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Discursive democratic potential before power: comparing Péter Magyar and Viktor Orbán as opposition challengers in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

Opposition victory is a plausible path to democratic renewal in electoral autocracies, but opposition status alone does not guarantee democratic commitment. This article develops the concept of discursive democratic potential: an actor-level, discourse-based framework for examining how opposition challengers publicly articulate democratic restoration, plural political membership and norm-bound competition while still outside government. Treating discourse as diagnostic evidence rather than a sincerity test, the framework evaluates political goals, pluralism and norm consistency, with particular emphasis on the target and direction of confrontation. Empirically, the article compares Péter Magyar and the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) in 2024–2025 with Viktor Orbán's challenger-period discourse before Hungary's 2010 regime transformation. The analysis draws on a 518,216-word corpus coded through keyword-assisted retrieval, semantic validation, author adjudication and blind human validation. Democratic and mostly democratic blocks dominate both corpora, risk cases are rare and no passage reaches the autocratic-prone threshold. Yet risk structures differ: Orbán's warning signs are more structural and hegemonic-majoritarian, while TISZA/Magyar risk is more explicit, vertical and accountability-oriented. The article shows why democratic vocabulary, civility and opposition status are, on their own, insufficient guides to democratic potential under autocratic pressure.

KEYWORDS

Electoral autocracy; democratic backsliding; opposition strategies; democratic restoration; discourse analysis; political pluralism

1. Introduction

Electoral autocracies produce a recurring but unresolved problem for democratic theory and comparative politics. When an entrenched incumbent distorts elections while preserving parties, campaigns and democratic vocabulary, opposition victory is often the most plausible route to democratic renewal. Yet the actors capable of defeating an autocrat are not automatically democrats. They may mobilize anger, anti-corruption resentment, people/elite polarization, constitutional restoration and anti-regime confrontation in ways that can either reopen plural competition or reproduce majoritarian and punitive logics once power becomes available (Gamboa, 2022; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013). The diagnostic problem is therefore double: analysts must avoid treating disruptive challengers as authoritarian simply because they confront a distorted regime, but they must also avoid treating opposition status and democratic self-description as proof of democratic commitment.

Democratic language is thus both necessary and insufficient evidence. It matters because actors publicly commit themselves to democratic rules, targets and limits. It is insufficient because similar words may legitimize bounded restoration, hegemonic refoundation or punitive cleansing depending on how they define political goals, the boundaries of the political community and permissible means.

Existing literatures provide important pieces of this puzzle but not a fully adequate diagnostic framework for opposition challengers before they reach power. Autocratization research has clarified how incumbents erode democracy from within and how electoral authoritarian regimes manipulate uncertainty (Levitsky &

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Way, 2010; Schedler, 2013). Opposition-strategy research has shown that challengers face real dilemmas under backsliding, since ordinary institutional tactics may be ineffective while radicalization may trigger repression or deepen polarization (Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022). In addition, populism and anti-pluralism research identifies important warning signs, especially the claim to exclusively represent the 'real people' (Medzihorsky & Lindberg, 2024; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016). These approaches, however, leave open a narrower question: what can opposition discourse before power reveal about a challenger's democratic potential when democratic restoration, anti-corruption critique, anti-elite mobilization and confrontational opposition are all politically plausible?

This article answers that question by developing the concept of discursive democratic potential: an actor-level, discourse-based diagnostic framework for examining how an opposition challenger articulates democratic restoration, plural political membership and norm-bound competition before reaching power. Here, 'before power' denotes the period in which challengers compete from opposition for governing power; it does not presume that they will ultimately obtain it. The framework treats discourse as diagnostic evidence rather than as a sincerity test. It therefore asks not whether actors use democratic words, but how their public language structures political goals, opponents, legitimate membership and permissible means under autocratic pressure.

The framework evaluates opposition discourse across three analytically distinct but empirically overlapping lenses. Political goals ask whether change is framed as rule-bound alternation and constitutional restoration or as unrestricted mandate and hegemonic refoundation. Pluralism asks whether rival voters, opponents and social groups remain legitimate members of the political community. Norm consistency asks whether the actor maintains democratic self-restraint under pressure, especially when speaking about accountability, punishment, mobilization or institutional repair. A cross-cutting interpretive rule then examines the target and direction of conflict, distinguishing horizontal exclusion of voters or lawful opponents from vertical confrontation against incumbents, captured institutions or authoritarian practices.

The empirical comparison is built around two Hungarian challenger moments. The first is the rapid rise of Péter Magyar and the Respect and Freedom Party (TISZA) within an entrenched electoral-authoritarian regime. Magyar's emergence has elsewhere been analyzed as a norm-breaking challenger strategy combining institutional critique, civic mobilization and transformative repolarization under significant regime uncertainty (Benedek, 2026; Bursać & Unger, 2026). Recent work has examined this rise from complementary perspectives, emphasizing the sequencing of opposition strategies and mobilization (Ishikawa, 2026), consolidation around a single credible challenger (Şar & Ayan Musil, 2026), and the digital construction of Magyar's charismatic authority (Metz et al., 2026). The second is Viktor Orbán's challenger-period discourse before the 2010 regime transformation. Orbán is not used here as a moral foil or deterministic warning, but as a historically consequential benchmark: his case illustrates why democratic-restorative language before power cannot be assessed only by its surface vocabulary. The article therefore asks how democratic reassurance and risk are structured in TISZA's public discourse and how this pattern compares with a prior Hungarian opposition discourse that preceded regime transformation.

Methodologically, the article analyses a large corpus of public political speech through keyword-assisted retrieval, context-block coding and author-adjudicated semantic validation. The design is intentionally conservative. It does not infer hidden intention, does not equate democratic rhetoric with democratic commitment, and does not treat all confrontational language as risk. Instead, it compares how democratic reassurance and warning signals are structured across the three dimensions. The core empirical claim is therefore cautious. The article does not show that TISZA is a proven democratizing actor, nor that Orbán's earlier opposition discourse was explicitly autocratic. It shows that surface democratic vocabulary and anti-incumbent rhetoric are insufficient guides: democratic potential depends on whether political change is bounded, whether the political community remains plural, and whether accountability claims remain constrained by democratic norms.

The main contribution is a bounded, actor-level framework for diagnosing opposition discourse in electoral autocracies without treating challengers as either democrats-in-waiting or autocrats-in-waiting. The Hungarian comparison shows how similar democratic vocabularies can contain different structures of reassurance and risk, while the coding design demonstrates how such discourse analysis can be made transparent and reproducible through explicit dimensions, context-sensitive coding, validation and supplementary evidence.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical framework. Section 3 presents the Hungarian case, corpus and method. Section 4 analyses the findings across political goals, pluralism and norm consistency. The conclusion discusses what the framework can and cannot tell us about democratic breakthroughs under electoral autocracy.

2. Theoretical framework: discursive democratic potential under autocratic pressure

2.1. Opposition challengers and the problem of democratic diagnosis

The core diagnostic problem is rooted in electoral authoritarianism. Such regimes retain multiparty elections, opposition parties and the vocabulary of competition while systematically distorting the conditions under which challengers compete. Elections are therefore arenas of uncertainty, legitimation and manipulation rather than either meaningless rituals or fully democratic contests (Schedler, 2006, 2013). Competitive authoritarian regimes similarly combine formal democratic institutions with incumbent abuse of state resources, media access and legal-institutional control (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Since contemporary autocratization often proceeds through executive aggrandizement, constitutional manipulation and institutional hollowing-out rather than open abolition (Bermeo, 2016; Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), harsh anti-incumbent confrontation must be read in context: it may be a democratic response to blocked accountability, but opposition status alone is never proof of democratic commitment.

