

Mainstream Labels, Radical Practice: A Theory of Disguised Parties

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Abstract: *Disguised parties are electorally competitive organisations that preserve a mainstream label while durably advancing radical-right projects through programmatic shifts, institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture. We theorise disguise as a strategic equilibrium that widens electoral appeal and reduces reputational and regulatory costs by separating audiences and sequencing illiberal change through low-visibility instruments. The concept differs from mainstreaming, rebranding and episodic hardening by requiring a sustained divergence between public self-placement and governing practice and by combining multiple channels over time. We develop a portable identification checklist and a threefold typology and apply them in a within-case, theory-guided process tracing of Fidesz (1989–2025). The case shows how mainstream signalling can shield radical-right governance: It legitimises legalistic institutional redesign, facilitates information-environment capture and raises the costs of alternation and rollback. From this logic we derive testable expectations about enabling conditions, especially radical-right competition, permissive oversight in media and judicial arenas, and party-finance loopholes, and about downstream effects on opposition coordination and policy feedback. The argument reframes democratic-backsliding debates by highlighting mainstream enablers as a distinct regulatory problem and by motivating ex ante, structural safeguards.*

Keywords: *disguised parties, democratic backsliding, party competition, mainstreaming, Fidesz*

Introduction

Across contemporary democracies, erosion increasingly proceeds through incremental, formally legal change rather than overt ruptures. Elected executives can reconfigure the rules of competition, oversight and information without cancelling elections, precisely because reputational and regulatory constraints reward strategies that appear moderate and lawful. This raises a conceptual puzzle only partly captured by existing terms: How can a party preserve a mainstream label while durably enacting radical-right governance in practice? We advance the concept of disguised parties to capture this configuration.

Disguised parties are electoral organisations that (i) maintain a mainstream public identity and formal self-placement, through branding, party-family signalling, coalition positioning and outward-facing commitments, while (ii) sustaining a durable divergence between label and practice via a multi-dimensional bundle of change. In practice, this bundle typically combines programmatic hardening (radical-right frames and policy priorities), institutional engineering (legalistic redesign of constraints and competitive rules) and ecosystemic capture (the restructuring of media, civic intermediaries and resource flows that shape public scrutiny). Disguise is therefore not cosmetic rebranding or episodic rhetorical escalation. It is a strategic equilibrium in which parties separate audiences and sequence change: They minimise stigma and scrutiny among moderates, watchdogs and external principals while maximising mobilisation, agenda control and organisational security among radical-right constituencies.

The article makes three contributions. First, it clarifies what existing literatures explain and what they miss. Scholarship (Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016; Brown, Mondon & Winter 2023; Moffitt 2022; Mudde 2024) on mainstreaming demonstrates how established parties adjust positions, emphases or rhetoric in response to niche or radical challengers. Yet much of this work remains centred on electoral competition and issue uptake. Disguised parties instead entail institutional and organisational adaptation that consolidates a substantive shift over time, including the redesign of electoral rules, regulators, judicial architecture and public-resource allocation, while maintaining mainstream cover. Second, cartel-party theory illuminates state-party entanglement, collusion and resource dependence (Katz & Mair 1995; 2009; Koole 1996; Pelizzo 2007), but disguise foregrounds a different logic: asymmetric signalling under constraint. Parties can present moderation to swing voters and regulators even as they entrench radical-right practice through policy, institutions and partisan ecosystems. Third, we translate the concept into a portable measurement framework: a checklist and typology that can be applied beyond a single setting and that generates testable expectations about when disguise emerges, how it is sustained and what it does to democratic competition.

Theoretically, disguise links reputational costs to institutional opportunity structures. When radical-right competitors pressure incumbents, adopting radical frames can reduce defections and consolidate a base, but overt radicalisation risks sanctions from moderates, independent oversight bodies and supranational principals. Disguise offers a way to resolve this trade-off. Mainstream labelling dampens reputational and regulatory penalties, while legalistic institutional change and ecosystemic interventions raise rivals' costs and reduce the effectiveness of accountability. In this framework, democratic erosion is not only a function of polarisation or voter demand; it also reflects strategic choices about *how* to move, through which instruments, in which sequence and under which constraints.

