display features that suggest democratic potential (Benedek 2025c). Rather than evolving into a personalized cult of leadership, followers' enthusiasm is anchored in participatory practices, symbolic rituals, and shared values rather than blind devotion to a leader (Metz and Kövesdi 2025). However, democratic capacity is hard to evaluate under authoritarian conditions, given opposition's extraordinary dilemmas. The concluding section therefore briefly examines the Orbán regime's responses to the unprecedented challenge posed by TISZA, to trace how incumbent strategies reshape challengers' opportunity structures.

Fidesz initially appeared paralyzed, lacking a coherent counter-narrative and even committing "unforced errors", such as Orbán's political director questioning the heroism of Hungary's 1956 revolutionaries. By late 2024, however, the regime recalibrated. After leaked recordings and verbal harassment of Magyar by Fidesz communications director Tamás Menczer during a charity visit,[20] Orbán openly endorsed confrontational tactics, declaring, "He who draws the sword dies by the sword" and

[18] "Medián: Magyar Péter a legnépszerűbb politikus Magyarországon" ["Medián: Péter Magyar is the most popular politician in Hungary"]. *HVG360*, March 20, 2025, https://hvg.hu/360/20250320_hvg-median-felmeres-magyar-peter-orban-viktor-nepszeruseg-marciusban-ujrakezdtek "Orbán 15 – másfél évtized a magyar társadalom szemével" ["Orbán 15 – fifteen years of the Orbán government through the eyes of Hungarian society"]. *Policy Solutions*, May 22, 2025. https://www.policysolutions.hu/hu/hirek/663/orban15_kutatas (accessed October 2025).

[19] "Inside the rise of Viktor Orbán's unexpected challenger." *Direkt36 / Telex.hu*, March 26, 2025. https://telex.hu/direkt36/2025/03/26/inside-the-rise-of-viktor-orbans-unexpected-challenger (accessed October 2025).

[20] "Is Fidesz campaigning through public arguments? Péter Magyar was insulted in front of a children's home – VIDEO." *Daily News Hungary*, December 3, 2024 https://dailynewshungary.com/fidesz-tamas-menczer-peter-magyar/ (accessed October 2025).

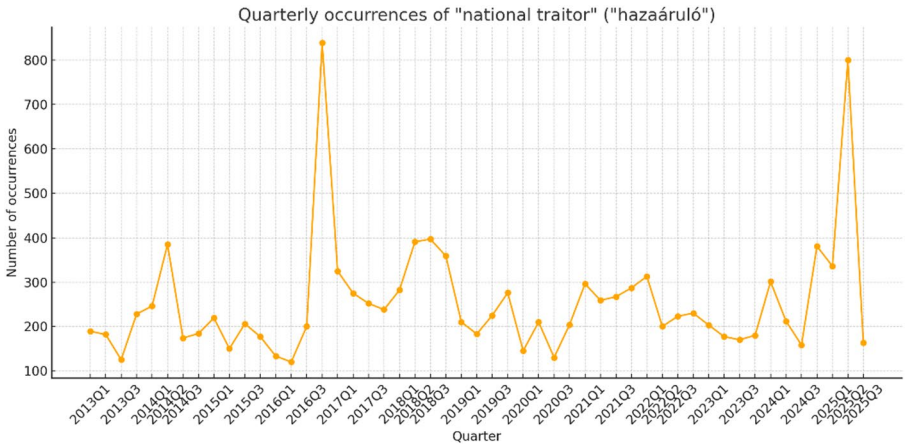

Fig. 1 Quarterly occurrences of "national traitor" in Hungarian media between January 2013 and August 2025

"With rabble-rousers one can only speak in their own language".[21] This marked a watershed: the regime now treated its challenger not through policy or strategic restraint but with hostility and threats of violence.

By early 2025, this strategy crystallized into a revived "traitor discourse." My content analysis (Fig. 1), based on data from the *IMEDIA* media database under licensed access, shows that the epithet "national traitor" (*hazaáruló*), which had largely disappeared by the early 2020s, surged again with TISZA's emergence. Senior Fidesz figures depicted the party as a Brussels-backed project, while Orbán himself labeled it "not a Hungarian party, but a Brussels one."[22] On March 15, 2025, the Prime Minister escalated further, describing opponents as "bugs" and calling for an "Easter cleaning" of NGOs, journalists, judges, and politicians allegedly funded from abroad.[23] Such dehumanizing metaphors recall earlier episodes in Hungary's populist tradition,[24] and functioned as an antechamber to political violence. Harassment of TISZA activists at street stands soon became routine, framed as patriotic duty.[25] Orbán announced a "transparency protection" bill modeled on Russian-style foreign agent laws.[26] Even

[21] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2rsvyK67cbk&ab_channel=Orb%C3%A1nViktor (accessed October 2025).