This caveat has deep roots in democratic theory. Democracy requires rule-bound alternation under conditions of open-ended competition and mutual recognition (Dahl, 1971; Przeworski, 1991), while transition scholarship emphasizes actors' acceptance of procedural constraints and indeterminate outcomes (Linz & Stepan, 1996; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). Linz's (1978) distinction between loyal, semi-loyal and disloyal actors and Sartori's (2005) analysis of anti-system opposition make the same point in actor-centred terms: a party may compete within a system while contesting its legitimacy, rules or plural foundations. The question is therefore not whether an actor opposes an incumbent, but whether its discourse accepts electoral contingency, plural membership and institutional limits.

Contemporary work on democratic erosion reaches the same conclusion from the opposite direction. Elected actors can undermine democracy while speaking the language of elections, national sovereignty, and popular mandate, deploying legal authority, anti-elite appeals, plebiscitary claims, and majoritarian rhetoric to weaken institutional constraints and delegitimize rivals (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Research on opposition in electoral autocracies likewise warns that challengers may be committed democrats, conditional democrats or strategic adapters whose commitments remain contingent on power prospects (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Gandhi & Ong, 2019). Aggregate regime measures are indispensable, but they compress actor-level perceptions, strategic dilemmas and justificatory repertoires into country-years (Schedler, 2024, pp. 19–22). *Discursive democratic potential* is therefore an *ex ante* diagnostic tool, not a prediction of future governance.

These literatures motivate the framework developed below: democratic diagnosis before power requires indicators that can separate rule-bound opposition from anti-pluralist or norm-unbounded challenge.

2.2. Discourse as diagnostic evidence, not as a sincerity test

The article treats discourse as diagnostic evidence, not as a transparent window into sincerity. Political actors can dissimulate, and democratic vocabulary may coexist with illiberal projects, autocratic legalism or hegemonic power claims (Corrales, 2015; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Maerz, 2019). Yet public language still matters because it organizes legitimate goals, adversaries, membership boundaries and binding constraints. In discourse-historical terms, political discourse is context-dependent, intertextual, argumentative and embedded in fields of action and genres (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp. 87–93). The task is therefore not to infer inner intention but to reconstruct the public structure of justification through which political change is framed.

One implication is that overtly anti-democratic discourse should be relatively uncommon where political actors continue to seek legitimacy through elections and democratic institutions. Contemporary authoritarian rule often operates through simulated democratic procedures, mediated performance and appeals to popular mandate rather than through explicit rejection of democracy (Guriev & Treisman, 2022; Sata &

Karolewski, 2023). This does not imply that challengers are necessarily deceptive, nor that democratic vocabulary is irrelevant. Consequently, neither the prevalence of democratic language nor the rarity of overtly autocratic statements can by itself establish democratic commitment. The diagnostic leverage lies instead in how democratic claims are tied to political targets, proposed remedies, membership boundaries and normative constraints.

This also clarifies why the method cannot be reduced to word-counting. Terms such as people, nation, corruption, betrayal, accountability, law, restoration or prison do not carry stable democratic or anti-democratic meaning out of context. Their meaning depends on target, predication, argumentation, genre and political setting (De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). Qualitative content analysis therefore requires an explicit coding frame, decision rules and validation procedures rather than impressionistic interpretation (Krippendorff, 2013; Schreier, 2012). Text-as-data scholarship reinforces the same point from a methodological angle: dictionaries, retrieval models and preprocessing choices help locate potentially relevant language, but their outputs become valid evidence only when checked against the substantive concept being measured (Grimmer et al., 2022).

The discourse literatures converge on this target-sensitive logic. Hawkins (2009) demonstrates that moralized, Manichean politics can be identified systematically in political speech, and Aslanidis (2016) treats populism as a discursive frame rather than a fixed organizational type. Laclau (2005) clarifies why 'the people' must be analyzed relationally. Maerz (2019) adds the authoritarian-context warning: actors may deploy pluralist or democratic vocabulary while embedding it in non-pluralist justification. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, 2017) further show why this is not a simple populism/democracy opposition: populism may expose exclusion and corruption, but it threatens liberal democracy when 'the people' is constructed as morally homogeneous and placed above plural institutions. The present framework therefore does not code populist or anti-elite rhetoric as risk per se, but asks whether conflict remains bounded by democratic goals, plural membership and norm consistency under autocratic pressure.

2.3. Defining discursive democratic potential

The article uses discursive democratic potential rather than the broader and more ambiguous term democratic capacity. 'Capacity' may denote macro-level regime resilience, institutional performance, state capability or citizen-level democratic dispositions. In a related but different use, election-administration scholarship treats democratic capacity as the institutional capacity to protect electoral integrity (Jacobs & Choate, 2022). Somer, McCoy and Luke define democratic capacity as a democracy's ability to preserve or improve democratic quality and an electoral autocracy's ability to adopt more democratic features (Somer et al., 2021, p. 930). Bene and Boda operationalize democratic capacities at the citizen level through political knowledge, information-seeking, non-extreme partisanship and democratic values (Bene & Boda, 2023, pp. 2–4). These uses are valuable but distinct from this article's object. Discursive democratic potential is narrower: an actor-level, text-based and ex ante diagnostic orientation visible in public discourse.

The narrowing is therefore not only terminological. Concept-formation scholarship helps specify what the evidence can validly support: public discourse can ground claims about actor-level democratic reassurance and risk, but not about macro-level regime capacity, administrative performance or future conduct in office. Sartori's (1970) warning against conceptual stretching, Goertz's (2006) emphasis on dimensions and indicators, and Adcock and Collier's (2001) distinction between conceptualization, measurement and validity therefore justify the article's restricted level of analysis, evidence type and three constitutive diagnostic dimensions.

Discursive democratic potential refers to the observable, codebook-operationalized orientation of an opposition actor's public discourse toward democratic restoration, a pluralistic political community and norm-bound political competition, together with the absence or limited presence of hegemonic, punitive, exclusionary or autocratic-prone risk signals. It does not predict future government behaviour or prove sincerity. It asks whether, in public justification, the actor frames political change as rule-bound alternation rather than unrestricted authorization; recognizes rival voters, opponents and social groups as legitimate members of the political community; and maintains democratic self-restraint under pressure and accountability demands.

This concept complements rather than replaces V-Dem's V-Party Anti-Pluralism Index (API) and related party-level expert-coded indicators. Medzihorsky and Lindberg (2024) show that anti-pluralism is a powerful warning sign for parties likely to undermine democracy and may perform better than broader labels such as populism or extremism, drawing on V-Party data (Lührmann et al., 2020). The present framework accepts that insight but asks a different question. It identifies not only anti-pluralist warning signs, but also positive democratic reassurance, ambiguity, target structures and norm-bound accountability claims in corpus-coded discourse. It therefore complements party-level expert indices by providing actor- and text-level diagnostic evidence about how democratic promise and risk are publicly articulated before power is obtained.

Table 1 summarizes this diagnostic structure by specifying the core question attached to each dimension and the corresponding reassurance and warning indicators.

2.3.1. Political goals: bounded restoration or hegemonic refoundation?

The first dimension, political goals, concerns the kind of political order an actor seeks to establish or restore. It asks whether political change is framed as rule-bound democratic restoration or as morally exceptional authorization to refound the political order without ordinary limits. Democratic competition is legitimate because it institutionalizes uncertainty: parties may win or lose, incumbents can be removed and no actor owns the polity (Dahl, 1971; Przeworski, 1991). Transition scholarship similarly treats democratic restoration as acceptance of procedural constraints under uncertain futures (Linz & Stepan, 1996; O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986).

At the same time, democratic-restorative language can become risky when tied to unrestricted mandate claims or hegemonic refoundation. Majorities are essential to democracy, but democratic government is not identical with the moral fusion of the majority, the people and the nation. Plebiscitary or majoritarian claims become dangerous when they portray electoral victory as authorization to remove institutional constraints, monopolize representation or purify the polity (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Thus, political goals must be evaluated not simply by whether actors invoke law, constitution, or people, but by whether they bind these terms to alternation and constraint.