Empirically, we develop an operational checklist for identifying disguised parties and apply it in a within-case, theory-guided process tracing of Fidesz across a long horizon (1989–2025, with focused attention to governing sequences after 2010). Hungary illustrates the stakes because a party that long signalled mainstream respectability simultaneously built an integrated toolkit of institutional redesign and information-environment control. The design allows us to trace how mainstream signalling interacts with specific instruments, electoral-law change, regulatory capture, judicial reconfiguration and selective resource allocation to produce durable advantages while maintaining the outward forms of legality and competition. The extended time frame also allows assessment under shifting external constraints, including EU rule-of-law conditionality, and anchors a comparative agenda: Which combinations of competitive pressure, permissive media-judicial environments and party-finance rules make disguise feasible and with what downstream consequences for opposition coordination and policy feedback? These questions speak to core debates on party change, competitive authoritarianism and democratic resilience. The phenomenon theorised here is not specific to Hungary, nor is it confined to Central and Eastern Europe. Rather, Hungary serves as a paradigmatic case of full-spectrum disguise, selected because it makes unusually visible the interaction of mainstream cover, institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture over time.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines disguise, states scope conditions and introduces a threefold typology (programmatic, institutional, ecosystemic), drawing clear boundaries vis-à-vis mainstreaming, rebranding and satellite arrangements. Section 3 theorises the mechanisms and expectations that render disguise a rational response to reputational, regulatory and competitive constraints. Section 4 sets out the research design, data and measurement strategy, including the operational checklist. Section 5 analyses Fidesz. Section 6 discusses implications for democratic competition and regulation and concludes.

Conceptualising disguised parties

We use the term ‘disguised parties’ to denote electoral organisations that preserve a mainstream public identity, in branding, formal self-placement and alliance behaviour, while durably enacting a multidimensional shift associated with radical-right governance across (a) policy programmes and frames, (b) institutional design and enforcement and (c) the surrounding media-civic ecosystem. Disguise captures a strategic divergence between presentation and practice: Parties continue to communicate moderation to pivotal voters, watchdogs and international audiences, yet routinise radical-right agendas in governance. Unlike episodic rhetorical hardening or short-lived policy pivots, disguise refers to a stable equilibrium in which mainstream signalling lowers reputational and regulatory costs even as radical practices expand mobilisation capacity and entrench incumbency advantages.

Scope conditions

The concept is designed for electoral regimes that preserve pluralism and some oversight, where labels and reputational constraints still carry informational value, for example under supranational conditionality, media scrutiny, judicial review and civil-society monitoring. It is not tailored to hegemonic single-party autocracies where labels convey little information, nor to purely pre-electoral tactical flirtations with hardline cues. To mark the required durability, we treat disguise as persisting for at least two national electoral cycles or four years (whichever is longer). To mark the required multidimensionality, we require observable movement on at least two of three pillars – programmatic, institutional or ecosystemic – for an organisation to qualify as disguised.

The concept is therefore intended to travel beyond Hungary and beyond Central and Eastern Europe. It captures a portable pattern observable in competitive electoral regimes where party labels retain informational value, reputational sanctions remain non-trivial and incumbents can exploit legal, regulatory and media-adjacent instruments without abolishing pluralism outright. Central and Eastern Europe offers particularly visible instances because post-transition institutional fluidity and uneven oversight often make the label-practice gap easier to observe, but the phenomenon itself is not region-bound. In this sense, Hungary should be read as a paradigmatic rather than an exclusive case.

