

The Local Pulse of Democracy: A Comparative Study of Electoral Dynamics in Türkiye and Hungary*

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Abstract

The present study examines the electoral dynamics in Türkiye and Hungary, two countries characterised by competitive authoritarian regimes under populist leadership. The present study explores opposition strategies during local elections, focusing particularly on significant opposition victories in major metropolitan areas in 2019. These victories in local elections are then juxtaposed with the subsequent general elections, in which the ruling parties have maintained their dominance. Utilising a comparative case study approach, the research explores the relationship between local electoral success and national political power, investigating whether victories in urban centres can serve as a viable pathway to challenge incumbent governments. The findings indicate that while local electoral achievements can bolster opposition credibility and visibility, the entrenched nature of authoritarianism, biased electoral dynamics, and internal opposition discord hinder translating local successes into national political change. The study under scrutiny here highlights the complexities of navigating authoritarian pressures and emphasises the necessity of strategic alliances and adaptability in opposition tactics to foster democratic resilience.

Keywords: Democratic Backsliding, Competitive Authoritarianism, Local Elections, Opposition Politics, Hungary, Türkiye

Demokrasinin Yerel Nabzı: Türkiye ve Macaristan'daki Seçim Dinamiklerinin Karşılaştırmalı Bir Araştırması

Özet

Bu çalışma, popülist liderlik altında rekabetçi otoriter rejimlerle karakterize edilen iki ülke olan Türkiye ve Macaristan'daki seçim dinamiklerini incelemektedir. Araştırma, yerel seçimlerde kullanılan muhalefet stratejilerine ve özellikle 2019'da büyük metropollerdeki önemli muhalefet başarısına odaklanmaktadır. Yerel seçim başarısı, iktidar partilerinin hâkimiyetlerini koruduğu sonraki genel seçimlerle karşılaştırılmaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı bir vaka çalışması yaklaşımı kullanan araştırma, yerel seçim başarısı ile ulusal siyasi güç arasındaki ilişkiyi inceleyerek, kent merkezlerindeki muhalefet stratejilerinin genel seçimlerde iktidarı kazanabilmek için uygulanabilir bir yol olup olamayacağını araştırmaktadır. Bulgular, yerel seçim başarılarının muhalefetin güvenilirliğini ve görünürlüğünü artırabileceğini gösterirken, yerleşik otoriterlik doğası, taraflı seçim dinamikleri ve muhalefet içi anlaşmazlıklar, yerel başarıların ulusal siyasi değişime dönüşmesini engellemektedir. Bu çalışma, otoriter baskılarla başa çıkmanın karmaşıklıklarını ortaya koymakta ve demokratik dayanıklılığı teşvik etmek için stratejik ittifakların ve muhalefet taktiklerinde uyum sağlamanın gerekliliğini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Demokratik Gerileme, Rekabetçi Otoriterlik, Yerel Seçimler, Muhalefet Siyaseti, Macaristan, Türkiye

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Introduction

One of the most critical features that distinguishes democracy from alternative political systems is the capacity of citizens to independently select and modify their governing bodies via the mechanism of transparent and equitable electoral processes. Democracies are defined by constitutionally enshrined liberties of association and expression, the availability of diverse information sources, the conduct of regular and equitable electoral processes, and the presence of multiple political parties engaged in competition.¹ In the absence of one or more of these conditions, the regime in question becomes a hybrid regime that falls within the authoritarian spectrum. The instances of Türkiye and Hungary, under the governance of populist leaders, have been recognized as salient exemplars of democratic regression and the ensuing authoritarianism, wherein elected officials concentrate authority, undermine institutional safeguards, and distort democratic principles to solidify their dominion.²

The extant body of literature has historically concentrated predominantly on the emergence of authoritarian leaders and their respective administrations, alongside their associated actions and policies. This scholarly focus has engendered particular insights, which have implicitly informed strategies for countering authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, in light of the phenomenon of democratic regression and the ascendance of authoritarian inclinations and populism on a global scale, as well as within the European milieu, it appears that there has been a significant increase in scholarly inquiry aimed at investigating opposition strategies within competitive authoritarian regimes. Understanding the dynamics of opposition strategies is crucial for assessing the resilience of democratic institutions in the face of authoritarian encroachments in both Türkiye and Hungary.

In the 2019 local elections in Hungary and Türkiye, a united opposition achieved a notable electoral breakthrough, securing victories in the metropolitan cities (Budapest and Istanbul) and several other major urban centres. The opposition bloc gained ground, which has led to growing that a change in the ruling power could be on the horizon. In the subsequent general elections, the two countries once again faced a comparable situation, with the incumbent government parties emerging as the winners. This paper seeks to analyse the strategy deployed by the opposition in their pursuit of electoral success at the local level and to evaluate the reasons behind their inability to replicate this success at the general election.

The study employs a comparative case study approach to examine the relationship between local electoral success and national political power in competitive authoritarian regimes. By analyzing electoral patterns in Hungary and Türkiye, this research investigates whether opposition victories in major metropolitan areas can serve as a viable pathway to

¹ Dahl, Robert A., *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, Yale University Press, 1971, pp.3-7; Haas, Michael, *Democracy: Components and Types*, In *Why Democracies Flounder and Fail: Remediating Mass Society Politics*, ed. Michael Haas, Springer International Publishing, 2019, pp.25-30.

² Esen, Berk and Gumuscu, Sebnem, *Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey*, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.37, No.9, 2016, p. 1582; Tanca, Dersu Ekim, *Party System Fragmentation and Fractionalization in Turkey under the AKP's Competitive Authoritarian Rule*, *Turkish Studies*, Vol.26, No.2, 2025, p.200; Yavuzylmaz, Hakan and Esen, Berk, *Formal yet Ineffective Opposition Coordination under Competitive Authoritarianism: Nation Alliance in Turkey*, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.46, No.2, 2025, p.237; Acar, Fahriye Didem and Esen, Erol, *Popülizm ve Liberal Demokrasi İlişkisinde 'Demokratik Gerileme': Macaristan Örneği*, *Electronic Journal of Political Science Studies*, Vol.16, No.2, 2025, pp.69-70; Szikra, Dorottya and Öktem, Kerem Gabriel, *An Illiberal Welfare State Emerging? Welfare Efforts and Trajectories under Democratic Backsliding in Hungary and Turkey*, *Journal of European Social Policy*, Vol.33, No.2, 2023, p.202.

challenging incumbent authoritarian-populist governments at the national level. The study acknowledges limitations in data availability, particularly regarding internal party dynamics and informal campaign practices. Media bias and state influence in both countries may affect the reliability of publicly available campaign materials. Given the geographic and temporal focus on capital cities between 2014 and 2024, the results may not fully capture regional variations or future political developments.

Method

This paper adopts a most-similar systems design (MSSD) within the comparative method framework.³ The research compares two countries-Hungary and Türkiye-that share substantial similarities in their political trajectories, regime characteristics, and opposition strategies, while differing in specific institutional arrangements. This design allows for the identification of causal patterns by controlling for similarities while examining variations in outcomes.⁴

The study utilizes a longitudinal comparative approach, tracking electoral performance across multiple election cycles (2014-2024) at both national and local levels. This temporal dimension enables the analysis of electoral trends, opposition strategy evolution, and the dynamic relationship between local and national political competition in competitive authoritarian contexts. The study utilises a range of publicly accessible electoral and socio-economic data sources to ensure analytical robustness. The electoral results for both the parliamentary and local contests were obtained from the official electoral authorities of Türkiye and Hungary, with additional turnout data being sourced from the International IDEA Voter Turnout Database. In order to contextualise electoral behaviour, demographic indicators – particularly those pertaining to youth population dynamics and unemployment rates – were drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators. Furthermore, democracy indices from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project were incorporated to trace shifts in regime characteristics over time. These datasets, covering the period between 2014 and 2024, provide a consistent empirical basis for assessing the interaction between local electoral breakthroughs and national-level political trajectories in competitive authoritarian settings.

The analytical framework integrates three interrelated levels of analysis. At the national level, it focuses on parliamentary and presidential election results to assess government party performance and the dynamics of opposition coalition formation. At the metropolitan level, it examines local election outcomes in capital cities-specifically Budapest and Istanbul-as bellwethers of urban opposition strength and indicators of shifting political alignments. At the cross-level stage, it explores the relationship between local electoral breakthroughs and subsequent national election performance, thereby linking subnational political developments to broader regime trajectories. This multi-level approach allows for systematic examination of whether local electoral success translates into national political change, addressing the central research question of whether metropolitan victories constitute a 'stepping stone' to national power.

³ Lijphart, Arend, *Comparative Politics and the Comparative Method*, American Political Science Review, Vol.65, No.3, 1971, p.685; Seawright, Jason and Gerring, John, *Case Selection Techniques in Case Study Research: A Menu of Qualitative and Quantitative Options*, Political Research Quarterly, Vol.61, No.2, 2008, p.304.

⁴ Przeworski, Adam and Teune, Henry, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, Wiley-Interscience, 1970, p.51.

Hungary and Türkiye were selected as comparative cases based on several theoretically relevant criteria that make them particularly suitable for examining opposition strategies in competitive authoritarian regimes. Despite these regime similarities, their electoral systems differ in ways that offer meaningful institutional variation for comparative analysis. These differences provide an opportunity to assess how institutional design mediates the link between local and national electoral outcomes, shaping opposition strategies and coalition dynamics. Both cases also exhibit strong temporal alignment. Each experienced significant opposition breakthroughs in the 2019 local elections-Budapest and Istanbul, respectively-followed by national contests in which incumbents retained power (Hungary in 2022, Türkiye in 2023). Moreover, both countries have undergone accelerating democratic backsliding since 2010, creating parallel trajectories for analysis.