Anti-corruption and accountability rhetoric requires the same distinction. In contexts of state capture and clientelistic extraction, demanding accountability can be central to democratic restoration. Comparative work on post-communist state exploitation and corruption control links democratic competition and credible opposition scrutiny to limiting state abuse (Grzymala-Busse, 2007; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Such claims are reassuring when framed as legal-institutional repair rather than exceptional authorization or redemptive refoundation; the boundary between accountability and revenge is addressed below under norm consistency.

This dimension also links the framework to electoral authoritarianism. In such regimes, the opposition's commitment to elections and alternation cannot be read naively, because the electoral arena is distorted; nor can it be dismissed, because elections remain a central site of uncertainty and possible opening (Donno, 2013; Hellmeier & Leuschner, 2024, pp. 172–173; Howard & Roessler, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010;

Table 1. Three dimensions of discursive democratic potential.

Dimension	Core question	Democratic reassurance indicators	Risk / warning indicators
Political goals	Does the actor frame political change as democratic restoration and rule-bound alternation?	Commitment to free and fair elections, peaceful alternation, constitutional restoration, rule-of-law commitments, legal accountability and institution-bound reform.	Claims to unrestricted mandate, fusion of majority with the nation, exceptional authorization, hegemonic refoundation or political replacement framed as redemptive purification.
Pluralism	Does the actor recognize rival voters, opponents and social groups as legitimate members of the political community?	Inclusion of rival voters, recognition of political disagreement, distinction between citizens and political elites, and acceptance of legitimate opposition.	Enemy or traitor framing, collective delegitimation of political camps, criminalization of opponents as a group, claims that only one actor represents the 'real people', or narrowing the boundaries of legitimate political membership.
Norm consistency	Does the actor maintain democratic self-restraint under conflict, pressure and accountability demands?	Commitment to legal means, nonviolence, electoral competition, procedural limits, due process and institutional self-restraint, correction or repair after norm breaches.	Revenge or punishment rhetoric without legal guarantees, coercive or extra-legal escalation, tolerance of coercion, refusal of procedural uncertainty, or exclusion of opponents from legitimate competition.

Schedler, 2013). Discursive democratic potential therefore looks for a double commitment: challenging authoritarian manipulation while remaining bound by democratic procedures after victory.

2.3.2. Pluralism: adversaries, enemies and the boundaries of membership

The second dimension, pluralism, concerns whom an actor recognizes as a legitimate participant in the political community. Democratic pluralism is not a demand for consensus or politeness; it is the recognition that public life contains durable disagreement among actors entitled to appear, speak, organize and compete (Arendt, 1968; Dahl, 1956). Mouffe's (2005) agonistic theory is useful here because it distinguishes adversaries from enemies: conflict remains democratic only insofar as opponents are treated as legitimate rivals within a shared institutional and symbolic space.

Populism research gives this dimension its sharper diagnostic edge. Mudde (2004) defines populism as a thin-centered ideology dividing society between the pure people and the corrupt elite and asserting that politics should express the general will. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2012, 2017) show its ambivalence: populism may challenge exclusionary elites but threatens liberal democracy when the people are constructed as morally homogeneous and placed above plural institutions. Laclau (2005) helps explain why the issue is not vocabulary alone: 'the people' is politically articulated through equivalential chains and antagonistic frontiers. The relevant question is thus not whether an actor invokes the people, but whether the people are constructed in a way that preserves or narrows legitimate political membership.

The anti-pluralism literature specifies the risk threshold. Müller (2016) argues that populism's democratic danger lies in the anti-pluralist claim that only the populist authentically represents the real people. Abts and Rummens (2007) similarly show how populist unity can undermine pluralist representation by dissolving legitimate difference into a single moral subject. Medzihorsky and Lindberg (2024) operationalize anti-pluralism as a warning sign for parties likely to undermine democracy, drawing on Linz's (1978, p. 29) 'litmus test' and V-Party evidence. For the present framework, enemy or traitor framing, collective delegitimation, group criminalization or claims of exclusive representation are warnings that the actor may be narrowing the political community itself.

Polarization research clarifies why pluralism cannot be equated with moderation. Conflict is ordinary in democratic politics; danger arises when identities are moralized, opponents become existential threats and alternation loses legitimacy (McCoy & Somer, 2019; Schedler, 2023). Svolik (2019) shows that polarization can make citizens tolerate democratic violations by their preferred side. Somer et al.'s (2021) concept of transformative repolarization is therefore useful: democratic opposition may rearticulate conflict around pro-democratic stakes, but only if it avoids reciprocal enemy-making and preserves plural membership. Pluralism, then, does not require depoliticized or non-confrontational speech. It requires that rival voters and lawful opponents remain legitimate members of the political community, even when incumbent elites or authoritarian practices are sharply challenged (Korkmaz, 2023).

2.3.3. Norm consistency: restraint under pressure and the accountability dilemma

The third dimension, norm consistency, asks whether an actor maintains democratic self-restraint under conflict, pressure and accountability demands. Linz's (1978) loyal/semi-loyal/disloyal distinction and Sartori's (2005) treatment of anti-system opposition matter because democratic commitment is tested when democratic norms become costly. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) reformulate this through mutual toleration and institutional forbearance: democracy depends not only on formal rules but also on actors' willingness not to exploit every legal possibility to destroy opponents or entrench themselves. Norm consistency therefore concerns legality, nonviolence, electoral competition, due process and institutional self-restraint, not politeness.

Opposition strategy research complicates this normatively simple picture. Under backsliding or electoral autocracy, ordinary institutional channels may be manipulated, courts captured, media access unequal and civil society pressured. Oppositions may therefore need disruptive or extra-institutional strategies to challenge authoritarian entrenchment (Bunce & Wolchik, 2011; Gamboa, 2022; Howard & Roessler, 2006). Yet radicalization can backfire, justify repression, deepen polarization or damage the conditions for democratic recovery (Cleary & Öztürk, 2022; Gamboa, 2022; Somer & Tekinırk, 2024). Norm consistency asks whether disruption remains anchored in democratic ends and limits.

The accountability dilemma is central here. Democratic restoration after autocratization often requires exposing corruption, reversing institutional capture, and holding former officeholders accountable. Yet accountability becomes democratically risky when it turns into punishment rhetoric without legal guarantees, revenge, or exclusion from legitimate competition. Work on constitutional democracy stresses that repair must preserve procedural limits, rights, and independent institutions even when responding to prior abuse (Ginsburg & Huq, 2018; Scheppele, 2018). Tushnet (2004) and Corrales (2015) show why this is difficult: legal instruments themselves can be weaponized, and legality can be used to entrench power as well as to restore it. Legal accountability is therefore a democratic reassurance indicator only when it is rule-bound; punitive purification or revenge without guarantees is a warning sign.

The norm consistency dimension also draws on work on democratic hypocrisy and partisan bias to capture a distinct risk: citizens and elites may excuse democratic violations by their own side. Svolik (2019) shows that polarization can make voters trade off democratic principles for partisan victory, while Graham and Svolik (2020), Simonovits et al. (2022), and Littvay et al. (2024) show that outgroup threat, partisanship and democratic hypocrisy reduce the electoral costs of democratic erosion, while European cross-national evidence links polarization to weaker democratic accountability (Patkós & Plesz, 2026). Braley et al. (2023) identify a subversion dilemma in which fear of the other side can justify preemptive norm violations. Restraint is therefore most diagnostic when actors face provocation, injustice or demands for retribution; mobilization remains democratic only if non-coercive and oriented toward competition rather than intimidation, extra-legal compulsion, or opponent elimination (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Tarrow, 2011).