Distinguishing disguise from adjacent concepts

Disguised parties are analytically distinct from several neighbouring concepts. Research on mainstreaming (Akkerman, de Lange & Rooduijn 2016; Williams & Hunger 2022; Krause, Cohen & Abou-Chadi 2023; Minkenberg & Vegh 2023) demonstrates how established parties adjust positions or salience in re-

sponse to radical-right challengers. Yet mainstreaming typically remains within the competitive field of issue uptake. Disguise goes further by encompassing institutional and organisational consolidation – for example, the remaking of media regulators, the redesign of judicial architecture or the engineering of electoral rules – undertaken while publicly retaining a mainstream label. By the same token, rebranding/‘modernisation’ captures presentational updates or leadership refresh without the persistent label-practice gap central to disguise. Cartel-party theory explains state-embedded collusion and resource dependence (Wiesendahl 2024; Blyth & Katz 2005; Bolleyer 2009), but disguise foregrounds asymmetric audience signalling under constraint: Moderation cues are targeted outward to watchdogs and swing voters even as radical practice is institutionalised inward for core supporters. Finally, disguised parties are not reducible to satellites subordinated to a dominant principal; they act as principal political actors. Movement infrastructures and astroturfing (Kovic et al. 2018; Courpasson & Vallas 2016) can support disguise by providing mobilisation capacity, but in a disguised configuration the party coordinates and instrumentalises such networks rather than functioning merely as their organisational arm.

Three pillars of disguise

Substantively, disguise can be programmatic, institutional or ecosystemic, typically in combination. Programmatic disguise denotes the normalisation of radical-right frames, nativism, authoritarian law-and-order and anti-pluralist delegitimation under a mainstream pedigree. It is visible in manifesto content and sustained leader rhetoric across electoral cycles and can be measured via Manifesto Project (MARPOR) categories and CHES expert placements relative to the party family the organisation publicly claims. Institutional disguise proceeds through what Scheppele (2018) terms *autocratic legalism*: constitutional redesign, regulatory capture, electoral-law engineering, civil-society restrictions and selective enforcement, justified in the idiom of ‘normal governance’. Such moves should register as inflection points in V-Dem’s rule-of-law and liberal-component indices and can be traced in legal-text change and enforcement patterns. Ecosystemic disguise involves constructing a loyal media-civic infrastructure, ownership concentration, skewed state advertising and procurement and GONGO-style intermediaries, while publicly claiming pluralist credentials. It is trackable through Media Pluralism Monitor risk profiles, ownership mapping and public-spending data.

A party is classified as *disguised* when all three conditions are met:

(1) Mainstream label: The party claims to be or is credibly placed within a mainstream family (self-description, coalition/alignment signals and where relevant EP group affiliation), yet policy outputs and institutional actions align with radical-right governance over time.

(2) Minimum durability: Persistence for $\geq$ two national electoral cycles or $\geq$ four years.

(3) Multidimensionality ($\geq$ two of three pillars): Programmatic across two consecutive elections, net increases in relevant MARPOR blocks and/or a $\geq$ 0.3 s.d. movement in CHES placements relative to the claimed family mean, with translation of frames into enacted policy. Institutional: deployment of at least three instruments among electoral-law redesign, regulator capture, judicial appointments/reshaping, NGO-law change and selective enforcement, accompanied by declines or structural breaks in V-Dem rule-of-law/liberal components. Ecosystemic: increased media-ownership concentration (HHI $\uparrow$) and state-advertising or procurement shares to aligned outlets exceeding audience share by $\geq$ 20 percentage points (or an equivalent skew), alongside the emergence or empowerment of pro-government civic intermediaries.

These thresholds are intended as heuristics that enhance comparability; robustness to alternative cut-offs can be assessed in sensitivity checks (reported in the online appendix). Figure 1 visualises the temporal clustering of these indicators for Fidesz (2010–2025) as a heatmap, illustrating how multi-pillar disguise consolidates over time.

For empirical work, the checklist provides measurement leverage and comparability across cases and time. It also underpins causal expectations about when disguise emerges, especially under radical-right competitive pressure combined with permissive oversight environments and party-finance loopholes and how it endures through reduced reputational costs and raised reversal costs. In short, existing labels capture fragments of the syndrome; disguise identifies the package that makes illiberal transformation sustainable under a respectable banner.