Finally, the metropolitan significance of Budapest and Istanbul further strengthens the comparative logic. Each capital represents approximately one-fifth of its country's population, serves as an economic, cultural, and political center, and demonstrates distinct voting patterns compared with rural and provincial areas. These cities symbolize urban-based opposition strength among educated and cosmopolitan electorates. Following established comparative politics methodology⁵, this case selection allows for both within-case process tracing and cross-case comparison, thereby illuminating the interaction between regime type, institutional design, and urban opposition dynamics.

Literature Review

A growing body of scholarship links democratic backsliding to the rise of populism and the emergence of hybrid regimes. The hybrid regimes, which combine democratic and authoritarian elements⁶, often led by populist strategies, are conceptualized with varying terminologies in scholarly discourse and are distinguished based on the evolving attributes of the ideal type. Hungary and Türkiye, with their populist leaders Viktor Orbán and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have become concrete examples in the literature of competitive authoritarian regimes.⁷ Both have faced a democratic breakdown that, over time, has fostered authoritarianism. Scheppele⁸ even coined the term Hungary a "Frankenstate", defining it as "an abusive form of rule, created by combining the bits and pieces of perfectly reasonable democratic institutions in monstrous ways".

Levitsky and Way⁹ conceptualised the term 'competitive authoritarian regimes' by drawing on third-wave democracies with a history of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes.

⁵ Seawright and Gerring, *ibid.*, p.304.

⁶ Diamond, Larry, Thinking About Hybrid Regimes, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2, 2002, pp.23; Wintrobe, Ronald, An Economic Theory of a Hybrid (Competitive Authoritarian or Illiberal) Regime, *Public Choice*, Vol.177, No.3, 2018, p.218.

⁷ Bieber, Florian, Patterns of Competitive Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans, *East European Politics*, Vol.34, No.3, 2018, p.348; Csanádi et al., Dynamics of an Authoritarian System: Hungary, 2010–2021, Central European University Press, 2022, pp.4-5; Esen and Gumuscu, *ibid.*, p.1584; Musil, Pelin Ayan and Yardımcı-Geyikçi, Şebnem, Transnationalization of Opposition Strategy Under Competitive Authoritarianism: Evidence from Turkey and Hungary, *Government and Opposition*, Vol.59, No.2, 2024, pp.345-46; Tanca, *ibid.*, p.200.

⁸ Scheppele, Kim Lane, Not Your Father's Authoritarianism: The Creation of the 'Frankenstate.' Newsletter of the European Politics and Society Section of the American Political Science Association, Vol.23, Winter 2013, p.5.

⁹ Levitsky, Steven and Way, Lucan A., Elections Without Democracy: The Rise of Competitive Authoritarianism, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.13, No.2, 2002, pp.52-56; Levitsky, Steven and Way, Lucan A., *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp.5-10.

Although the institutionalization process of the system is different, the Turkish political system post-2017 referendum can be defined as a competitive autocracy characterized by the concentration of power in the presidency, undermining democratic institutions, and limiting political pluralism.¹⁰ In competitive authoritarian states, despite the regular holding of elections which are generally competitive, there is a weakening of the system of checks and balances on the government, accompanied by an increase in government control over society and independent actors. The government exercises undue control over state-owned media and regulatory bodies, employs legal processes to harass critics and reward supporters in the media and civil society, engages in widespread repression of opposition groups by securitising dissent, and relies on the widespread use of public resources and misuse of public policy instruments to gain access to increased private funding for the party.¹¹ Incumbents deny adequate media coverage to the opposition, harass opposition candidates and their supporters, and in some cases manipulate election results to the extent that the regime fails to meet minimum democratic standards.

Democratic backsliding refers to the gradual weakening of democratic institutions and norms by elected leaders who exploit the legitimacy of democratic elections to consolidate power.¹² Populism often serves as a driving mechanism in this process, as leaders claim to embody the will of the ‘true people’, symbolised by the ‘Us’ against corrupt elites (e.i, Them), thereby justifying the erosion of institutional constraints.¹³ The literature robustly links populism to democratic erosion, with several studies providing clear causal pathways between populist rhetoric, polarization, and institutional decay in Hungary¹⁴ and Türkiye.¹⁵ The performative and post-foundational theories of populism elucidate how populist leaders construct exclusionary national identities that legitimise illiberal governance. As populism grows stronger and more influential, a situation known as ‘democratic regression’ also emerges.¹⁶ It should be emphasised that populism is a transitional strategy. Once this strategy achieves its goal-that is, once Parliament and the opposition are no longer able to perform their basic democratic functions-we are no longer talking about democratic regression, but about authoritarian consolidation.

¹⁰ Arslantaş and Kaiser claims that many scholars apply the competitive authoritarianism label to Türkiye without sufficient theoretical justification, and they suggest the need for more precise categorisation for Turkish case. See Arslantaş, Düzgün and Kaiser, André, The ‘Competitive Authoritarian’ Turn in Turkey: Bandwagoning versus Reality, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.44, No.3, 2023, p.505.

¹¹ Esen and Gumuscu, *ibid.*, p.1582; Levitsky and Way, *Elections Without Democracy*, pp.56-59; Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi, *ibid.*, p.343-49.

¹² Bermeo, Nancy, On Democratic Backsliding, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.27, No.1, 2016, p.5.

¹³ Mudde, Cas and Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp.5–7, 20–22; Müller, Jan-Werner, *What is Populism*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pp. 3–6, 19–23.

¹⁴ Palonen, Emilia, Performing the Nation: The Janus-Faced Populist Foundations of Illiberalism in Hungary, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol.26, No.3, 2018, pp.312-16; Acar and Esen, *ibid.*, pp.77-78; Ilonszki, Gabriella, and Vajda, Adrienn, How Far Can Populist Governments Go? The Impact of the Populist Government on the Hungarian Parliament, *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol.74, No.4, 2021, pp.782-83.

¹⁵ Castaldo, Antonino, Populism and Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.8, No.4, 2018, pp.472-74; Dinçşahin, Şakir, A Symptomatic Analysis of the Justice and Development Party’s Populism in Turkey, 2007–2010, *Government and Opposition*, Vol.47, No.4, 2012, p.640; Yabancı, Bilge, Populism as the Problem Child of Democracy: The AKP’s Enduring Appeal and the Use of Meso-Level Actors, In *Exit from Democracy*. Eds. Öktem, Kerem, and Karabekir Akkoyunlu, Routledge, 2018, p.146.

¹⁶ Acar and Esen, *ibid.*, 59.

Existing literature has traditionally focused on the emergence of authoritarian leaders and their administrations, as well as their populist strategies. A significant proportion of this research has been concerned with the impact of institutional transformations on the consolidation of authoritarian regimes.¹⁷ A considerable body of research has examined democratic backsliding and transitions to authoritarian regimes, drawing upon specific case studies that provide detailed accounts of legislative weakening, executive decrees, and abusive constitutionalism that facilitate authoritarian consolidation.¹⁸ These explain the actors and influences through which authoritarian regimes emerge and establish themselves, and exemplify Levitsky and Way's¹⁹ definition of competitive authoritarianism in which the government's accountability is reduced, its control over the media, civil society, and independent actors is increased, and public resources and policy instruments are misused to ensure its continuity. In these civilian regimes, wherein electoral processes occur at consistent intervals within a competitive yet unfair, dissenting voices are stifled, and proponents of the government are incentivized. The manner in which economic crises, neoliberal reforms, and socioeconomic bloc interests contribute to the erosion of democracy has also been examined in this context.²⁰

These studies have yielded insights that have implicitly guided efforts to counter authoritarian regimes. However, given the recent surge in democratic backsliding and authoritarian tendencies, as well as the rise of populism on a global and European scale, there has been a notable increase in research exploring opposition strategies within competitive authoritarian regimes.²¹ The inability of authoritarian regimes to respond to new crises, the failure of transitional populist strategies to foster old polarization, and the challenges created by economic management characterised by irrational decisions have been identified as contributing to the development of opposition to authoritarian power.²²

Theoretical Framework

In both Hungary and Türkiye, populist rhetoric has been instrumental in legitimising the concentration of executive power, restricting media freedom, diminishing judicial independence, and eroding of electoral competitiveness. These dynamics have transformed both countries into competitive authoritarian systems, where formal democratic institutions exist but are systematically manipulated to favor incumbents.

¹⁷ Esen and Gumuscu, *ibid.*, pp.1585-86.

¹⁸ Ilonszki and Vajda, *How Far Can Populist Governments Go?*, 782; Esen and Gumuscu, *ibid.*, pp.1585-86; Tanca, *ibid.*, pp.218-19.

¹⁹ Levitsky and Way, *Elections Without Democracy*, pp.51-65; Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, 5-12.

²⁰ Kutlay, Mustafa and Öniş, Ziya, *Governance Crises and Resilience of Authoritarian Populism: 2023 Turkish Elections from the Perspective of Hirschman's 'Exit, Voice, and Loyalty'*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.24, No.2, pp.395-98.

²¹ Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi, *ibid.*, pp.345-48; Yavuzylmaz and Esen, *ibid.*, p.237; Yabancı, Bilge, *Civic Opposition and Democratic Backsliding: Mobilization Dynamics and Rapport with Political Parties, Government and Opposition*, Vol.60, No.2, 2025, p.431; Yabancı, Bilge, et al., *Limits of Autocratisation: Actors and Institutions of Democratic Resistance and Opposition*, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol.46, No.2, 2025, pp.102-4.

