

With the final votes counted, Fidesz has secured a ‘super-majority’ in Hungary, but it is questionable how fair the election really was

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*Hungary held elections on 6 April, with the ruling Fidesz party winning a clear majority of seats. While there was initially some doubt over whether Fidesz had secured the ‘super-majority’ in parliament needed to amend the country’s constitution, the final results announced on 12 April indicated that it had met this target. **Agnes Batory** writes that although the parliamentary opposition carries some of the blame for its defeat, the electoral reforms passed in the previous parliament by Fidesz also had an impact on the result, with some observers concluding that the elections were ultimately ‘free but not fair’.*

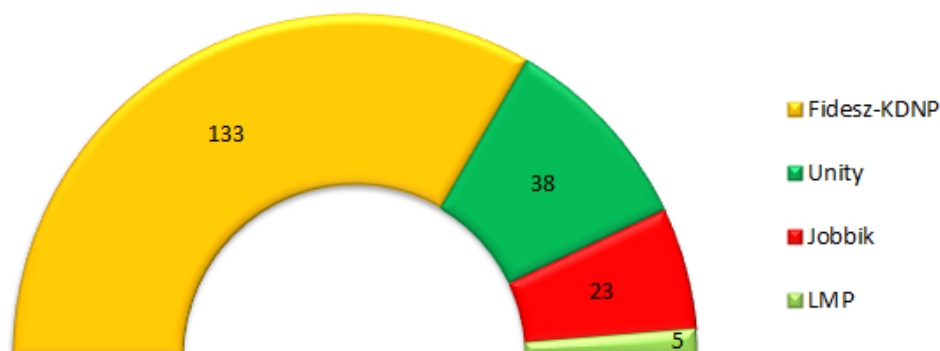


On 6 April Hungarians went to the polls for the sixth time since regime change in 1990. They returned to power PM Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz, an erstwhile liberal youth movement turned national-conservative or, as many say, populist.

Since 2010, Orbán’s party has held a two-thirds majority in Parliament, allowing it to change laws of constitutional standing – a political tool used to its full potential against the Fidesz’s main opponents in the left-liberal camp. Of the 2.7 million voters supporting the party’s list four years ago, over 625,000, or about 23 per cent deserted the party. Yet, Fidesz won 133 of the 199 mandates in the new Parliament with 44.5 per cent of the vote, and with this secured another supermajority.

The extreme right Jobbik also increased its support by about 5 per cent, to a shockingly high 20.5 per cent, while the centre-left (an alliance of five parties), fragmented and in disarray since their 2010 defeat, received a relatively low 26 per cent. Because of the greatly disproportional electoral system – designed by Fidesz to maximize their own electoral advantage – this translates into just 38 mandates (19 per cent) in the new Parliament. Also taking votes from the centre-left, the small green protest party LMP scraped past the 5 per cent threshold, thus electing 5 MPs. The final distribution of seats is shown in the Chart below.

Chart: Final distribution of seats in the Hungarian parliament



Note: Fidesz and the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP) form an alliance, while the Unity alliance is made up of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Together 2014, the Democratic Coalition (DK), Dialogue for Hungary (PM), and the Hungarian Liberal Party (MLP).

For more information on the other two parties see: [Jobbik](#) and [Politics can be Different \(LMP\)](#).

How did Fidesz and its small satellite, the Christian Democratic People's Party, accomplish this feat? Governments in Central and Eastern Europe relatively rarely get re-elected. The result is also surprisingly good given that inequality grew and many Hungarians got poorer [under the party's watch](#) and approximately one-third of the population lived under the [poverty threshold](#). The economic policies pursued by Fidesz are commonly described as unorthodox. The government failed to reach its main objective, the reduction of the country's indebtedness, despite raiding, and spending, private pension funds early in the term. Unemployment has also remained stubbornly high, and about half a million young Hungarians work abroad.

Free but not fair?

Part of the answer lies in the institutional context in which the election took place. Many opposition figures claimed that the vote would be free but not fair. The OSCE election monitoring mission's [report](#) does not go quite this far, but does agree that the governing party 'enjoyed an undue advantage because of restrictive campaign regulations, biased media coverage and campaign activities that blurred the separation between political party and the State'.