Mechanisms and expectations

Disguise is sustained through three interlocking channels that jointly reduce reputational and regulatory sanctions while increasing incumbency advantages. The first channel is audience separation. By preserving a mainstream label, through party-family cues, coalition signals and outward-facing moderation, incumbents dampen stigma among pivotal voters, watchdogs and external principals, even as targeted domestic cues mobilise hardline constituencies. The second channel is institutional engineering under legalistic cover. Here, formally lawful rule changes convert contingent majorities into durable advantages by reshaping the conversion of votes into seats, reconfiguring oversight and raising the costs of reversal for successors. The third channel is ecosystemic capture. By reallocating resources and opportunities in the information field, via ownership concentration, selective subsidisation and aligned civic intermediaries, incumbents gate message reach and weaken counter-narratives without abolishing pluralism. Together, these channels

generate a stable equilibrium in which elections and formal pluralism persist, but effective contestability thins.

These mechanisms imply a sequenced logic. Competitive pressure can trigger programmatic hardening; mainstream signalling then reduces the penalties of illiberal change; institutional and ecosystemic instruments consolidate advantage; and their joint operation creates path dependence that constrains alternation and rollback. We therefore derive five expectations.

H1 (Competitive trigger): Where a salient radical-right challenger threatens an incumbent's core electorate, incumbents are more likely to initiate programmatic hardening and to begin assembling enabling institutional or ecosystemic instruments within two national electoral cycles.

Observable implications: (a) Sustained upward movement in relevant MARPOR categories and/or CHES placements relative to the claimed party-family mean; (b) early adoption, drafting or public justification of enabling rules (e.g. regulatory discretion, financing loopholes, procurement/advertising flexibility) that expand implementational latitude.

H2 (Audience separation and sanction dampening): Maintaining a mainstream label attenuates electoral, reputational and regulatory penalties for illiberal moves, especially under polarisation and out-group threat framing.

Observable implications: (a) Institution-altering reforms attract weaker punishment among moderates when mainstream cues remain salient; (b) systematic two-level messaging, external-facing moderation and legality claims combined with domestically hardening cues; (c) compared with overt hardline actors, the incumbent faces delayed or softened sanction responses for substantively similar moves.

H3 (Legalistic engineering and incumbency advantage): When disguise includes institutional engineering, rule changes increase incumbency advantages and raise reversal costs for successors.

Observable implications: (a) Simulated seat allocations under pre-versus post-reform rules show a more favourable votes-to-seats conversion for the incumbent; (b) activation or creation of veto points (constitutional thresholds, appointment locks, entrenched regulatory bodies) that increase the political and legal cost of rollback.

H4 (Ecosystemic capture and information gating): Selective state advertising/procurement and ownership consolidation shift survival odds and message reach toward aligned outlets while preserving formal legality and nominal pluralism.

Observable implications: (a) Persistent gaps between audience shares and state-advertising/procurement shares favouring aligned outlets; (b) worsening risk profiles in the Media Pluralism Monitor (or equivalent) for editorial independence and market plurality; (c) where data permit, detectable content shifts toward government frames following subsidy or ownership shocks.

H5 (Cumulative entrenchment and path dependence): The joint presence of institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture lowers the probability of alternation and reduces the magnitude and scope of rollback when alternation occurs.

Observable implications: (a) Reduced reversal rates in core domains despite changes in government personnel or coalition composition; (b) durable trend breaks in rule-of-law and liberal-component measures (e.g. V-Dem) that do not rebound fully after turnover, consistent with elevated reversal costs and constrained accountability.