²² Tuğal, Cihan, *Democratic Autocracy: A Populist Update to Fascism Under Neoliberal Conditions*, *Historical Materialism*, Vol.32, No.3, 2024, p.45; Sahin, Selver B, *Looking Beyond Democratic Backsliding: Analysing the Political Economy Context of Turkey's Regime Trajectory Through a Mode of Participation Approach*, *Democratization*, Vol.30, No.4, 2023, pp.755-56.

In competitive authoritarian regimes, where the majority holds the power to set and change the rules of the democratic game, the opposition is subject to restrictions that impede its ability to win elections, thereby rendering it challenging to effect a change in the regime. Nevertheless, the initial structure of the regime, founded upon a 'Us versus Them' dichotomy between opposing factions, also represents a vulnerability that can facilitate a transition towards change. The inherent nature of authoritarianism forces opposition parties to compromise on the anti-regime axis. The success of the opposition's electoral alliance in competitive authoritarian regimes represents a peaceful means of ensuring the democratisation of the regime.²³ In this context, the local elections in Hungary and Türkiye, in which the opposition achieved success for the first time in a long time, are taken as a point of departure for the analysis presented in this paper.

The relationship between local and national elections, which is the focus of this paper, has important parameters of political participation and representation. The campaigns of political parties and electoral alliances are conducted in a delicate balance in the general and local elections held in successive periods. Timing of the elections, performance of the ruling party and incumbents in local government, arithmetic in the national/local assemblies, the charisma of new candidates, the influence of opposition parties, alliances, or new potential for cooperation structure the interaction of elections at both levels. In the democracy literature, which focuses more on general elections, interest in local elections, especially in unitary states, began after the 1990s. Since the 1990s, international efforts to strengthen local governments and develop a concept of local democratic governance have led to an increased interest in local governance practices, along with the participatory democracy approach derived from critical political theory. Although this interest is directed at the development of citizen participation practices between two election periods, local elections have inevitably begun to be followed more closely.

In competitive authoritarian systems, the ruling party's failure in local elections gives rise to tensions that are primarily focused on the security of its power. This indicates that the authority sustaining the system is being destabilised at the subnational level. The opposition begins to assert itself at a level closer to the people and to gain their trust through its actions/services.²⁴ Direct and indirect government supervision enables it to demonstrate a more transparent administration. As it is not directly responsible for national issues, the opposition performs its function of criticism from a different perspective. The exertion of authoritarian pressure on local governments, frequently accompanied by the dissemination of disinformation, presents a significant challenge. However, it can also prove advantageous for the opposition, which is seeking to secure victory in the forthcoming general elections and to maintain its position in the local elections.

The impact of this phenomenon may vary depending on the degree of centralisation or decentralisation of the state system. However, the provision of services addressing the everyday challenges faced by citizens has the effect of increasing the visibility of opposition parties. In decentralised states, the fact that presidents have previously held the position of mayor of the capital city or a major urban centre, or that they have served as state governors, is also related to this. If they are successful at the sub-national level, it seems reasonable to suggest that they could be similarly successful at the national level. In Türkiye, which is a

²³ Oğuz, Mustafa Cem, Melez Rejimlerden Çıkışta Seçim İttifakları: 2019 Macaristan Yerel Seçimi Üzerine Bir İnceleme, *Fiscaoeconomia*, Vol.4, No.1, 2020, p.48.

²⁴ Farole, Safia Abukar, Eroding Support from Below: Performance in Local Government and Opposition Party Growth in South Africa, *Government and Opposition*, Vol.56, No.3, 2021, pp.540-42.

unitary state, Erdoğan was known primarily as a successful mayor. Ekrem İmamoğlu, who assumed the same position as the opposition candidacy, and the incumbent mayor of the capital, Mansur Yavaş, were/are also popular candidates for the presidency. In the Hungarian context, the incumbent mayors (Péter Márki-Zay of Hódmezővásárhely and Gergely Karácsony of Budapest) participated in the 2021 opposition primary, aiming to challenge Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the 2022 parliamentary election.

Since 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has gradually transformed the political system into an authoritarian system by leveraging its long-standing position as the dominant party in the history of democracy. In this process, Erdoğan, who first became prime minister and then president following the transition to a new government system, established a regime-level polarisation through the populist strategy he adopted.

Background of Democratic Backsliding in Türkiye and Hungary

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (since 2002) and Viktor Mihály Orbán (Since 2010) rose to power in their countries, and their parties (along with alliance partners) have demonstrated consistent electoral success at the national level, with no recorded losses in general elections. In the period preceding the one under review, Türkiye was on the road to a consolidated pluralistic democracy since its first democratic transition in 1950, despite the persistence of important democratic deficits and concerns.²⁵ Hungary was a more consolidated democracy in its relatively short post-communist democratisation history. Erdoğan (b. 1954) and Orbán (b. 1963) are two highly influential personal figures who have been responsible for the creation of regime-level polarisation²⁶ throughout their uninterrupted incumbency. They assumed power through the democratic electoral process, subsequently exploiting the political system to consolidate their authority. Both individuals originated from the political youth organisations of the nationalist-conservative ideology to which their respective parties are affiliated. They have been engaged in active political life since the 1990s. Orbán was elected to Hungary's first post-communist parliament in 1990. Erdoğan, previously a candidate for parliament and mayor, achieved his first success by being elected mayor of the Istanbul metropolitan municipality in the 1994 local elections. Both have been opportunistic advocates of liberalism and democracy, depending on the circumstances, moving away from the radicalism of their youth ideology and settling on the centre-right. Orbán's Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) and Erdoğan's AKP are two such cases in point, as they are firmly occupying the right of the centre political spectrum, making them the predominant powers in their respective states via a vote share of close to half of the electorate.

AKP was established in 2001 by a group of political reformers who had previously been associated with the pro-Islamist parties that had been banned on several occasions due to their anti-secularist views and reestablished under different party names. The pro-Islamist parties were established as a split from the first liberal opposition party (the Democrat Party) of the Turkish Republic, which was founded in 1946. The AKP represents both traditions in its party identity and has been characterised as a conservative and neoliberal political party. The AKP came to power at the end of 2002, garnering support from individuals who cast

²⁵ Somer, Murat, Understanding Turkey's Democratic Breakdown: Old vs. New and Indigenous vs. Global Authoritarianism, In *Exit from Democracy*, Eds. Öktem, Kerem, and Karabekir Akkoyunlu, Routledge, 2018, p.15.

²⁶ Yavuzylmaz, Hakan, When Local Becomes General: Turkey's 31 March 2019 Elections and Its Implications for Dynamics of Polarization and Sustainability of Competitive Authoritarianism, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol.23, No.4, 2021, p.624.

their ballots for the party for a multitude of cultural and pragmatic reasons.²⁷ The June 2015 parliamentary election marked the first occasion since the AKP's ascension to power in 2002 that the incumbent party lost its parliamentary majority. The current alliance between the AKP and the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) commenced in 2016.

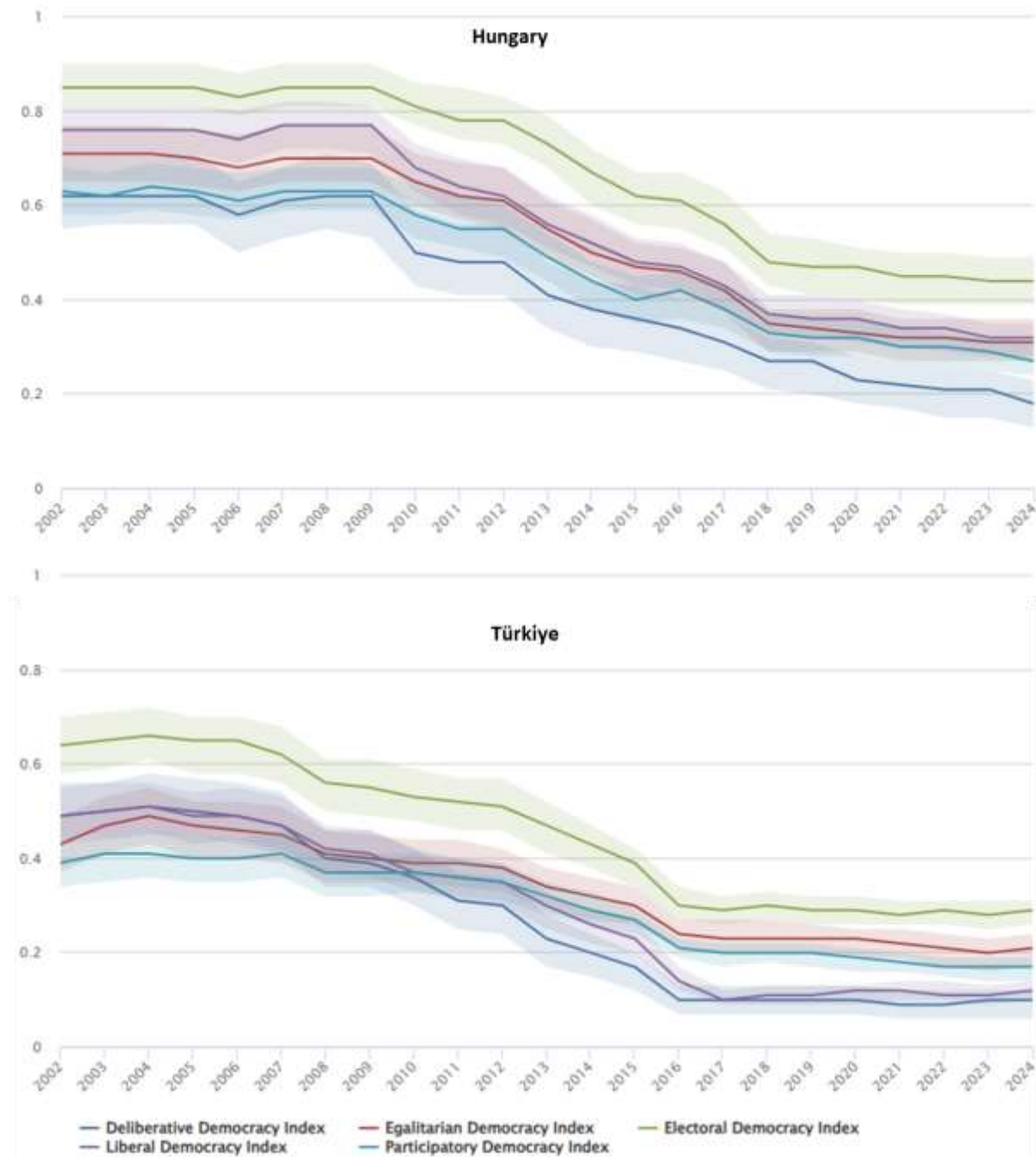
The Fidesz party was established in 1988 under the name Alliance of Young Democrats (Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége). It was originally a centre-left and liberal activist movement that opposed the ruling Marxist–Leninist government. In 1990, the party was officially registered, with Orbán assuming the role of leader. Subsequently, the party gained representation in the National Assembly following the 1990 parliamentary election. In the wake of the election, the party embraced liberal conservatism, prompting a significant exodus of liberal members who joined the Alliance of Free Democrats. Subsequently, the party sought to form a coalition with other conservative parties, and following the 1998 election, it successfully formed a centre-right government. In the early 2000s, the party adopted a nationalist platform, but its popularity declined slightly due to corruption scandals. Between 2002 and 2010, the party served in the opposition, and in 2006, it formed a coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP). In 2010, Orbán's centre-right Fidesz party won a landslide victory in the national elections, gaining more than two-thirds of the seats in Parliament - giving it a constitutional majority - and went on to win further victories not only nationally but also at local, regional, and European levels.²⁸