[22] https://www.origo.hu/itthon/2025/04/orban-viktor-a-TISZA-part-egy-brusszeli-part-a-gazdai-brusszelben-vannak (accessed October 2025).

[23] https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-177th-anniversary-of-the-hungarian-revolution-and-war-of-independence-of-1848-49/ (accessed October 2025).

[24] This language echoed the populist rhetoric of József Torgyán's infamous 1996 speech, in which he described liberal elites as "repulsive worms and carrion vultures" destroying the Hungarian nation from within and without. https://mandiner.blog.hu/2010/03/14/torgyan_96_alliberalis_undorito_fergek_liberalis_dogkeselyuk (accessed October 2025).

[25] "Kötekedés, kiabálás, lökdösődés, leköpés: térképen a Tisza Párt aktivistái elleni atrocitások" ["Harassment, shouting, shoving, spitting: a map of attacks against TISZA Party activists"]. *SzabadEurópa.hu*, April 7, 2025. https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/kotekedes-kiabalas-lokdosodes-lekopes-terkepen-a-TISZA-part-aktivistai-elleni-atrocitasok/33366614.html (accessed October 2025).

[26] https://miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-evertekelo-beszede-2025-02-22/ (accessed October 2025).

though its vote was postponed, the symbolism reinforced claims that the opposition served foreign interests.

Alongside this discursive offensive, the government attempted to re-anchor politics on *reciprocal polarization* terrain. Culture-war themes (LGBTQ rights, drug policy) were revived to push TISZA back into familiar cleavages. The party, however, sought to sidestep these "polarizing traps," delegating responses to smaller actors while keeping its focus on systemic change and inclusive symbolic initiatives such as the *Voice of the Nation* campaign, presenting itself as focused on building "a new Hungary." This regime strategy yielded mixed results: LGBTQ+ rights-related *Budapest Pride* attracted record participation in 2025, showing the limits of Fidesz's attempt to monopolize identity politics.

By spring, accusations of espionage entered mainstream government communication: Fidesz leaders alleged collusion between TISZA and the Ukrainian secret service,[27] a narrative amplified by pro-government media and militant online groups and soon endorsed by Orbán himself.[28] Reports of possible treason charges against the former military officer Romulusz Ruszin-Szendi in Magyar's team, though not acted upon, demonstrated how rhetorical delegitimization can prepare the ground for legal exclusion.

Institutional tools already exist to operationalize exclusion. The Sovereignty Protection Office, created in 2024, wields broad powers to investigate "foreign influence." Proposed transparency rules could disqualify parties on technical grounds. An insider trading probe into Magyar's finances, launched by public prosecutors with the Hungarian Central Bank, together with new asset declaration requirements for opposition MEPs, further contributed to a climate of uncertainty. While Orbán publicly insisted that "everyone who obeys the law will be allowed to run," his rhetoric simultaneously hinted at potential disqualification, suggesting that noncompliance could justify exclusion.[29] However, so far, concrete sanctions have primarily targeted the established opposition (e.g., DK and Momentum MPs stripped of mandates and a minister threatening Budapest mayor Karácsony with imprisonment), rather than TISZA MEPs. At the same time, this environment of strategic ambiguity allows the regime to deter TISZA mobilization without openly resorting to repression.

[27] Máté Kocsis publicly claimed that "it has now become clear that the Ukrainian secret service (SBU) is colluding with the TISZA Party". https://www.facebook.com/kocsismate/posts/1248518769968351?ref=embed_post (accessed October 2025).

[28] Orbán stated on May 13 that "We have never seen anything like this before! A Hungarian opposition party is actively involved in a foreign intelligence operation against Hungary. Our services are prepared." https://www.facebook.com/reel/1210694870701492 Orbán further elaborated this frame on May 23, claiming that "Hungarian opposition parties essentially maintain Ukrainian ties" and that "Ukrainians are gliding through [Hungarian politics] like a knife through butter" via the opposition" https://www.facebook.com/watch?v=1060027439522837 Previously, in an interview with a friendly outlet, Orbán labeled TISZA "a serious rival, but a foreign-funded project kept alive from abroad, joined by leftist oligarchs", flatly concluding "I have no doubt that TISZA is not a Hungarian party, but a Brussels one." https://mandiner.hu/belfold/2025/04/az-ev-egyik-legjobban-vart-interjuja-hont-andras-vs-orban-viktor-eloben-a-mandinern (accessed October 2025).