2.4. Target, direction and regime context as cross-cutting interpretive rules

The three dimensions are applied through a cross-cutting interpretive rule concerning target and direction. Harsh confrontation is not democratic or anti-democratic in itself; the question is who or what is targeted: voters, social groups, lawful opponents, officeholders, captured institutions, propaganda actors, oligarchic networks or alleged corruption structures. Democratic conflict requires adversarial contestation, but anti-pluralist conflict transforms adversaries into enemies (Mouffe, 2005; Müller, 2016). Discourse-historical analysis similarly directs attention to nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivization and intensification: political meaning depends on how actors, groups, responsibility and legitimacy are constructed (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009).

Target and direction are especially important in electoral autocracies. Vertical confrontation against autocratic incumbents, captured institutions or manipulation may be compatible with democratization, and may even be necessary when normal accountability channels are blocked (Gamboa, 2022; Schedler, 2013). Horizontal exclusion of voters, social groups or lawful political communities is riskier because it narrows legitimate political membership. De Cleen and Stavrakakis's (2017) distinction between people/elite and nation/other logics clarifies why elite critique is not identical with exclusionary nationalism, even though the two can be articulated together. This distinction helps avoid both over-sanitizing confrontational opposition and over-coding anti-regime critique as anti-pluralism.

At the same time, vertical confrontation is not automatically democratic. Even when aimed at incumbent elites or captured institutions, rhetoric becomes risky if it shifts from legal accountability to betrayal framing, collective criminalization, revenge or norm-unbounded punishment. Target and direction therefore operate as decision rules for borderline cases: the same vocabulary can signal democratic accountability, ambiguity or risk depending on whether it remains tied to plural membership, due process and future alternation.

3. Case, corpus and method

3.1. Case rationale and benchmark

Hungary is selected because it combines a highly institutionalized electoral-autocratic setting with an unusually visible challenger moment. Since 2010, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz has repeatedly won elections while reshaping constitutional, media and administrative conditions in ways that reduce opposition competitiveness. The case is therefore not a normal alternation setting in which opposition language can be read against stable democratic rules. Regime critique, anti-corruption discourse and institutional confrontation may be

necessary components of democratic challenge, but punitive or exclusionary rhetoric can also acquire heightened significance.

The Hungarian discursive environment also justifies the target-sensitive design. Research on the Orbán regime describes a hybrid order structured by electoral authoritarianism, populist majoritarianism, state capture and patronal forms of political control (Benedek, 2025; Bozóki & Benedek, 2024; Magyar & Madlovics, 2020). Media scholarship shows how party colonization, public-service disinformation and parallel media systems reshape the public sphere in which opposition speech is produced and received (Bajomi-Lázár, 2013; Polyák & Urbán, 2024). Computational and critical discourse analysis work on Hungarian political discourse further supports treating public language as politically consequential material rather than a neutral communicative surface (Özoflu & Arató, 2023; Rakovics et al., 2026). These features make it important not to treat criticism of incumbents, government-aligned media or oligarchic networks as anti-pluralist by default.

The empirical comparison uses two challenger corpora. The first is Péter Magyar's *Magyar Infó* corpus, which captures the TISZA party's public self-presentation during its rapid rise as a new opposition actor in 2024 and 2025. The second is Viktor Orbán's pre-2010 challenger-period discourse. Orbán is not used here as a moral foil or as evidence that all challengers will become autocrats. He is used as a historically consequential benchmark because his opposition discourse preceded a later regime transformation and therefore illustrates why democratic-restorative vocabulary alone is insufficient. The comparison asks how democratic reassurance and warning signs were structured in public opposition language before power was obtained.

3.2. Corpus and unit of analysis

The corpus contains 518,216 words across 98 documents or episodes. The Orbán corpus comprises 69 speeches from the 2007–2010 challenger period, totalling 231,991 words. The TISZA/Magyar corpus comprises 29 *Magyar Infó* episodes from July 2024 to July 2025, totalling 286,225 words. The two corpora differ in genre and communication environment: Orbán's speeches are conventional political addresses, while *Magyar Infó* is a serial livestream format combining campaign communication, direct voter address, issue framing and movement-building. The article therefore does not compare rhetorical style as such. It compares coded democracy-relevant signals within the public challenger discourse of each actor (Table 2).

The primary unit of analysis is the context block. Long texts were segmented into approximately 120-word blocks, producing 4,351 initial units. This design avoids treating isolated keywords as evidence: words such as corruption, traitor, prison, nation or law may carry different democratic meanings depending on target and argumentative context. The block provides enough context to evaluate meaning while remaining standardized for comparison. Detailed subcodes are multi-label, but each final block receives one valence judgment reflecting the dominant or most consequential democratic signal.

The final public dataset contains 3,378 author-adjudicated coded context blocks. Of these, 3,298 are included in quantitative summaries, while 80 are retained for transparency but excluded from quantitative interpretation. Because the *Magyar Infó* corpus is longer and more conversational, a lower share of all mechanically generated TISZA/Magyar blocks entered the final coded dataset. Quantitative comparisons therefore refer to semantically validated candidate blocks rather than full-corpus frequency equivalence. The public supplement preserves block identifiers, source metadata, final valence, risk status, dimensions and shortened text excerpts. Coding decisions were made on the full context blocks rather than on these shortened public excerpts; full coded context is provided for all final Risk −1 cases.

Table 2. Corpus construction and coded dataset.

Stage / metric	Total	Orbán 2007–2010	TISZA / Magyar Infó (2024–2025)
Corpus words	518,216	231,991	286,225
Documents / episodes	98	69	29
Generated 120-word blocks	4,351	1,956	2,395
Candidate coded blocks after retrieval and semantic filtering	3,562	1,692	1,870
Final author-adjudicated coded context blocks	3,378	1,636	1,742

3.3. Retrieval, coding and validation workflow

The coding workflow combines qualitative content analysis with keyword-assisted retrieval. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate because the research question requires theoretically guided categories, explicit decision rules and systematic treatment of ambiguous cases (Krippendorff, 2013; Kuckartz, 2014; Schreier, 2012). Keyword-assisted retrieval maximized corpus coverage and identified candidate passages but did not classify them automatically. This follows text-as-data cautions that automated or dictionary-based procedures can improve coverage and transparency but cannot replace substantive validation of political meaning (Grimmer et al., 2022; Roberts et al., 2014).

The workflow proceeded in four steps. First, the codebook was developed from the theoretical framework and calibrated through corpus familiarization, including a MAXQDA-assisted pilot phase. Theoretically derived and iteratively refined keyword families retrieved candidate blocks associated with restoration, elections, law, accountability, corruption, peoplehood, nationhood, betrayal, enemy framing, punishment and related signals. Second, candidate blocks were semantically validated to remove false positives, irrelevant occurrences, quotations, historical examples and literal uses. Third, validated blocks were coded across political goals, pluralism and norm consistency, while target, direction and rhetorical mode were recorded as interpretive fields. Fourth, final valence was assigned on the ordinal scale Democratic +2, Mostly democratic +1, Ambivalent 0, Risk −1 and Autocratic-prone −2.

The distinction between retrieval and coding is central. A raw hit is only an entry point into interpretation. A context block became evidence only after codebook-guided semantic validation, including checks of relevance, speaker position, target, rhetorical mode and contextual meaning. Final labels were author-adjudicated, especially at the risk boundary and in mixed passages where democratic reassurance and punitive, moralizing or exclusionary elements co-occurred. Preliminary automated and AI-assisted suggestions served as audit support, evidence retrieval and tabulation assistance, not as final substantive coding, consistent with recent work on large-language-model approaches to authoritarian-discourse detection (Mochtak, 2025).

This approach is consistent with established measurement practice in discourse and text-as-data research. Context-dependent concepts cannot be captured through isolated keywords: indicators need explicit definitions and separation from adjacent ideological vocabularies (de Vreese et al., 2018; Hawkins & Castanho Silva, 2018; Jankowski & Huber, 2023). Recent machine-learning approaches make a similar distinction between substantive claims and host ideologies rather than relying on partisan or policy-specific vocabulary (Erhard et al., 2025). Here, too, meaning depends on the validated relation between claim, target, norm and context.