Consequently, a competitive authoritarian regime has emerged and become entrenched over time in both countries. Erdoğan and Orbán are both regarded as populist-authoritarian leaders who seek to advance their autocratic agendas through the use of 'revolutionary' and 'ideological' levels of polarisation, thereby ensuring their continued hold on power through successive electoral victories.²⁹ Figure 1 illustrates the decline in various democratic indices in both countries, particularly following 2010. Both cases illustrate a transition from competitive democracies to hybrid or authoritarian regimes, though through distinct institutional trajectories.

²⁷ Çarkoğlu, Ali and Kalaycıoğlu, Ersin, *The Rising Tide of Conservatism in Turkey*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp.123-129.

²⁸ Hajnal, György and Boda, Zsolt, *Illiberal Transformation of Government Bureaucracy in a Fragile Democracy: The Case of Hungary*, In *Democratic Backsliding and Public Administration*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p.76-80; Scheppele, Kim Lane, *How Viktor Orbán Wins*, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.33, No.3, 2022, pp.45-48.

²⁹ Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi, *ibid.*, pp.350-51; Somer, Murat, *Turkey: The Slippery Slope from Reformist to Revolutionary Polarization and Democratic Breakdown*, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol.681, No.1, 2019, pp.44; Vegetti, Federico, *The Political Nature of Ideological Polarization: The Case of Hungary*, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 681, No.1, 2019, pp.79.

Figure 1: Rates of Democracy Indexes - Hungary and Türkiye*

Source: V-Dem, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/, (01.10.2025).

The figures depict the trajectories of five V-Dem indices-Deliberative, Egalitarian, Electoral, Liberal, and Participatory Democracy-for Hungary and Türkiye between 2002 and 2024. Both countries exhibit clear patterns of democratic backsliding, though the onset and pace differ. In Hungary, democratic indicators remained relatively high until around 2010, after which all indices began to decline sharply. This corresponds to the rise of Viktor Orbán's government and the gradual erosion of liberal democratic institutions. Between 2010 and 2018, Hungary experienced its steepest decline, particularly in the Liberal and Electoral Democracy indices, signaling growing constraints on judicial independence, media

pluralism, and electoral competitiveness. Although the decline slowed after 2018, Hungary's democracy scores stabilized at substantially lower levels by 2024. In Türkiye, the decline began earlier and was more abrupt. Moderate democracy scores in the early 2000s gave way to steady deterioration after 2008, accelerating following the 2013 Gezi protests and especially after the 2016 coup attempt. By 2024, Türkiye scores lower than Hungary across all indices, with the Liberal Democracy Index approaching minimal levels.

Government–Opposition Balance and Electoral System Bias in Türkiye and Hungary

Türkiye and Hungary are both unitary republics with legislative powers vested in unicameral parliaments. Türkiye has a presidential government system, while Hungary has a parliamentary government system. There is a difference in balance between the government and the opposition in Hungary and Türkiye. In the case of Hungary, the government has a two-thirds majority in parliament (135/199), whereas in Türkiye, the government has barely more than half (323/600). Table 1 shows the distribution of parliamentary seats in the two countries following the most recent general elections.

Table 1: The Parliaments' Composition After the Elections

	Hungary (April 2022)				Türkiye (May 2024)			
	Alliance	Parties	No. of seats	Share of seats (%)	Alliance	Parties	No. of seats	Share of seats (%)
Government	Fidesz-KDNP (67.8%)	Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz)	117	58.8	People's Alliance (53.8%)	Justice and Development Party (AKP)	267	44.5
		Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP)	18	9.0		Democratic Left Party (DSP)	1	0.2
Opposition	United for Hungary (DK-Jobbik-Momentum-MSZP-LMP-Párbeszéd) (28.1%)	Democratic Coalition (DK)	15	7.5	Nation Alliance (35.3%)	New Welfare Party (YRP)	5	0.8
		Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik)	10	5.0		Nationalist Action Party (MHP)	50	8.3
		Momentum	10	5.0		Republican People's Party (CHP)	130	21.7
		Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)	10	5.0		Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA)	15	2.5
		Dialogue for Hungary (Párbeszéd) (PM)	6	3.0		Felicity Party (SAADET)	10	1.7
		Hungary's Green Party (LMP) (Politics Can Be Different)	5	2.5		Future Party (GELECEK)	10	1.7
	(3.0%)	Our Homeland (Mi Hazánk)	6	3.0	Democrat Party (DP)	3	0.5	
	(0.5%)	Representative of the German minority living in Hungary	1	0.5	Good Party (İyi Party)	44	7.3	
	(0.5%)	Independents	1	0.5	Labour and Freedom Alliance (10.8%)	Green and the Left Party of the Future (YSGP)	57	9.5
						Labour Party (EMEP)	2	0.3
						Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP)	2	0.3
					Workers' Party of Türkiye (TİP)	4	0.7	
			199	100.0			600	100.0

Source: <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/HU/HU-LC01/election/HU-LC01-E20220403/>, https://data.ipu.org/node/177/elections?chamber_id=13548, (20.01.2025).

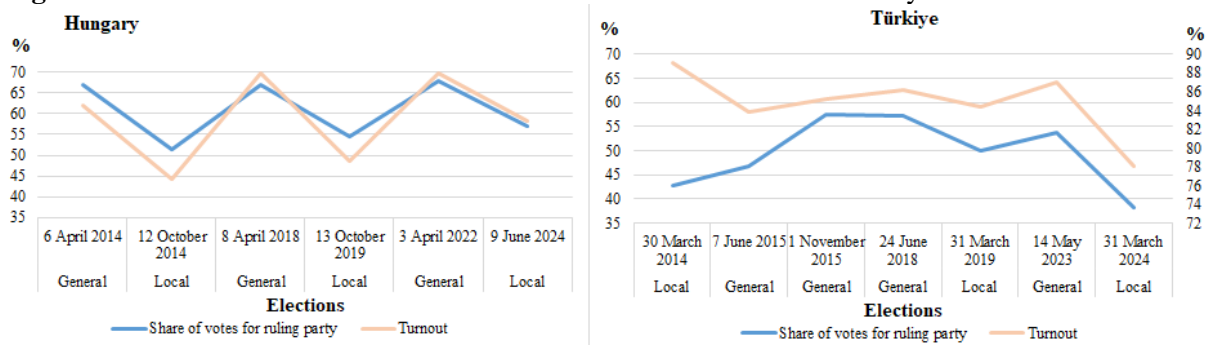
In Hungary, the opposition is more evenly dispersed into one bloc compared to the Turkish opposition, which is divided into two blocs. Here, it is necessary to emphasize the differences in electoral systems. In Hungary, the mixed-member proportional system ((106 from single-member constituencies (FTPT); 93 from national list (drawn up party list or national minority list)). The electoral system (the law was adopted in 2011 and first practised

in 2014) creates a strong bias towards the largest party.³⁰ The Turkish electoral system for the parliamentary elections is based on the list proportional representation. In both countries, the districts were gerrymandered through the new boundaries adopted, which gave results in favor of the ruling parties.³¹

Local Elections and General Elections

In order to establish a basis for comparison, it is first necessary to consider the results of the last three general and local elections in the two countries at the national level. The impact of the electoral system is discernible in Hungary, both in its national and general elections, and in comparison with Türkiye (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Shares of Government Parties in Local Elections and Parliamentary Elections*



Source: For Hungary, <https://www.valasztas.hu/web/national-election-office/home>, for Türkiye, <https://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/secim-i-CC%87statistikleri/78318>, (22.12.2024).