[29] "Hogyan tudnák megakadályozni Magyar Péter indulását a választáson?" ["How could Péter Magyar's candidacy be blocked in the election?"]. Telex.hu, May 8, 2025. https://telex.hu/belfold/2025/05/08/magyar-peter-TISZA-part-valasztas-indulas-ellehetetlenites-orban-viktor (accessed October 2025).

Together, the revival of "traitor discourse" and the deployment of strategic ambiguity constitute an opportunity-structure shock that pressures opponents to slide toward reciprocal polarization. By conflating opposition with treachery, Fidesz questions the legitimacy of alternation in power. Discursive escalation, reinforced by selective legal instruments, narrows the space for democratic competition and heightens the risk of authoritarian closure. Comparative surveys underscore the danger: polarized citizens themselves often tolerate or even endorse autocratic measures (Littvay et al. 2024), while Hungarian voters impose some of the weakest electoral sanctions in Europe for democratic norm violations (Avramovska et al. 2024). In this environment, Orbán's strategy not only delegitimizes challengers but also normalizes abandoning pluralism as a patriotic necessity, a trajectory paralleling developments in contemporary Turkey.

Conclusion: the outlook of democratization in Hungary

This study proposed a constructivist-realist framework for understanding how democratic challengers operate under regime uncertainty, emphasizing the role of regime perceptions in shaping strategic choice. It outlined a typology of opposition strategies, ranging from conventional challengers working within the system to radical disruptors seeking extra-institutional rupture (Table 1). Although developed with hybrid regimes in mind, this framework also offers analytical leverage for understanding opposition and contestation in other settings—such as populist and anti-establishment parties in consolidated democracies that transform representational deficits into anti-elite mobilization, or radical civic movements confronting perceived systemic injustice—where actors' interpretations of the political order shape their strategic repertoires. In addition, these categories are fluid: democratizing movements, especially successful ones, often combine strategies across electoral, institutional, and civic arenas.

The framework also emphasized polarization as an intentional autocratic strategy. In Hungary, the Orbán regime has weaponized polarization to erode mutual toleration and legitimize authoritarian practices. Distinguishing ideological, affective, and democratic polarization (Table 2) helps explain how different forms of division undermine opposition effectiveness and demand tailored polarization counterstrategies (Table 3). Transformative repolarization—reframing politics around shared democratic values and civic renewal—emerges as the most promising response. Unlike reciprocal demonization or passive retreat, this strategy cuts across entrenched divisions and builds inclusive coalitions.

The Hungarian case underscores the importance of nuanced analytical understanding for opposition strategies in hybrid regimes. The Orbán regime fused authoritarian institutions with polarizing 'us-vs-them' rhetoric, restructuring competition around favorable ideological and identity cleavages. Established opposition parties, caught in continuous dilemmas, pursued a mix of incoherent strategies—conventional parliamentary protest supplemented by ad hoc extraordinary gestures, drifting toward strategic adaptation, and accompanied mostly by reciprocal polarization or passive depolarization—that proved ineffective in the face of an evolving hybrid regime

(Table 4). Attempts at unity, most notably the technically joint opposition campaign of 2022, proved both insufficient and belated: lacking a coherent forward-looking vision, they failed to galvanize broader support, leaving Orbán free to exploit populist-nationalist frames during wartime crisis. The result was another supermajority and a demoralized opposition. This trajectory illustrates the study's first tentative hypothesis: reciprocal polarization may energize turnout in the short run but narrows coalition breadth, ultimately weakening prospects for regime change.

Against this backdrop, Péter Magyar and his TISZA Party broke with earlier patterns. Emerging in early 2024 amid worsening economic hardship, growing social dissatisfaction, and an unexpected scandal that undermined governing Fidesz's legitimacy, it combined norm-breaking institutional challenge with intensive grassroots civic mobilization. Its narrative centered not on traditional left–right cleavages but on moral renewal: a "corrupt co-criminal system" versus a "corruption-free Hungary." This new framing allowed the party to reach far beyond traditional opposition constituencies, attracting disillusioned Fidesz voters and politically disengaged citizens. Its symbolism—reclaiming national icons monopolized by Fidesz—and emphasis on everyday grievances (inflation, declining public services, corruption) reinforced credibility. Crowdfunding and grassroots "TISZA Islands" created participatory structures, providing both resources and civic identity. Complementing these channels, the *Tisza Világ* application—launched in September 2025 and soon compromised in a politically charged hacking incident—gamifies activism by awarding points and badges for tasks from adopting villages to meme production, thereby integrating online engagement with offline organizing and further reinforcing the movement's participatory infrastructure.[30] The party embodied transformative repolarization, mobilizing a "universal opposition" coalition around a new social contract. This speaks to the study's second hypothesis: hybrid institutional–extra-institutional strategies, when coupled with transformative reframing, appear capable of expanding cross-camp reach, an insight worth testing comparatively.