The electoral law was designed solely by Fidesz and adopted without cross-party support; the same goes for the constitution ("fundamental law"). Unsurprisingly, Fidesz strategists created a system that would favour the party's re-election chances. Fielding candidates on a national list became extremely easy, with the result that 18 parties, most of them brand new formations, had a list. A number of so-called 'bogus parties' (possibly created only to access generous public subsidies) featured names so similar to that of members of the centre-left alliance that the latter was forced to spend valuable time (and money) explaining to voters which box to tick on election day. Observers also point to the [effect of gerrymandering](#) by Fidesz, to the extent that according to some estimates the opposition would have needed 6-8 per cent more of the vote to get the same result as Fidesz. The outcome was massively disproportional, with 44.5 per cent of the list vote (as an indicator of popular support) 'buying' Fidesz 66.8 per cent of the mandates.

The playing field was certainly not level in terms of campaign spending either. According to [Transparency International](#) the cost of Fidesz-promoting advertising by the party, the government, and allied 'pseudo-NGOs' was at least double that allowed by the law. As the OSCE [points out](#), the opposition parties also suffered from media bias, with news programmes at the public service and the most popular commercial TV channels dominated by Fidesz advertising, some 'disguised' as 'government information'. Of the latter, one example was the slogan 'Hungary performs better' which became a centerpiece of the Fidesz campaign.

However, the left-liberal parties also have themselves to blame for Fidesz' sweeping victory. For much of the parliamentary term they spent more time and energy fighting one another than Fidesz. It was only a few months before the election that a formal alliance was finally created, and even then more time was wasted while a decision was made on which other formations were allowed to join.

Hopes that the alliance would attract new voters were not realised on election day, despite – or perhaps because of – two former prime ministers and the Socialists' prime ministerial candidate fronting the alliance's list. The other



Viktor Orbán, Credit: European People's Party (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

player in the ‘democratic opposition’ (the opposition excluding Jobbik), LMP, made a change of government even less likely as the party decided to keep equal distance from Fidesz and the former governing party Socialists. The party fielded candidates wherever it could, thereby splitting the vote of those wanting government change in single member districts.

Clear choice of values but not of policies

The opposition parties’ pledges were too unrealistic or, in Jobbik’s case, [widely unrealistic](#), to match or trump Fidesz’ most popular measure, utility rate cuts, which the governing party promised to defend and extend at all costs. On the other hand, Fidesz did not publish a manifesto where analysts could have attached a price tag to specific promises. Viktor Orbán also refused the opposition parties’ challenge to participate in a public debate of party leaders. This repeats the pattern from 2010 when Fidesz did not disclose plans in the campaign for a new constitution or electoral system, for instance, and the main contenders sought the voters’ favours with excessive, populist promises.

Instead of policy issues, mutual accusations of corruption dominated the campaign. The democratic opposition was implicated in two scandals that broke, rather conveniently for Fidesz, shortly before the election. One involved a Socialist Party vice-chairman who held undisclosed bank accounts and the other a former Socialist council member who, having just been released from jail, published his memoirs of the party’s shady affairs.

The democratic opposition in turn made much of the Fidesz parliamentary party leader’s undeclared property assets, and of the [sizeable stadium](#) built in the football-loving prime minister’s tiny hometown. A book dealing with the Orbán family’s fortune came out shortly before the elections. The left-liberal camp and LMP also voiced outrage over the “Orbán-Putin pact” (an agreement the Fidesz government signed with Russia for a loan to build a second nuclear reactor; Paks 2) which they claimed was corruption on much grander scale: i.e. that the deal was motivated by Fidesz’ quest for public money that would be easily siphoned away without any external control through lucrative contracts for government-friendly companies.

Although substantive policy debate between the government and opposition parties never took place, voters in Hungary were nevertheless given a clear choice between competing sets of values and orientations. Fidesz had been more reserved about European integration in the previous decade than the then governing Europhile Socialists and liberals, while remaining committed to EU membership. During the 2010-14 term, however, the party’s Euroscepticism became much more pronounced. On 3 April, for instance, Viktor Orbán claimed at a rally that his government had spent the last four years grappling with banks, multinational companies, and ‘imperial bureaucrats in Brussels’. The Eurosceptic rhetoric was accompanied by a declared policy of opening up to the East – of which the nuclear reactor deal with Putin’s Russia is a [clear example](#).

For the left-liberal alliance, as a speaker at their last rally before the elections put it, the choice facing the country was ‘Moscow or Brussels’, not only in foreign policy but also in domestic politics, in terms of an increasingly autocratic as opposed to liberal democratic system. However, 6 April showed that for the 2.1 million Hungarians supporting Fidesz this choice was a false one, or utility rate cuts simply mattered more. Four out of 10 voters did not bother to cast a ballot at all. With this they handed Mr Orbán and his party the opportunity to redraw the rules of the game again for 2018, should he choose to do so.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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