(*) Seat shares of the government parties for parliamentary elections and vote shares of the parties for municipality assemblies for local elections were used for a better comparison due to the different electoral systems between countries and elections. The secondary axis is for turnout data for Türkiye.

Figure 2 compares the share of votes for the ruling party and voter turnout in Hungary and Türkiye across recent general and local elections. In Hungary, both variables fluctuate moderately between 2014 and 2024. The ruling party's vote share remains relatively high—mostly between 60% and 70%—with noticeable peaks in the 2018 and 2022 general elections, indicating stable dominance despite slight variations in turnout. In Türkiye, the ruling party's vote share shows greater volatility. It rose from around 40% in 2014 to a peak near 60% in 2018, followed by a decline to 40% in the 2024 local elections. Turnout, although consistently high, shows a gradual downward trend, especially after 2018. Overall, the data suggest that while Hungary's ruling party maintains consistent electoral strength amid stable participation, Türkiye displays greater electoral fluctuation and a decline in both support and turnout in recent years.

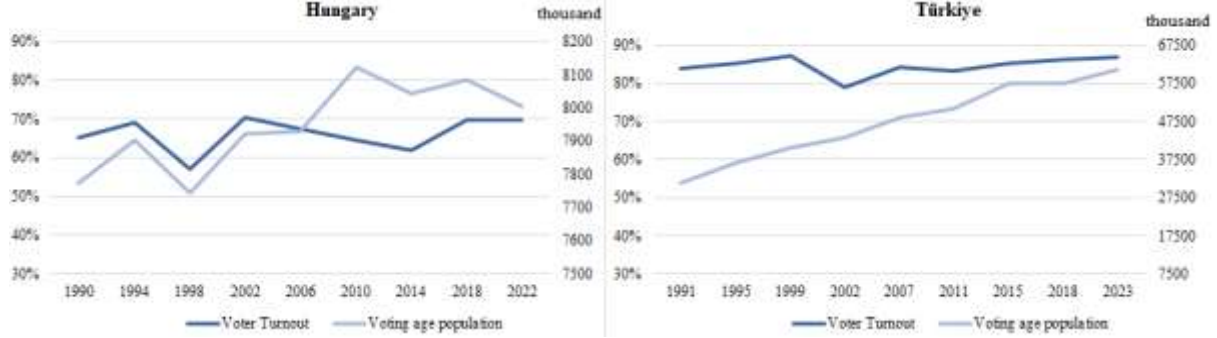
The countrywide results indicate that the ruling parties in both countries received a lower number of votes in the two most recent local elections than in the general elections. In Hungary, the incumbent administration, which expanded its parliamentary representation in the 2022 general elections, also witnessed an increase in its electoral support in the subsequent three local elections. In Türkiye, it is evident that the ruling party's votes declined

³⁰ Mécs, János, Courts and Populist Electoral Politics – The Case of Hungary, *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law*, Vol.16, No.2, 2024, p.271.

³¹ Çiçek, Ali, Türkiye'de Seçim Hileleri: Gerrymandering, *İnsan ve İnsan*, Vol.9, No.34, 2022, p.70; Mécs, ibid., p.274.

in the countrywide results of the two most recent local elections. It should be noted that local elections in Türkiye are a better indicator of general elections than local elections in Hungary.

Figure 3: Turnout Rates in General Elections and Voting Age Population*



Source: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database>, (10.06.2024).

(*) The secondary axis is for population data.

Figure 3, which compares voter turnout in general elections, allows for a more nuanced observation of the differences between the two countries. While some general trends, such as compulsory voting increasing turnout, are empirically supported, the overall understanding of how different institutional factors (such as proportional representation, election salience and voting facilities) affect turnout is still uncertain and lacks clear and consistent explanations.³² Changes in voter turnout suggest that elections are not only a vehicle through which citizens demonstrate their engagement but also a mechanism through which dissatisfaction with democracy is expressed.³³ However, this relationship can manifest in mixed ways when considering cross-country or country time series. Voter turnout in the last two general elections in Hungary and Türkiye reached its highest level since 2002.

In Türkiye, the law stipulates compulsory voting, whereas in Hungary, electoral participation is voluntary.³⁴ In terms of conventional measures such as the members-voters ratio and party identification, and territorialization, Türkiye's political parties are relatively well-institutionalized.³⁵ An effective grassroots organisation with dynamic youth and women's branches is known to be crucial to the parties. The high proportion of young people (see Appendix 1) in Türkiye is part of the explanation for the difference in voter turnout.

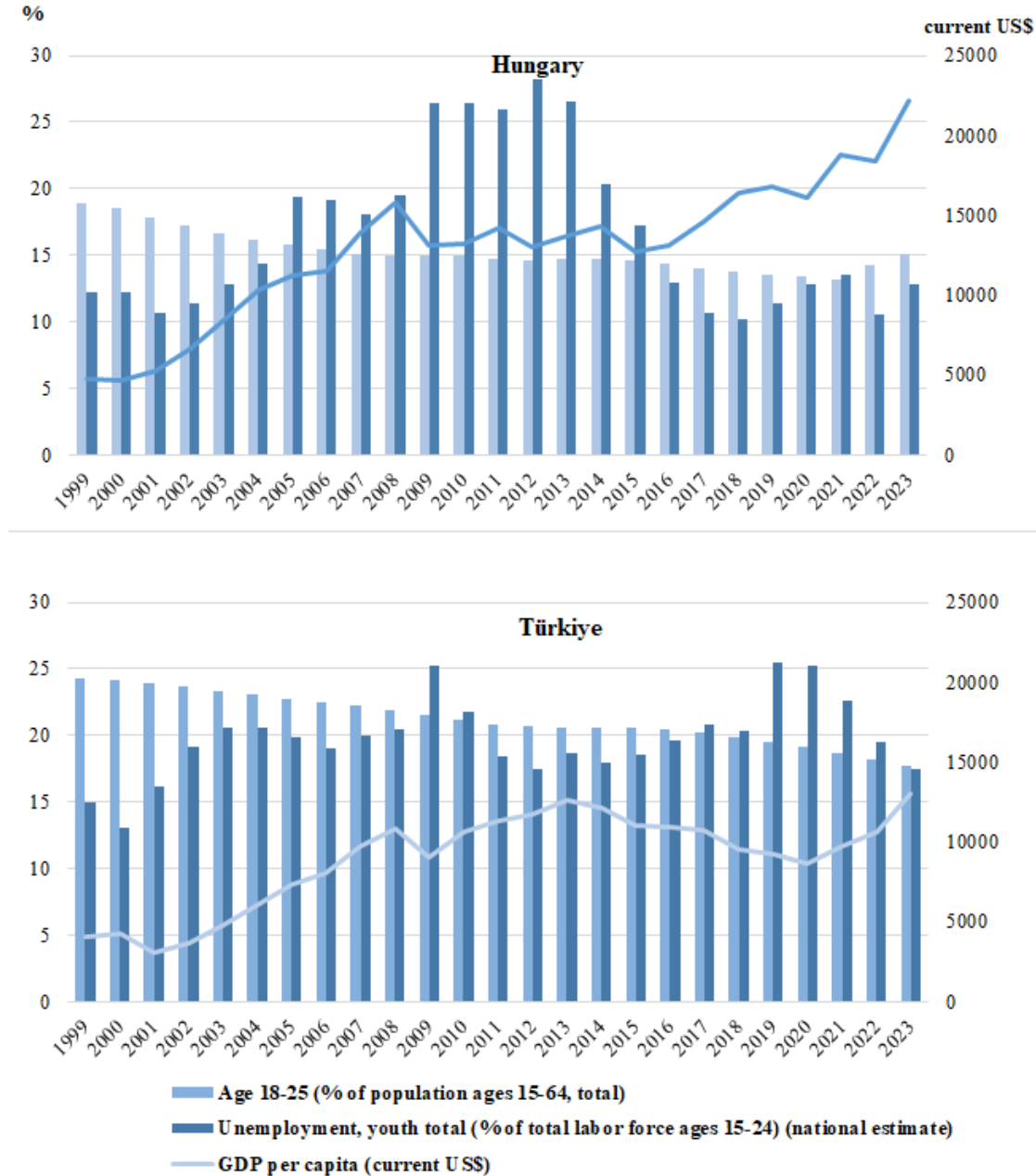
³² Blais, André, What Affects Voter Turnout?, Annual Review of Political Science, Vol.9, No.1, 2006, pp.112-16.

³³ Ezrow, Lawrence and Xezonakis, Georgios, Satisfaction with Democracy and Voter Turnout: A Temporal Perspective, Party Politics, Vol.22, No.1, 2016, pp.4-6.

³⁴ International IDEA, Voter Turnout Database, 2024. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout-database>, (10.06.2024).

³⁵ Somer, Understanding Turkey's Democratic Breakdown, pp.15-16.

Figure 4: Young Population and Economic Performance



Source: <https://data.worldbank.org/>, (25.08.2025).

(*) The secondary axis is for GDP data.