3.4. Reliability, transparency and limits

Because the analysis is interpretive and theory-driven, reliability is assessed through transparent coding procedures, sensitivity checks and blind validation. Standard content-analysis guidance treats reliability, validity and transparency as related but distinct requirements: agreement statistics help evaluate stability, but do not by themselves establish conceptual validity (Cohen, 1960; Krippendorff, 2013; Lombard et al., 2002; Neuendorf, 2017). The key reliability concern is the rare and theoretically central boundary between Ambivalent 0 and Risk −1. Only 41 blocks were finally classified as Risk −1, and none as Autocratic-prone −2. Because this distribution is sparse, simple percentage agreement would be misleading; the audit instead reports the binary risk/non-risk boundary, ordinal valence convergence and high-sensitivity disagreement review.

Two validation layers were used. First, a calibrated auxiliary blind audit served as a robustness and sensitivity tool rather than a substitute for human intercoder reliability. It identified risk-union cases, major valence disagreements and inclusion/exclusion disputes for priority author review. Together with sensitivity screens of Ambivalent 0 and positive-coded rows, the documented targeted author-adjudication layer covered 290 unique high-sensitivity rows. More details are reported in the supplement.

Second, the final risk boundary was stress-tested through blind validation by two independent human coders. The sample contained all 41 final Risk −1 blocks and 39 adjacent or substantively relevant controls, making it a boundary test rather than a representative random sample. The coders used different thresholds. Coder 1 identified a broader risk zone: 32 risk-equivalent cases, 26 matching the author-adjudicated risk category, with precision .812, recall .634 and F1 .712. Coder 2 applied a stricter standard: 10 risk-equivalent

cases, no false positives, precision 1.000, recall .244 and F1 .392. 'Either-human risk' yielded precision .824, recall .683 and F1 .747. Exact valence agreement was lower, as expected, but ordinal ±1 agreement was high: 88.0 per cent and 88.6 per cent.

The human validation is substantively informative. Coder 1 detected TISZA/Magyar risk cues more readily, while Orbán risk had lower recall because several final Risk −1 blocks were structural, majoritarian or hegemonic rather than lexically obvious. Coder 2's zero false positives reflect a stricter risk core. This supports the article's central interpretive claim: TISZA/Magyar risk signals are often more explicit and vertical, whereas Orbán's pre-2010 risk signals are often more structural and theory-dependent.

The analysis has three limitations. First, it cannot establish sincerity or predict future conduct in office; it reconstructs public democratic reassurance and risk before power is obtained. Second, the two corpora differ in genre, period and communicative setting, so the comparison is a theoretically guided benchmark comparison rather than a stylistic experiment. Third, ambiguity is not coding failure. In electoral autocracies, democratic-restorative, anti-corruption, populist and punitive elements often coexist, and the analytic contribution lies in separating bounded restoration from hegemonic refoundation, vertical regime confrontation from horizontal exclusion, and legal accountability from revenge.

To make the analysis verifiable, the supplementary material provides the coding framework and retrieval rules, the public coded dataset, document-level source metadata, full-context evidence for all final Risk −1 cases, the data underlying the reported tables and figures, a compact record of the targeted coding audit, and documentation of the external human validation. The findings therefore rest on a transparent, auditable workflow, not selective quotation or unsupervised automated classification.

4. Findings: democratic reassurance and risk in comparative challenger discourse

The empirical analysis evaluates whether democratic reassurance and warning signs are structured differently across the two challenger corpora. It does not ask whether one actor simply 'sounds more democratic,' nor does it treat all confrontational or anti-corruption language as risk. The relevant question is how each discourse combines political goals, pluralism and norm consistency, and whether hard conflict is directed vertically at incumbent elites and captured institutions or horizontally at voters, opponents and the political community as such.

Figure 1 shows the main distribution of final valence categories for included coded context blocks. The first aggregate result is deliberately conservative: neither corpus is dominated by risky or autocratic-prone discourse. Democratic +2 and Mostly democratic +1 blocks form the largest share in both corpora, Ambivalent 0 blocks are substantial, and Risk −1 remains rare. No block crossed the threshold for Autocratic-prone −2, which was reserved for explicit anti-pluralist, extra-legal, repressive, violence-supporting or competition-

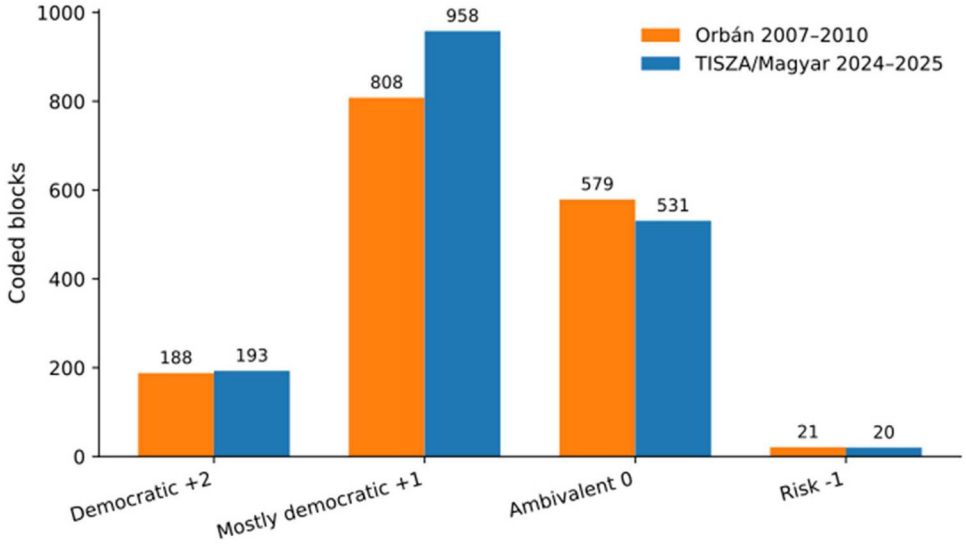


Figure 1. Valence distribution by corpus.

Table 3. Final valence by diagnostic dimension and corpus.

Dimension	Corpus	Democratic +2	Mostly democratic +1	Ambivalent 0	Risk −1	Autocratic-prone −2	Valid N
Political goals	Orbán 2007–2010	169 (16.4%)	566 (55.1%)	277 (26.9%)	16 (1.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1,028
Political goals	TISZA/Magyar 2024–2025	130 (13.6%)	629 (65.7%)	189 (19.7%)	9 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	957
Pluralism	Orbán 2007–2010	141 (11.3%)	546 (43.7%)	545 (43.6%)	18 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	1,250
Pluralism	TISZA/Magyar 2024–2025	142 (10.4%)	703 (51.7%)	494 (36.4%)	20 (1.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1,359
Norm consistency	Orbán 2007–2010	150 (16.9%)	410 (46.3%)	309 (34.9%)	17 (1.9%)	0 (0.0%)	886
Norm consistency	TISZA/Magyar 2024–2025	158 (18.2%)	467 (53.7%)	235 (27.0%)	10 (1.1%)	0 (0.0%)	870

denying statements. The absence of such cases is substantively meaningful because the coding did not treat ordinary harshness, moralized opposition rhetoric or punitive ambiguity as autocratic-prone discourse.

The pattern is unsurprising in light of the theoretical discussion above. Neither corpus is saturated with openly authoritarian language. The point, then, is not to count 'dangerous words,' but to examine how reassurance, ambiguity and risk are structured within each corpus.

The dimension-level distributions add a further distinction (Table 3). Democratic +2 and Mostly democratic +1 blocks together constitute the majority of valid cases in every dimension and corpus, while Risk −1 remains below 2 per cent throughout and no block reaches the Autocratic-prone −2 threshold. The combined positive share is higher for TISZA/Magyar in political goals (79.3 per cent versus 71.5 per cent), pluralism (62.2 per cent versus 55.0 per cent) and norm consistency (71.8 per cent versus 63.2 per cent). Conversely, Orbán's corpus contains larger ambivalent zones, especially in pluralism and norm consistency. These are descriptive differences rather than inferential tests, since dimensions are multi-label and blocks are nested within documents or episodes.