Research design, data and measurement

The study employs theory-guided process tracing (Falleti 2014) to test whether the sequence and co-evolution of programmatic hardening, legalistic institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture matches the mechanism of disguise rather than short-lived rhetorical or policy spikes. The analysis is anchored in clearly dated decision points and policy bundles, most notably electoral-law redesign, regulatory reconfiguration, judicial and oversight changes and the reallocation of state resources in the media and civic sphere, so that timing, interaction and durability across channels can be assessed. Classification follows the portable checklist introduced earlier: A party qualifies as disguised when a sustained label-practice divergence is observed under minimum durability ($\geq$ two national electoral cycles or $\geq$ four years) and multidimensionality (movement on $\geq$ two of the three pillars). The empirical aim is not an exhaustive measurement of all possible indicators, but mechanism testing: whether programmatic shifts emerge and persist alongside institutional and ecosystemic instruments in a pattern consistent with H1–H5.

Causal leverage derives from timing, sequencing and scope-condition tests. For institutional and ecosystemic instruments to plausibly enable disguise, reforms in electoral rules, regulator design or subsidy/allocation mechanisms must precede or coincide with the relevant shifts in indicators (content, concentration, risk profiles) and the pattern should be sustained beyond a single cycle. We compare counterfactual seat allocations under pre-reform vs post-reform rules to evaluate changes in votes-to-seats conversion and to identify institutional features that raise rollback costs (e.g. entrenchment mechanisms, appointment locks or heightened thresholds). To reduce over-attribution, we incorporate falsification checks: Placebo outcomes in apolitical beasts (e.g. sports or culture) should not respond systematically to state-advertising shocks and non-aligned outlets should not experience improved survival probabilities following alignment-contingent subsidies. Message asymmetry is assessed by contrasting external-facing moderation cues with domestic hardening in topic and valence patterns, complemented by qualitative evidence of strategic signalling.

Table 1: Data families, indicators, sources and uses

Domain	Indicator (examples)	Primary Source(s)	Coverage	Use in Tests
Mainstream Label (Classification)	Self-description; coalition/alignment signals; EP group/party-family cues (where relevant); outward-facing moderation/legality claims	Party documents; coalition records; EP/group records; external communications	Event-dated; 1989–2025 (focus 2010–2025)	Checklist condition (label-practice divergence); H2: audience separation
Programmatic	MARPOR nativism/authority/law-and-order blocks; sustained leader-speech frames; CHES movements vs claimed party-family mean	MARPOR; speech corpora; CHES	Election years + annual; 2010–2025 (CHES waves through 2024)	H1: drift/trigger; H2: sanction dampening; breakpoint/trend tests
Audience Separation and Sanction Environment	External moderation cues vs domestic hardening (topic/valence); timing/intensity of watchdog, judicial or supranational responses	External vs domestic speeches/press; watchdog statements; court rulings; EU-facing responses (where applicable)	Event windows around contested reforms	H2: two-level messaging; delayed/softened sanctions (pattern tests)
Institutional Engineering	Legal-text changes (constitution/electoral/NGO law); regulator statutes; appointment/oversight redesign; veto-player inventory	Official gazettes; constitutional/electoral codes; appointment records	Event-dated; 2010–2025	H3/H5: sequencing; reversal-cost proxies; process-tracing tests
Rule-of Law / Liberal Components	Index levels; trend breaks; persistence after key reforms/turnover	V-Dem	Annual; 2010–2025	H3/H5: structural-break diagnostics; persistence/roll-back tests
Ecosystemic	Ownership concentration (HHI); state-advertising/procurement skew vs audience share; MPM risks; outlet survival probabilities	Ownership registries; audience metrics; state advertising/procurement data; MPM	Annual/bi-annual + event shocks; 2010–2025	H4/H5: allocation-skew tests; falsification; (appendix) DiD/survival models
Elections	Votes, seats, district boundaries, apportionment formulae (D'Hondt/Sainte-Lague)	Electoral commissions; district maps; legal rules	Election years; 2010–2025	H3: seat-vote counterfactuals; changes in votes-to-seats conversion
Falsification / Placebos	Apolitical beasts (sports/culture) content; placebo allocations (e.g., cultural funding)	Content corpora; budget lines; administrative datasets (where available)	Event windows; 2010–2025	Robustness: placebo tests to reduce over-attribution