Figure 4 illustrates the trends in youth population (ages 18–25), youth unemployment, and GDP per capita (current US\$) in Hungary and Türkiye from 1999 to 2023. In Hungary, the share of the youth population gradually declines over time, while youth unemployment shows considerable fluctuation-peaking between 2009 and 2013-before declining after 2015. Meanwhile, GDP per capita demonstrates a steady upward trend, particularly after 2016, reaching its highest level in 2023, suggesting sustained economic growth despite demographic decline. In Türkiye, the youth population share remains relatively stable, though with a mild downward trend. Youth unemployment fluctuates at a generally high level, with noticeable peaks around 2009 and 2019-2020, coinciding with

economic slowdowns. GDP per capita increases overall, but less steadily than in Hungary, reflecting episodes of economic volatility and recovery, especially after 2018.

Overall, the data indicate that while both countries experience declining youth shares and periodic unemployment challenges, Hungary's GDP growth has been more consistent, whereas Türkiye's economic performance has been more uneven, closely linked to fluctuations in youth unemployment.

The available evidence suggests that the issue of youth support is a significant aspect of the political agendas of political parties. During the electoral process, the opposition directed their attention to the younger demographic, which contributed to their success. In the period preceding the 2023 elections, media outlets and polling companies have begun to disseminate reports indicating that the votes of young people could be crucial in the forthcoming elections. In recent years, rising unemployment and difficult economic conditions have driven the youth population to the polls. The increase in the number of years of compulsory education, the expansion of the network of universities, and the promotion of girls' education at all levels, when considered alongside the recent economic conditions, can be expected to raise the future expectations of the young population (first-time voters make up 8%), especially in urban areas, and to increase participation in elections, which represents the most traditional form of political participation. The ruling party, which was previously more closely aligned with the young population through socio-political networks, has not benefited much from this in recent years.³⁶

In Hungary, where the proportion of the young population is already relatively low, there has been a notable migration of this demographic abroad. Some of those who have remained in Hungary have gravitated towards the far-right opposition party, Jobbik, particularly in response to the migration crisis. Despite the low overall voter turnout among Hungarian youth, this demographic has also turned to the opposition³⁷, though the impact may be less pervasive than in Türkiye.

It should be noted that citizens residing abroad are permitted to cast their votes (only for party lists in Hungary) in general elections, provided that they are eligible to vote in the respective country. However, they are not entitled to participate in local municipal elections in either country, as these are reserved exclusively for the residents of the relevant locality. Although it represents a relatively minor proportion, this discrepancy merits inclusion among the key differentiating factors between the two electoral systems. The distribution of voting rates among external voters, who constitute approximately five percent of the total registered voters in Türkiye (approximately three percent of the voters), reveals that the AKP receives a considerable number of votes in both cases. The distribution of votes among provinces is also made by allocating the votes of non-residents to the relevant party. However, this does not result in a change to the parliamentary arithmetic.

In the 2022 election in Hungary, the opposition's efforts to engage emigrants were set against the backdrop of Fidesz's strong support among non-resident voters (i.e. the cross-border ethnic Hungarian vote), resulting in a highly polarised and contentious election

³⁶ Başer, Bahar, *Youth Politics and Activism in Turkey*, In *Elections and Earthquakes: Quo Vadis Turkey*, Transnational Press London, 2024, pp.5-6.

³⁷ Waterbury, Myra A., *Populist Nationalism and the Challenges of Divided Nationhood: The Politics of Migration, Mobility, and Demography in Post-2010 Hungary*, *East European Politics and Societies*, Vol.34, No.4, 2020, p.966.

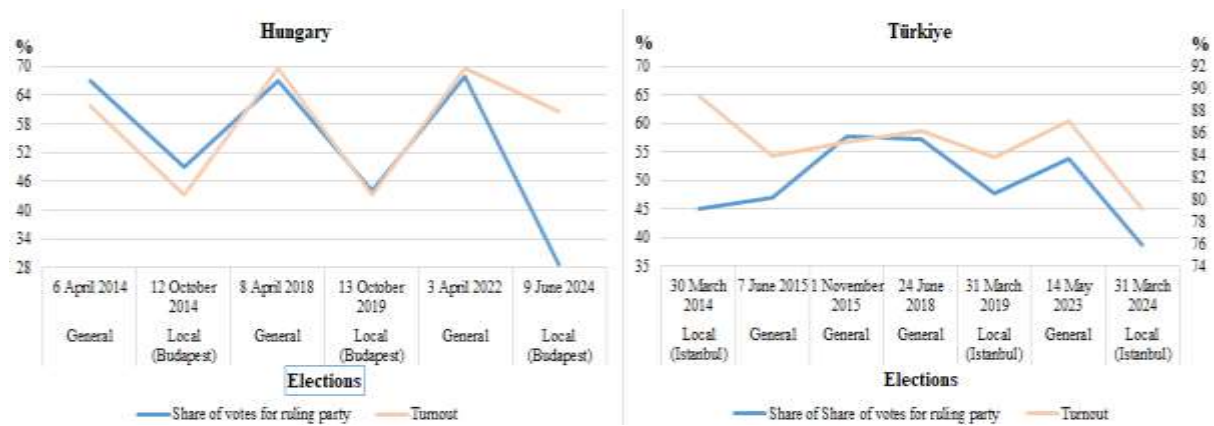
environment. Despite the opposition's efforts, Fidesz's dominance in external voting contributed to its electoral victory.³⁸

Budapest and Istanbul: General vs. Local

Istanbul and Budapest, the most populous metropolises of these countries (approximately 20% of the total population), have historically been cities of great importance to political powers due to both their strategic locations and their political and economic influence. Istanbul serves as the country's economic hub. Since the city is the country's driving force in terms of trade, industry, finance, and tourism. Similarly, Budapest has become the political, economic, cultural, and demographic centre of Hungary. Both cities have traditionally been places of protest against central governments, which have previously triggered resistance movements throughout the country. By the time the opposition assumed control of the two cities in 2019, the Fidesz and AKP governments had already initiated extensive urban transformation projects in each city. These projects were underpinned by a neo-authoritarian vision of nationhood, designed to reinforce their political power and discredit opposition voices.³⁹ Consequently, the loss of control over these cities represented a significant setback for the Fidesz and AKP governments in their pursuit of hegemony.⁴⁰ The dominance of these cities is important for the prestige of political powers. An old saying in Turkish politics -“Whoever wins Istanbul, wins also Türkiye”- was stated by Erdoğan himself a couple of times.

Firstly, to gain insight into the significance of Budapest and Istanbul in the context of the election results of the countries, the local election results of the cities and the general election results at the national level (see Figures 4 and 5) were examined. This was followed by an examination of the local election results and the general election results in the cities.

Figure 5: Shares of Government Parties in Local Elections (Budapest/Istanbul) and Parliamentary Elections*



Source: For Hungary, <https://www.valasztas.hu/web/national-election-office/home>, for Türkiye, <https://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/secim-i%CC%87statistikleri/78318>, (22.12.2024).

³⁸ Waterbury, Myra A, Competing External Demoi and Differential Enfranchisement: The Case of the 2022 Hungarian Election, *Ethnicities*, Vol.25, No.3, 2023, pp.436.

³⁹ Akçalı, Emel and Korkut, Umut, Urban Transformation in Istanbul and Budapest: Neoliberal Governmentality in the EU's Semi-Periphery and Its Limits, *Political Geography*, No.46, 2015, p.82, 86.

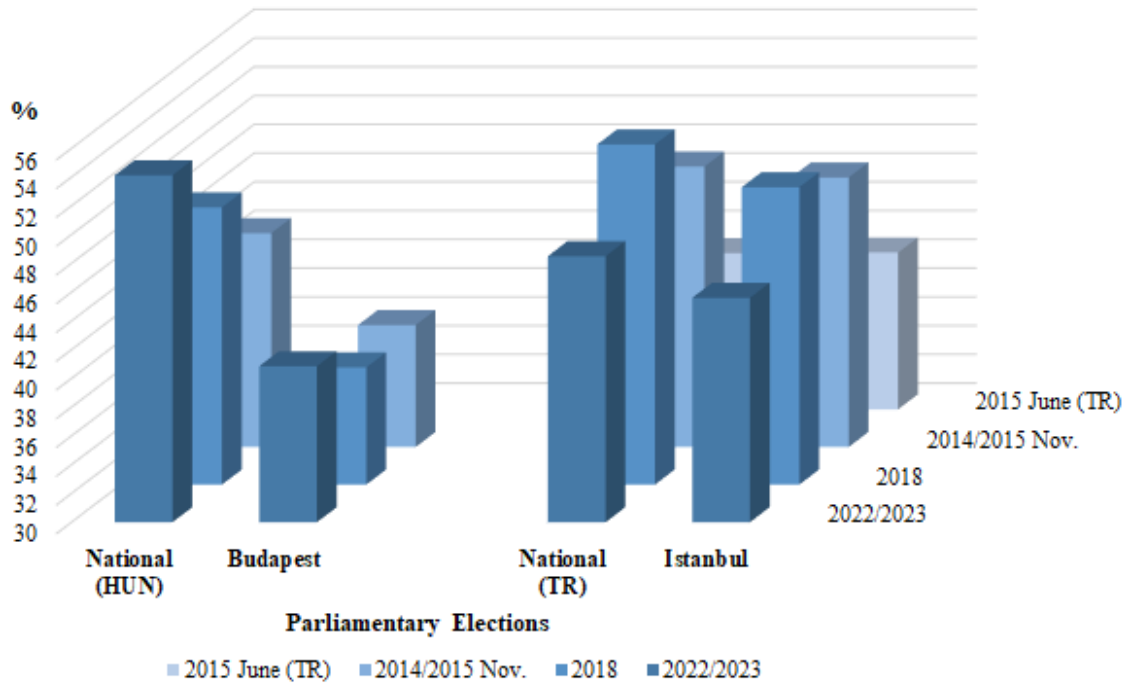
⁴⁰ Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi, *ibid*, pp.350-52.