Table 4 reports selected evidence from both corpora. The excerpts are translated from Hungarian, while the source IDs identify the exact document and context block in the public coded dataset. The table intentionally includes not only risk cases but also Democratic +2, Mostly democratic +1 and Ambivalent 0 cases. This makes visible how democratic reassurance, ambiguity and risk coexist within the same corpora.

4.1. Political goals: restoration, alternation and the edge of refoundation

The political-goals dimension shows substantial democratic reassurance in both corpora. Orbán's challenger-period discourse contains explicit references to democracy, lawful order, European orientation, nonviolence and electoral accountability. TISZA/Magyar discourse similarly articulates political change through elections, legal reform, public-service repair, anti-corruption measures and institutional restoration. This supports the article's caution against any simple retrospective reading: Orbán's pre-2010 opposition discourse was not explicitly autocratic, and TISZA's discourse cannot be reduced to anti-regime anger.

The difference appears less in the presence of democratic vocabulary than in how political change is bounded. In the TISZA corpus, political goals are typically linked to electoral alternation, administrative repair, EU funds, legal accountability and the rebuilding of state capacity. The risk-sensitive edge appears when anti-corruption language moves toward criminalizing labels, especially in references to the 'national co-criminality system.' Even here, however, many passages remain below the Risk −1 threshold because they target incumbent elites, oligarchic networks or institutional capture rather than voters or lawful political communities.

In the Orbán benchmark, the most consequential risk does not take the form of open anti-electoralism. It appears in a more structural register: majority, nation and governing capacity are gradually brought into the same semantic field. The 'one country, one flag' passage is coded as Risk −1 because it does not merely celebrate unity. It aligns the 'new majority' with every Hungarian, making the majority appear as the national whole rather than as one coalition among others. The 2009 Kötcse passage sharpens the same logic. It acknowledges elections, but it asks whether politics should move away from a dual field of alternation toward a large governing force oriented to 'permanent governing.' This is why the benchmark is analytically useful: the warning signal is not an explicit endorsement of dictatorship, but the discursive prefiguration of a hegemonic-majoritarian settlement.

Table 4. Selected evidence by source ID, valence and coding logic.

Source and valence	Translated excerpt / condensed block evidence	Coding logic and interpretation
Orbán +2 17 August 2008 ID: OV027_B0020	'Central Europe should stand for democratic rights, international democratic rules, the independence of states and the side of freedom.'	Strong democratic reassurance: international rule-boundness, democratic rights and respect for state independence.
Orbán +1 1 October 2007, ID: OV012_B0035	'[With parliamentary means alone], urgent change cannot be achieved today. Extra-parliamentary democratic means are also needed, but only means that are democratic, nonviolent, peaceful, and capable of creating broader unity rather than a narrowing vanguard.'	Mostly democratic norm consistency: disruptive mobilization is accepted only under nonviolent and broadening constraints.
TISZA +2 21 July 2024, ID: MI002_B0021	'We also need Fidesz voters, including those who still stand with the governing party despite knowing its corruption and faults. We must take them into account, just as we must take our most liberal and left-wing voters into account. I can promise honesty: we will not deceive anyone or do politics differently from what we promised in the campaign.'	Strong horizontal pluralism: government-party voters are addressed as legitimate and persuadable citizens, not as enemies.
TISZA +1 22 September 2024, ID: MI009_B0067	'Reports on NER-related [referring to the *Orbán-regime self-description: 'System of National Cooperation', NER*] crimes are invited through a secure whistleblower platform and are to be examined by criminal-law professionals and, later, investigative journalists.'	Mostly democratic accountability: anti-corruption language is criminality-adjacent, but it is channelled through evidence, professional review and legal procedure.
Orbán 0 9 October 2007, OV013_B0008	'Lies, fraud, irresponsibility, mafia politics and violence surround the country, while the nation sinks deeper into crisis. Yet we, the generation committed to the West, continue to stand by freedom, lawful order, human dignity and democracy.'	Ambivalent boundary case: severe moral condemnation coexists with explicit democratic and legal self-positioning.
TISZA 0 4 August 2024, MI004_B0056	'The anti-corruption fight would make it impossible for EU funds to be used as in previous cycles, ending up with the Orbán family, other members of the clan and the 'system of national co-criminality.' If the government accepted these conditions, the European Commission could probably release the funds within weeks.'	Ambivalent boundary case: institutional anti-corruption and EU-restoration logic coexist with a strongly criminalizing regime label.
Orbán Risk −1 16 February 2007, OV002_B0053	'We fight not for ourselves, not for Fidesz, not for the right, but for every single Hungarian. The slogan is: one country, one flag. The new majority is growing day by day. Long live the new majority, let us raise the flag high.'	Hegemonic-majoritarian risk: the majority, the nation and the political project are rhetorically fused, thinning the boundary between plural competition and national representation.
Orbán Risk −1 5 September 2009, OV053_B0028	'Instead of politics organized for permanent struggle, we should choose politics organized for permanent governing. Our thinking should not be defined by constant struggle with the other side, but by the persuasive representation of certain national issues. Of course there will be competition, and voters will decide in the end. The question is whether we offer the continuation of a two-party system in a dual field of constant value debates or present the behaviour and goals of a large governing party, a political force striving for permanent governing.'	Hegemonic replacement risk: electoral competition is formally acknowledged, but alternation and plural value conflict are normatively subordinated to a central, durable governing-force logic.
TISZA Risk −1 5 May 2025, MI021_B0036	'To rewrite Bucha without taking the facts into account, in order to use it for their own propaganda, is the lowest point. That they are capable of rewriting such recent history to support their own narrative is outrageous. I think these people have no place in public life. They should not be allowed to deal with history.'	Public-life exclusion risk: the target is mainly propaganda/ideological actors, but the formulation narrows legitimate participation rather than specifying legal accountability.
TISZA Risk −1 16 June 2025, MI026_B0017	'The privatization of the defense industry amounts to treason and is a serious national-security issue. Fidesz oligarchs are buying into arms-manufacturing companies, while Hungarian ammunition production has come under the control of a company with foreign influence. What does the Sovereignty Protection Office, the new ÁVH [*Hungary's communist-era secret police*] say about this? Obviously nothing.'	Betrayal-frame risk: the charge is vertically directed at regime-linked elites and policy capture, but 'treason' language raises the normative threshold.

The political-goals Risk −1 subset makes this contrast more visible. As Figure 2 shows, Orbán's 16 political-goals risk blocks are distributed across a broader range of subtypes, including legitimacy denial and hegemonic majoritarianism, which do not appear among TISZA/Magyar's nine political-goals risk blocks. TISZA/Magyar's cases are more concentrated in treason/betrayal and collective criminalization. The distinction is therefore less one of sheer risk frequency than of risk structure: Orbán's political-goals warning signs extend more clearly into questions of legitimacy, majority rule and governing centrality, whereas TISZA/Magyar's are more concentrated in vertically directed criminality and betrayal frames.