Source: Author

Data, measurement and robustness

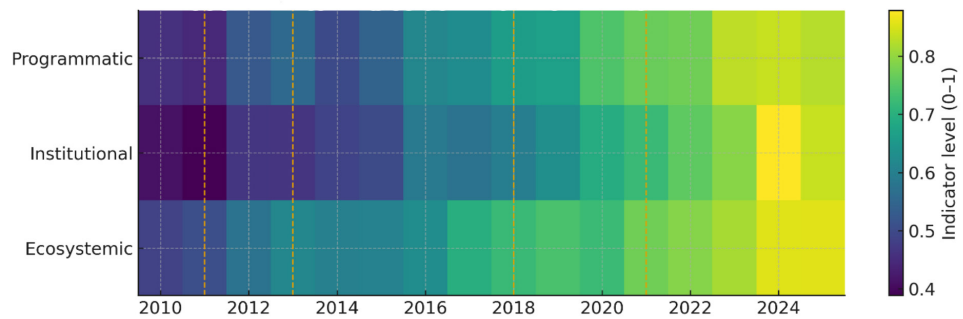
Triangulation combines four data families (summarised in Table 1): (1) textual and positional evidence (manifestos, leader speeches, CHES placements) to capture programmatic change and signalling; (2) institutional-legal series (constitutional amendments, electoral-law revisions, regulatory statutes, enforcement patterns) to capture institutional engineering and reversal costs; (3) information-ecosystem indicators (ownership mapping, HHI concentration, state-advertising allocation, Media Pluralism Monitor risk profiles) to capture ecosystemic capture; and (4) electoral returns and district-level reconstructions to generate pre/post rule counterfactuals of votes-to-seats conversion.

Indicators are normalised to a common (0–1) scale with transparent transformations. Heuristic thresholds (e.g. CHES movement ≥ 0.3 s.d. relative to the claimed party-family mean; state-advertising shares ≥ 20 percentage points above audience share) are treated as comparability aids and are stress-tested in the online supplement via alternative cut-offs and lags. Where gradual change is expected (e.g. frame normalisation), we use breakpoint diagnostics and flexible trend specifications (e.g. restricted cubic splines) to detect inflections without over-fitting. Robustness exercises include alternative operationalisations of programmatic change (different MARPOR aggregations; alternative CHES axes), alternative periodisations for institutional change ($\pm$ one election; $\pm$ two years) and alternative denominators for advertising skew (audience share, reach, time-weighted reach). Missingness is handled by pre-specified rules (listwise deletion for $<5\%$ gaps; multiple imputation otherwise, never across outcome families). All coding decisions are logged and uncertainty intervals accompany quantitative estimates.

Case analysis – Fidesz (1989–2025; focus 2010–2025): From liberal youth to a disguised party

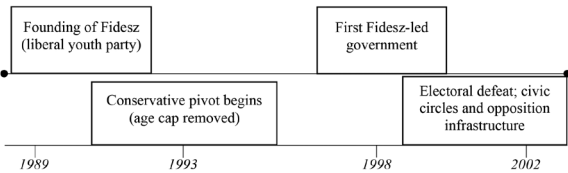
Fidesz provides an unusually clear test of disguised-party mechanisms because it combines (i) a long period of credible mainstream signalling and international embedding with (ii) a post-2010 governing sequence in which institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture are assembled under legalistic cover. The core claim advanced here is not that Hungarian politics became openly non-electoral, but that a durable equilibrium emerged in which electoral ritual and formal legality persist while effective contestability thins. To orient the within-case process tracing, Figure 1 summarises the clustering of key disguise indicators across the post-2010 period, while Figures 2A and 2B map the mechanism-relevant turning points through which mainstream cover was first assembled and then translated into multi-pillar disguise.