(*) Seat shares of the government parties for parliamentary elections and vote shares of the parties for municipality assemblies for local elections were used for a better comparison due to the different electoral systems between countries and elections.

Figure 5 compares the share of votes for ruling parties and voter turnout in Budapest and Istanbul across recent general and local elections. In Hungary, the ruling party's vote share remains high in national elections-around 60–70%-but drops sharply in the 2024 local election in Budapest, indicating declining urban support despite national dominance. Voter turnout follows a relatively stable pattern, remaining close to the ruling party's performance trend. In Türkiye, the ruling party's vote share shows gradual increases in general elections from 2015 to 2018, followed by declines in both 2019 and 2024 local elections in Istanbul, where opposition strength has grown. Turnout stays consistently high, above 80%, though it slightly decreases over time.

Overall, both graphs reveal that while ruling parties in Hungary and Türkiye maintain electoral strength nationally, their support in major urban centers-Budapest and Istanbul-has eroded, signaling a growing urban–rural political divide.

Figure 6: Share of Votes* for Government Parties in Parliamentary Elections



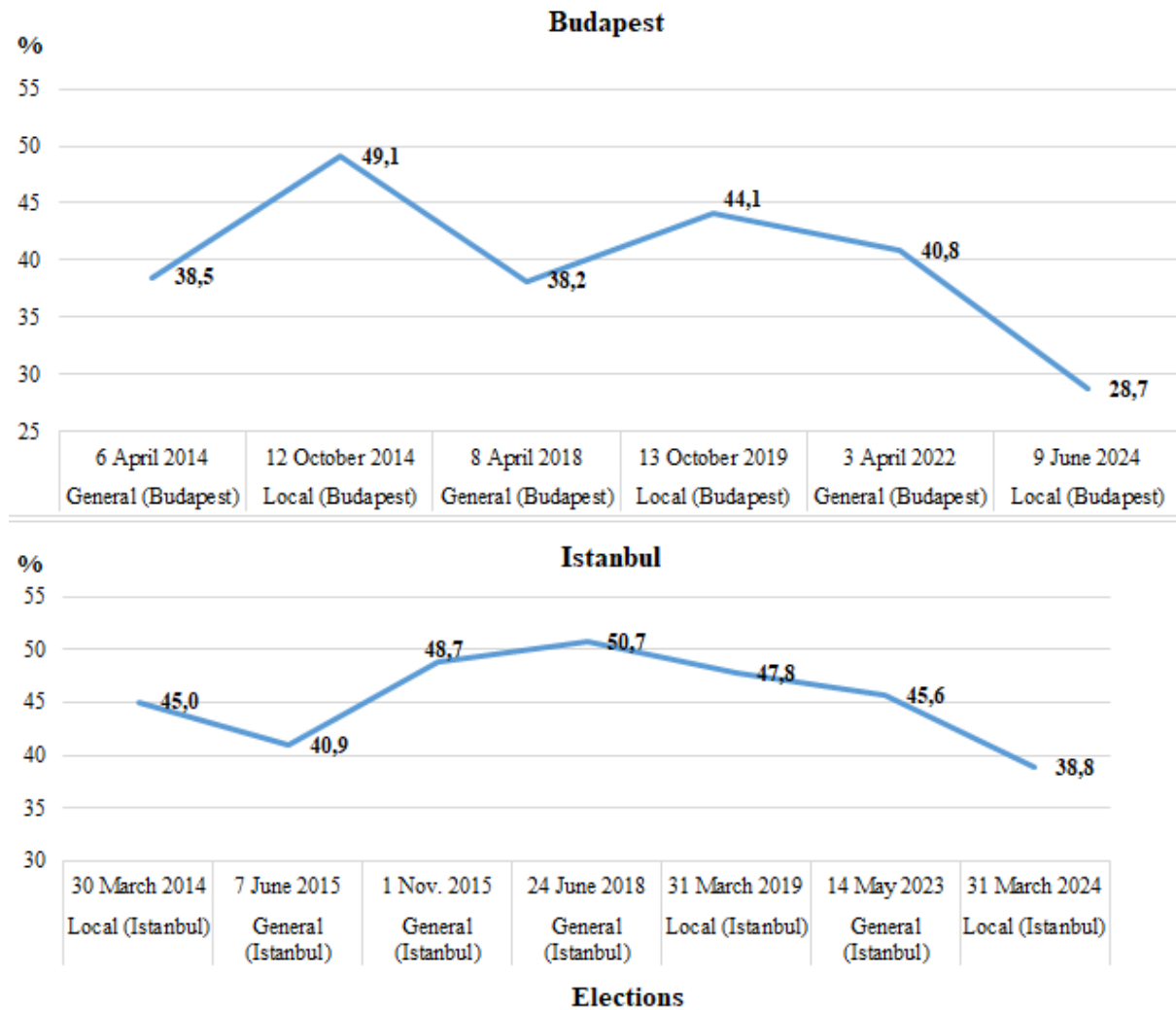
Source: For Hungary, <https://www.valasztas.hu/web/national-election-office/home>, for Türkiye, <https://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/secim-i-CC%87statistikleri/78318>, (22.12.2024).

(*) Vote shares of the government parties based on party list results were used for a better comparison.

As demonstrated in Figure 6, the Budapest and Istanbul vote shares of the governing parties in both Hungary and Türkiye tend to be lower than their nationwide (National) vote shares. This decline is indicative of a marked decrease in governmental support, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in urban areas. The success of the opposition in the local elections in the big cities, especially in Istanbul, shows that a critical threshold has been crossed. Istanbul is more representative of the general political trend in the country than Budapest. This situation can be observed in both parliamentary and local elections.

In Hungary, the government is still strong throughout the country. Success in Budapest, where the opposition is strongest and most effective in terms of population, does not herald success at the national level. The electoral system in Hungary creates an unfair parliamentary distribution, and the majority remains in the hands of the government for effective decisions at the national and local levels. It is important to highlight that the failure of the opposition to secure victory in the general elections can be attributed, at least in part, to the situation of these mayors not standing for election to the presidency of the government, despite having performed well in the opinion polls and/or primaries. President Erdoğan was known primarily as a successful mayor of Istanbul. The incumbent mayor, Imamoğlu, was supposed to be a popular candidate for the presidency. In Hungary, the incumbent mayor of Budapest, Karácsony, ran in the 2021 opposition primary. Local elections are of particular importance for both the opposition and the government, as the mayors of these cities have the potential to become presidential/ prime ministerial candidates in the forthcoming general elections.

Figure 7: Share of Votes for Government Parties in Elections*



Source: For Hungary, <https://www.valasztas.hu/web/national-election-office/home>, for Türkiye, <https://www.ysk.gov.tr/tr/secim-i-CC%87statistikleri/78318>, (22.12.2024).

(*) Vote shares of the government parties based on party list results were used for a better comparison.

As demonstrated in Figure 7, the government's vote percentages in both cities exhibited a decline, following a period of strong support in the general elections (peaking in Istanbul and rising in Budapest). This decline was particularly pronounced in the most recent local elections in 2024, where the government's vote percentages reached their lowest levels. Moreover, during the majority of the periods under consideration, voter percentages in Istanbul exceeded those in Budapest.

Opposition: What Did in Local and What Did Not in General?

In the 2019 mayoral elections in Budapest and Istanbul, opposition parties, despite their differences, were able to unite behind joint candidates, thereby demonstrating a unified front in the face of a common challenge. Musil⁴¹ indicates that intermediary parties, which are perceived as less threatening by other opposition factions, facilitate the circumvention of these conflicts and the fostering of a collective identity to defeat the ruling party's candidate. In Hungary, Párbeszéd fulfilled this role, while in Türkiye, it was the CHP. In renewal elections in June 2019, opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu (b. 1971) was elected mayor of Istanbul, having received a greater number of votes than in the previous election in March 2019, when he was also the frontrunner. In October 2019, Gergely Karácsony (b. 1975), the liberal candidate, was elected mayor of Budapest, defeating the incumbent, who was supported by the Fidesz party. In the context of authoritarian conditions, both İmamoğlu and Karácsony, who were running as oppositional mayoral candidates, demonstrated indications of solidarity with one another during the local elections. Prior to the Budapest mayoral elections in 2019, Karácsony had compared the Budapest race to the Istanbul mayoral election in March.⁴²

It is noteworthy that the candidates in question were considerably younger than those of the preceding and/or rival ruling party. István Tarlós (b. 1948), who served as Mayor of Budapest for two consecutive terms, and Binali Yıldırım (b. 1955), a prominent figure in Turkish politics, having previously held numerous roles within the government, including that of prime minister, are examples of this. Kadir Topbaş (b. 1945), who had previously served as Mayor of Istanbul for three consecutive terms. It seems reasonable to posit that the government was aware of the potential consequences of this strategy, as evidenced by their nomination of a younger mayoral candidate (Murat Kurum, b. 1976) in the 2024 local elections. However, the candidate's lacklustre performance against İmamoğlu was met with public ridicule. The sincerity of his communication with young people was also instrumental in the victory of the Mayor of the Capital, Mansur Yavaş (b. 1955), even though his rival was not much younger than him. During the electoral process, both the ruling party and the opposition focused their attention on the younger demographic.⁴³ Given the proportion of young people in Türkiye and the economic conditions that challenge them, it can be argued that discourses aimed at young people were more effective for the success of the opposition in the last two local elections.