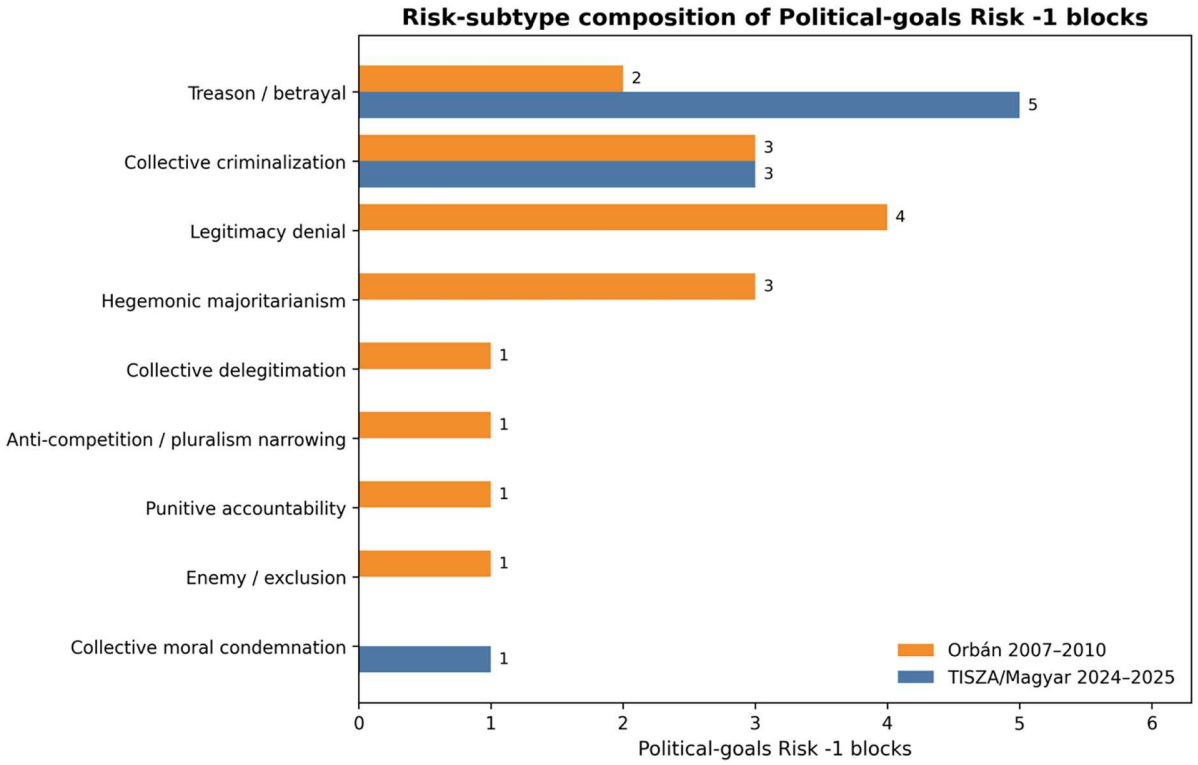


Figure 2. Risk-subtype composition of Political-goals Risk −1 blocks.

4.2. Pluralism and the ambivalent boundary zone

Pluralism is the dimension where the horizontal/vertical distinction does the most empirical work. The TISZA corpus contains important horizontal reassurance: Magyar repeatedly addresses government-party voters as necessary participants in change rather than as enemies. The clearest example is MI002_B0021, where Fidesz voters, liberal voters and left-wing voters are all included within the audience that must be taken seriously. This does not eliminate all risk, but it is a strong pluralist signal because it keeps voters inside the legitimate political community.

The Orbán corpus also contains inclusion, civic unity and European-democratic language. Yet its ambivalent and risk-adjacent passages more often connect people/elite moral dualism, majority language and delegitimation of the governing side. Figure 3 reports risk-adjacent subcodes within Ambivalent 0 blocks; these are diagnostic flags, not final Risk −1 classifications. People–elite moral dualism dominates this category in both corpora. Ambivalent 0 is therefore not residual: it captures strong moralized or populist conflict that does not clearly cross into exclusion, revenge or hegemonic authorization.

The two ambivalent examples in Table 4 illustrate this logic. Orbán's OV013_B0008 combines harsh references to lies, mafia politics and violence with explicit affirmation of lawful order, dignity and democracy. TISZA's MI004_B0056 combines EU-restoration and anti-corruption claims with the criminalizing 'national co-criminality system' label. Both use harsh rhetoric; neither is automatically anti-pluralist because target, remedy and surrounding norm language prevent a straightforward Risk −1 classification. The finding is therefore methodologically important: the article does not mechanically translate moralized vocabulary into risk.

4.3. Norm consistency and the risk-subtype fingerprint

Norm consistency is where the rare risk cases become most informative. Across the full dataset, the raw number of final Risk −1 blocks is almost symmetrical: 21 in the Orbán corpus and 20 in the TISZA/Magyar Infó corpus. This near symmetry is misleading if read alone. Figure 4 shows that the risk profiles differ: Orbán's risk structure is more dispersed across hegemonic majoritarianism, legitimacy denial, collective

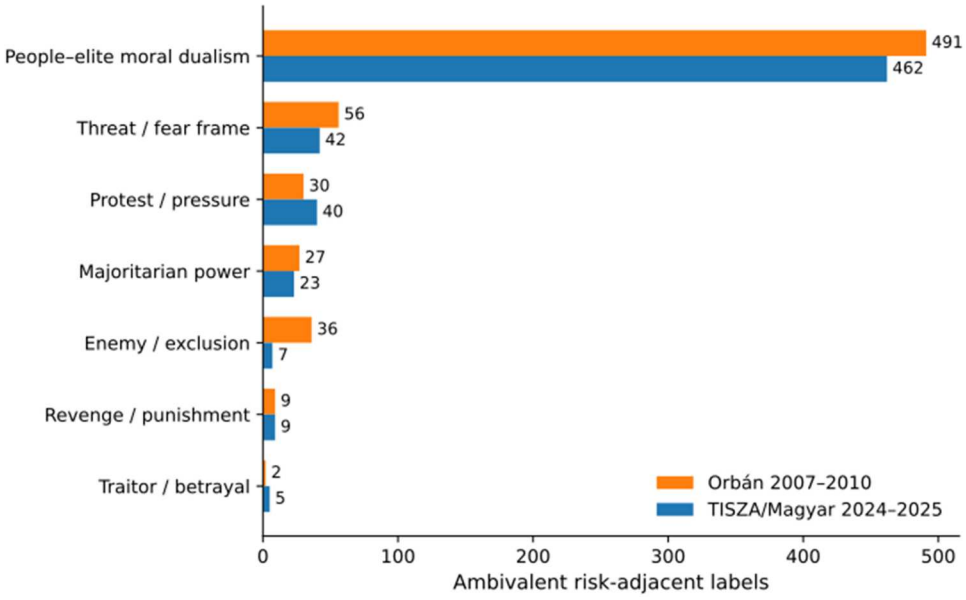


Figure 3. Ambivalent risk-adjacent fingerprint.

criminalization and punitive accountability, whereas TISZA's risk structure is more concentrated in treason/betrayal language and collective criminalization, with one public-life exclusion case.

In the Orbán benchmark, the risk profile is strongly connected to the political-goals and pluralism dimensions. Hegemonic majoritarianism appears only in the Orbán corpus. So does legitimacy denial. These categories do not prove that the pre-2010 discourse already contained an explicit autocratic programme. They indicate that a democratic-restorative challenger discourse can contain normatively consequential signals compatible with later hegemonic politics: majority-as-nation fusion, delegitimation of the governing side, and a preference for durable governing centrality over ordinary alternation.