TISZA's meteoric rise—nearly 30% in the 2024 European Parliament elections—briefly disrupted Orbán's aura of invincibility. Yet this breakthrough provoked a fierce backlash. By early 2025, government rhetoric escalated into "traitor discourse," portraying the opposition as foreign agents. Threats of disqualification created an atmosphere of strategic ambiguity. Legal and discursive instruments signaled that the regime was prepared to move beyond electoral authoritarianism if necessary. Parallel culture-war initiatives sought to re-anchor politics on familiar reciprocal polarizing terrain. Harassment of activists and disinformation campaigns reinforced this trajectory, narrowing space for democratic contestation. In response, Magyar has also signaled that, if necessary, he may go beyond institutional channels, hinting at a systemic disruptor stance that could create extraordinary conditions reminiscent of color revolutions or Euromaidan.

As in 1989 and 2010, rare moments of systemic change emerge when deep structural crises converge with well-chosen challenger strategies. Magyar's ascent so far reflects precisely this interplay, though he still stands at the threshold. However, even if a breakthrough occurs, post-authoritarian governments face a "post-autocratic tri-

[30] https://TISZAvilag.hu/intro (accessed October 2025).

lemma": they can be fast, effective, or lawful, but only two at once—a dilemma Ivan Krastev described in "post-populist" terms during his 2025 Budapest lecture.[31] This constraint means that without rapid and tangible results, the risk of populist autocrats returning remains high.

These dynamics underscore the precarious position of challengers under electoral autocracy. On one side, transformative repolarization of a norm-breaking challenger offers a pathway to effective institutional and civic mobilization, rebuilding democratic legitimacy and trust. On the other, incumbents retain powerful tools—legal, discursive, and coercive—to foreclose genuine alternation in power. In this sense, Hungary illustrates the double bind of opposition politics in hybrid regimes: success can invite intensified repression, while failure risks fragmentation and irrelevance. The prospects of democratization may hinge on whether transformative repolarization can withstand authoritarian backlash without sliding into reciprocal polarization or disruptive escalation. The Hungarian case thus offers broader lessons for comparative research: democratic breakthroughs are neither linear nor assured, but hinge on challengers' ability to sustain inclusive mobilization under hostile conditions, incumbents' adaptive responses, and societies' receptiveness to pluralism under authoritarian pressure.

Appendix

List of the analyzed episodes of *Magyar Infó* (accessed October 2025).
Magyar Infó Part 1,2024-07-14, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_HM5PIcYSY
Magyar Infó Part 2,2024-07-21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dvo-KpvQDS8
Magyar Infó Part 3,2024-07-28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pg8z6-ECgKE
Magyar Infó Part 4,2024-08-04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aa0JUcy0LGs
Magyar Infó Part 5,2024-08-11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4t93jDwS1s
Magyar Infó Part 6,2024-08-18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUR0tl30Dwc
Magyar Infó Part 7,2024-09-01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kkEdsRh9V0
Magyar Infó Part 8,2024-09-08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SlKzkmA-xDY
Magyar Infó Part 9,2024-09-22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmsWsvR441k
Magyar Infó Part 10,2024-09-29, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8j0eXsDp84M
Magyar Infó Part 11,2024-10-13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DZYXrEfIDU
Magyar Infó Part 12,2024-10-20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewgwCcXQnos
Magyar Infó Part 13,2024-10-27, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZkSLLwX85oU

[31] https://politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=3585 (accessed October 2025).

Magyar Infó Part 14,2024-11-03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HbTsVphJgQ
Magyar Infó Part 15,2025-01-13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CH5zuBEXfLY
Magyar Infó Part 16,2025-01-20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tl64V5ieSAA
Magyar Infó Part 17,2025-02-03, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WqheHTD_JCw&ab_channel=MagyarP%C3%A9terHivatalos
Magyar Infó Part 18,2025-02-17, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mSEDuLk_PM
Magyar Infó Part 19,2025-02-24, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz0ICrvmH-g
Magyar Infó Part 20,2025-04-28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmh9O9jH4Yk
Magyar Infó Part 21,2025-05-05, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9yH6uPHXAE&ab_channel=MagyarP%C3%A9terHivatalos
Magyar Infó Part 22,2025-05-19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4uwsWYZwAQ&ab_channel=MagyarP%C3%A9terHivatalos

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