⁴¹ Musil, Pelin Ayan, How Opposition Parties Unite in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes: The Role of an Intermediary Party, *Democratization*, Vol.31, No.1, 2024, pp.223-25.

⁴² The Guardian, Blow for Hungary PM Orbán as opposition wins Budapest mayoral race, October 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/13/opposition-parties-candidate-wins-budapest-mayoral-race>, (15.06.2024).

⁴³ BBC News, Turkey elections: Young voters who could decide Turkey's future, May 11, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65533680>, (10.05.2024).

In the context of local elections in Türkiye, candidates who have previously held the position of district mayor in Istanbul province are more likely to be elected as metropolitan mayor. Erdoğan, Topbaş, and İmamoğlu are examples of such candidates, having all served as district mayor. Notably, the government could not field such a candidate against İmamoğlu in the local elections. Likewise, the mayors of Budapest, Tarlós and Karácsony, were the mayors of the Budapest district municipalities.

In response to the limitations imposed by the ruling parties, opposition parties in these countries have been compelled to adapt their strategies. This entailed the formation of broad coalitions, the coordination of efforts across disparate opposition groups, and the pursuit of transnational strategies that entail collaboration with international actors. Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi⁴⁴ place emphasis on the role of transnational strategies, whereby opposition groups seek support from international organisations, foreign governments, and other external actors to counter the domestic power imbalance. Furthermore, the objective was to enhance awareness of the authoritarian tactics employed by the incumbent governments and to facilitate more rigorous international observation of electoral procedures, thereby bolstering transparency. This strategy was reflected in the populist government's rhetoric of demonising opposition candidates' collaboration with foreign powers in order to consolidate its power. In Hungary, the government adopted a more overt approach in this regard. However, in Türkiye, the government, which had been in power for a longer period and was perceived as being increasingly authoritarian, also needed to demonstrate that it was not opposed to international liberal values. This ensured that the opposition's transnational strategy could not be openly criticized. The opposition in Türkiye has been able to legitimise its strategies and provide a sense of purpose for its actions.

The ruling party's success in the 2023 general elections in Türkiye is noteworthy, particularly given the challenging circumstances in which they were held. Türkiye's 2023 general election took place under the shadow of severe economic challenges, including high inflation, unemployment and the depreciation of the Turkish lira, as well as the devastating earthquakes that occurred on 6 February 2023, centred on Kahramanmaraş. These earthquakes resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of lives and left millions homeless, leading to significant criticism of the government's crisis management and disaster response capabilities. The combination of economic hardship and social trauma caused by the earthquake played a crucial role in shaping voter preferences. The government's economic policies and its handling of the disaster were heavily criticised by the opposition, leading to growing discontent among the electorate. The elections were seen as a crucial turning point for the future of the country's policies and the reconstruction process in the aftermath of these twin crises. However, the opposition did not show sufficient sensitivity in choosing its candidates. In Türkiye, the nomination of former ruling party politicians for guaranteed places in the opposition ranks provoked a reaction from the opposition. The process reached a point where confidence in the opposition was also undermined in the run-up to the elections because of the indecision and confusion surrounding the selection of candidates for the parliamentary elections.

The personality and attitude of the presidential candidate had an important impact on the outcome of the national elections, which were held concurrently with the presidential elections. Instead of one of the most prominent figures in the polls with a high probability of winning (the incumbent mayors of Ankara and Istanbul), the CHP leader, Kemal

⁴⁴ Musil and Yardımcı-Geyikçi, *ibid.*, pp.355-57.

Kılıçdaroğlu, ran for the presidency. Kılıçdaroğlu was unable to persuade the conservative electorate, who had previously voted for Erdoğan, to alter their allegiance at the ballot box. In addition to Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu, two other presidential candidates were put forward. Sinan Oğan, from the nationalist movement tradition, received the critical vote that would affect the outcome. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which had previously been defined as pro-Kurdish and had received 8-9 percent of votes in the previous presidential elections, did not nominate a candidate. Despite public discontent, the election campaign was conducted vibrantly, and the turnout rate was quite high. The election proceeded to a second round, with Erdoğan ultimately securing the second round as president with 52.8 percent of the vote. The election results were met with disappointment by those who had supported the opposition.

In 2021, Hungary saw significant political developments, with the right-wing governing coalition of Fidesz and the KDNP further consolidating their control over various institutions. The state of danger, a legal order introduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, allowed the government to rule by decree throughout the year, extending its influence beyond pandemic-related issues. Access to public information was limited, and the right of public assembly was constrained. The evidence shows that the ruling party's populist characteristics cannot fully account for the formal and informal changes in Hungary. The parliament has been almost entirely deprived of its basic functions, and the Fidesz party merely feigns representation, generating an illusion of legitimacy.⁴⁵

Similarly, in the 2022 general elections in Hungary, the discussions on the opposition's joint candidacy had the effect of nullifying the possibility of success, coupled with the inherent disadvantages of the electoral system changed in 2020 to favor the ruling party. The Hungarian opposition primary in 2021 constituted a noteworthy occurrence, marking the inaugural nationwide primary election in Hungary's political history. Ultimately, the non-partisan candidate Péter Márki-Zay was victorious in the primary election, thereby becoming the prime ministerial candidate of the United Opposition in the 2022 parliamentary elections. The primary process involved the collaboration of multiple opposition parties, including the Democratic Coalition, Jobbik, Momentum, and others, to select a single candidate to challenge Orbán and Fidesz.

The primary was characterised by intense competition, particularly in the second round, in which Márki-Zay was pitted against Klára Dobrev following the withdrawal of Gergely Karácsony, who had initially endorsed Márki-Zay. His withdrawal has been described as a political failure. Despite Karácsony's decision, the parties supporting him - MSZP, Dialogue, and LMP - did not declare their support for Márki-Zay, and Jobbik also remained neutral. Prior to the opposition primary, Karácsony was considered the frontrunner, having established himself as a prominent figurehead of the opposition in recent years. In response to the opposition primary campaign, Fidesz launched a counter-campaign called "Stop Gyurcsány! Stop Karácsony!", referring to former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, leader of the Democratic Coalition, and also targeting as a rival Budapest Mayor Karácsony, leader of Dialogue for Hungary, who was running as a prime ministerial candidate in the primaries⁴⁶. This event demonstrated the difficulties and complexities inherent in the Hungarian opposition's efforts to present a unified front in the face of a formidable ruling party.

⁴⁵ Ilonszki and Vajda, *ibid.*, pp.782.

⁴⁶ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit 2022-Hungary*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2088055.html>, (20.05.2024).

The Hungarian opposition's pre-election confusion and the election results were discussed in the Turkish media for their similarity to the opposition's pre-election indecision in Türkiye.⁴⁷ The lack of consideration of voter reactions in the determination of candidates represents a significant electoral risk for all political parties. The 2024 local elections demonstrate that the opposition has gained insights from the preceding general elections. It has been observed that a change of government is a possibility in Türkiye. In order for such a change to be seen in Hungary, the electoral system must first be democratised. Orbán continue to maintain significant influence throughout the country.

Conclusion

The dynamics of local and national elections within competitive authoritarian regimes demonstrate a complex interplay between central power and local governance. The achievements of opposition parties at the local level, as evidenced by the outcomes in Hungary and Türkiye, underscore the potential of these successes to function as a catalyst for broader democratic transformation. By establishing a reputation for effective local governance and identifying and exploiting the vulnerabilities of authoritarian regimes, opposition parties can challenge the ruling party's dominance. Nevertheless, the path to national success necessitates not only the continuation of these local victories but also the formation of strategic alliances and the capacity to navigate the authoritarian pressures that seek to undermine their efforts.

The experiences of opposition parties in both Budapest and Istanbul illustrate the potential efficacy of strategic alliances and transnational collaboration in challenging the dominance of entrenched ruling parties, particularly in authoritarian contexts. However, the mixed outcomes demonstrate the complexities involved, such as the potential risks of internal discord and the challenge of appealing to a broad electorate. While the 2024 local elections in Türkiye demonstrate that the opposition may have learned valuable lessons from past missteps, the Hungarian opposition continues to face significant challenges due to the entrenched nature of the ruling party and an electoral system that favours incumbents. Looking ahead, both contexts suggest that opposition success may depend on their ability to navigate internal dynamics, engage younger voters, and maintain a unified front against dominant ruling parties.

In conclusion, the local elections of 2024 illustrate that the opposition has acquired valuable insights from the prior general elections. It has been noted that a transition of government is a conceivable outcome in Türkiye. For a similar transformation to occur in Hungary, it is imperative that the electoral framework be first subjected to democratization. Orbán continues to exert substantial influence across the nation.

⁴⁷ Gazeteduvar, Macaristan seçimleri: Riskler Türkiye'deki muhalefet için de geçerli, 05 Nisan 2022. <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/macaristan-secimleri-riskler-turkiyedeki-muhalefet-icin-de-gecerli-haber-1559250>, (20.05.2024); Medyascope, Macaristan seçimleri Türkiye'de muhalefete ne söylüyor?, April 4, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p4SwLAM1ci0>, (21.05.2024); Şahin, Haydar, Macaristan Seçimleri ve Türkiye Muhalefeti, Perspektif, May 12, 2022. <https://www.perspektif.online/macaristan-secimleri-ve-turkiye-muhalefeti/>, (21.05.2024).

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