In the TISZA/Magyar Infó corpus, risk is more lexically visible and more vertically directed. Betrayal and treason language appears more often, and collective criminalization is tied to the regime, oligarchic networks, propaganda actors or specific policy arenas. This makes the risk easier to identify in blind validation,

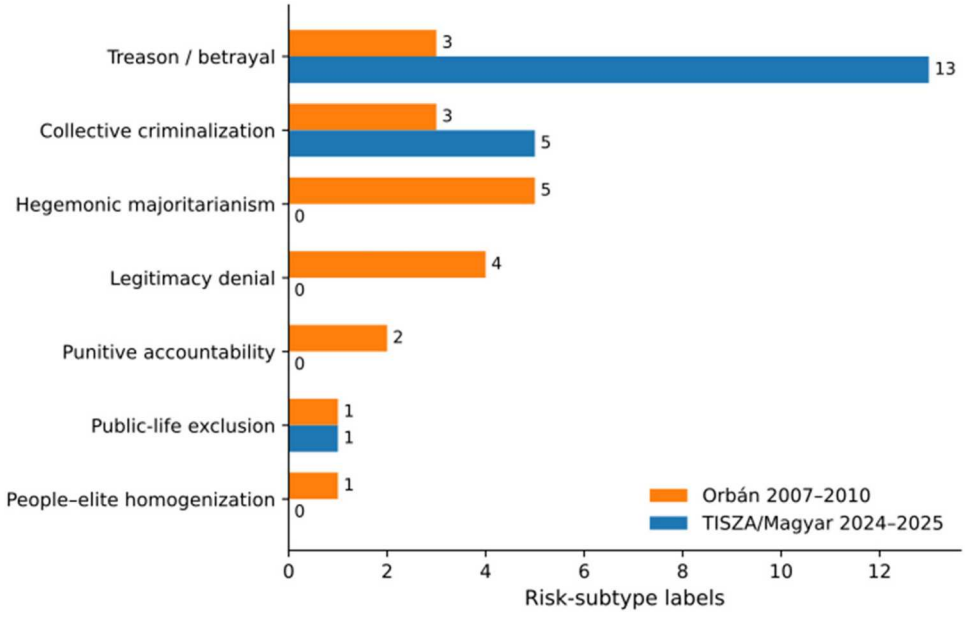


Figure 4. Main risk subtype fingerprint.

but target direction remains decisive. The 'no place in public life' passage moves beyond criticism of propaganda into public-life exclusion; the defense-industry passage is risky because it uses treason language, even though its target is regime-linked elite capture rather than ordinary voters. Vertical orientation reduces but does not remove democratic risk.

The comparison therefore turns less on whether democratic language is present than on how reassurance, ambiguity and risk are structured. Both corpora contain strong democratic signals and rare risk cases, but those risks take different forms: Orbán's challenger-period discourse is more strongly associated with hegemonic-majoritarian and governing-permanence logics, while TISZA/Magyar discourse is more often marked by vertically directed betrayal, criminality and public-life exclusion frames.

5. Conclusion

This article began from a problem central to democratic politics under electoral autocracy: opposition victory may be the most plausible route to democratic renewal, yet opposition status is not itself a democratic guarantee. The analysis avoided two symmetrical mistakes. It did not treat disruptive anti-incumbent confrontation as inherently authoritarian, because in a distorted regime such confrontation may be necessary for democratic accountability. But it also did not treat democratic self-description, anti-corruption rhetoric or opposition identity as proof of democratic commitment. *Discursive democratic potential* was developed to occupy this middle ground: a diagnostic framework for examining how opposition challengers publicly articulate democratic restoration, plural membership and norm-bound competition while competing for power from opposition.

The findings support this approach. Democratic and mostly democratic blocks dominate both corpora, ambivalent blocks are substantial, Risk −1 cases are rare, and no coded block reaches the Autocratic-prone −2 threshold. This matters because the article does not rest on an inflated reading of danger. Neither corpus is saturated with authoritarian language. Instead, both contain democratic reassurance, moralized conflict and a small number of warning signs. The key question is not whether one actor simply 'sounds democratic,' but how reassurance, ambiguity and risk are structured.

The Orbán benchmark demonstrates why this distinction is necessary. The pre-2010 challenger discourse contains democratic, legal and nonviolent reassurance and should not be retrospectively rewritten as an openly autocratic programme. Its most consequential warning signs are structural: the majority, the nation and the governing project are brought into close association; alternation and value conflict are devalued in favour of durable governing centrality; and the governing side is sometimes framed through delegitimation or criminalization. These patterns do not prove future autocratization, but they show that democratic-restorative vocabulary can coexist with a hegemonic-majoritarian structure of political meaning.

The Magyar corpus presents a different configuration. It shows substantial discursive democratic potential through its emphasis on elections, legal accountability, institutional repair, European orientation and horizontal inclusion of rival voters. The strongest pluralist reassurance lies in passages addressing Fidesz voters as citizens to be persuaded rather than enemies to be excluded. At the same time, the corpus is not risk-free. Its warning signs are more explicit and vertical: betrayal, criminality, public-life exclusion and punitive formulations are directed mainly at regime elites, oligarchic networks, propaganda actors or captured institutional settings. This vertical direction makes the risk different from horizontal anti-pluralism, but it does not neutralize it when accountability detaches from legal guarantees or widens from regime actors to political communities.

Several implications follow from the comparison. First, civility is a poor proxy for democratic potential: harsh regime critique may be compatible with democratization, while polite or legally phrased majoritarianism may weaken plural alternation. Second, anti-populist keywording is also insufficient, because people/elite moralization, corruption language and betrayal frames can be democratic, ambivalent or risky depending on target, remedy and normative constraint. Third, actor-level discourse analysis adds value by reconstructing how challengers frame power, opposition, membership and accountability before entering office, complementing party-level and regime-level indicators.

The article also has clear limits. It cannot establish sincerity or predict how TISZA will govern. Discourse is an early observable indicator, not a substitute for organizational analysis, candidate selection, coalition behaviour, institutional practice or future governing conduct. The two corpora differ in genre, period and

communicative setting, so the comparison should be read as a historically informed benchmark. Finally, the validation results show that the risk boundary is meaningful but sensitive: explicit betrayal and criminality frames are easier to detect, while structural hegemonic and majoritarian risks require more theory-dependent interpretation.

These limitations define the scope of this study's claims. Discursive democratic potential is intended as an early-warning and early-reassurance framework, not as a forecast of future governing behaviour. It asks whether an opposition actor keeps political change bounded by elections and institutions, preserves the legitimacy of rival voters and lawful opponents, and keeps accountability claims constrained by due process and nonviolence. For re-democratization, the practical implication is demanding: successful challengers must confront captured power vertically without translating that confrontation into horizontal exclusion, collective criminalization or revenge.

Although developed through the Hungarian comparison, discursive democratic potential is designed as a portable actor-level diagnostic framework. It is most useful where challengers operate in distorted, polarized or backsliding environments and claim to restore democracy, clean politics or national sovereignty before obtaining power. Cross-case application should not mechanically transfer Hungarian thresholds or risk labels. It requires calibration to regime context, party-system history, genre, language and the locally available repertoires of democracy, legality and exclusion. Comparative research could test whether similar structures of reassurance, ambiguity and risk appear across different opposition challengers, and whether particular risk configurations become more consequential after power is won.

Democratic renewal therefore requires more than defeating an autocratic incumbent. It requires opposition politics capable of combining democratic urgency with democratic restraint. Magyar's discourse contains meaningful democratic reassurance, but its future democratic significance will depend on whether vertical anti-regime confrontation remains tied to plural membership, legal accountability and institutional self-limitation. The broader lesson is that democratic breakthroughs under electoral autocracy cannot be assessed only by who wins against whom, but also by the kind of political community, opposition and accountability that challengers make thinkable before they win.

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This article is dedicated to the memory of my parents.

Declaration of generative AI use

OpenAI's ChatGPT, GPT-5.5 Thinking, was used during the revision process for limited editorial and workflow support, including language refinement, consistency checking, and methodological audit support under author supervision. It was not used to generate synthetic data, replace source collection, determine final coding decisions, produce final empirical classifications, create or manipulate research results, or substitute for scholarly interpretation. The corpus construction, codebook design, semantic validation, final author adjudication, interpretation of results, references and manuscript claims were checked and finalized by the author, who takes full responsibility for the integrity of the manuscript and supplementary material.

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Data availability statement

The supplementary material submitted with this article contains the coding framework and retrieval rules, the public coded dataset, document-level source metadata and source IDs, full-context evidence for all final Risk −1 cases, the data underlying the reported tables and figures, a compact coding-audit summary, and documentation of the external human validation.

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