Figure 1: Disguise indicators over time – Heatmap of Fidesz (2010–2025)



Source: Author

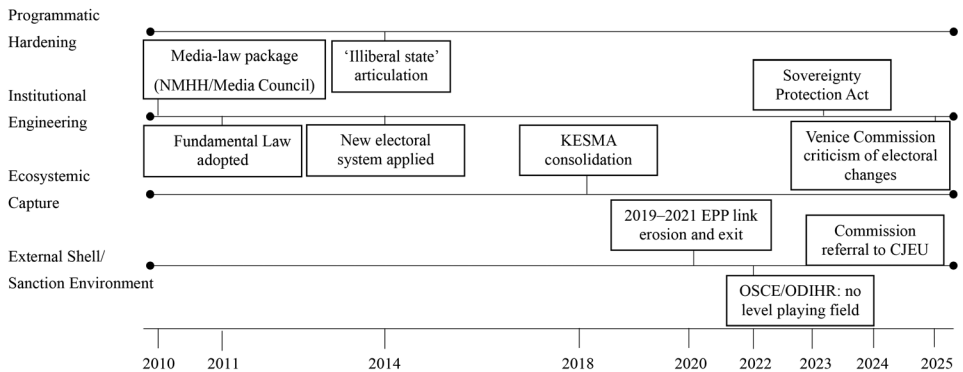
Figure 2A: From liberal origins to mainstream cover: Fidesz (1989–2002)



Source: Author

Note: The figure includes only those pre-2010 turning points that helped establish Fidesz’s mainstream credibility, governing legitimacy and movement capacity, i.e. the background conditions that later made a durable label-practice gap possible.

Figure 2B: From mainstream cover to multi-pillar disguise: Fidesz (2010–2025)



Source: Author

Note: Events are included only when they mark (i) the activation or deepening of one of the three pillars of disguise or (ii) a shift in the external sanction environment relevant to audience separation and the erosion of Fidesz’s international mainstream shell.

In the pre-2010 phase, Fidesz largely resembled a liberal movement-party with generational renewal (the 35-year age cap), market-liberal and civil-libertarian appeals and a clear pro-European profile (Lendvai 2019; Kiss 2002). Throughout the 1990s the organisation centralised and pivoted toward a civic-conservative identity (Batory 2016), broadening its electorate and elite alliances; by 1998 it led a centre-right government, reinforcing mainstream credentials in European party politics (Kiss 2002; Benoit 2002). After losing office in 2002, Fidesz invested in movement infrastructures, most notably the civic circles (*Polgári Körök*) (Greskovits 2017; Bozoki 2008) and cultivated business-media linkages that later proved decisive. This pre-history matters because it builds a dual capacity: outward respectability via European party-family embedding and inward mobilisation capacity via civilisational and sovereigntist frames. In the terms of this article, it supplies the foundations for a later label-practice gap to become durable rather than episodic. The decisive turn after 2010 transformed opportunity into durable advantage through a sequenced assembly of the disguise toolkit. Competitive pressure in the right-of-centre space provides the relevant trigger logic (H1): Where challengers threaten core constituencies, incumbents have incentives to harden programmatically while preparing enabling instruments that expand implementational latitude. In this setting, programmatic hardening is paired with the gradual activation of institutional and ecosystemic levers that are formally legal, technically framed and therefore comparatively low in immediate visibility. This interpretation is compatible with Agh's (2022) characterisation of the Orban regime as a 'perfect autocracy' culminating in a form of 'zombie democracy'. For the purposes of this article, Agh's formulation is useful not as a substitute for the disguised-party concept, but as a regime-level description of the political end-state toward which multi-pillar disguise can contribute. The present argument, by contrast, specifies the party-strategic mechanism through which such an outcome becomes electorally sustainable under mainstream cover.

Institutional engineering provided the first pillar of consolidation (H3-H5). The Fundamental Law (2011) replaced the post-1989 constitution and was followed by amendments (Mazza 2013) and 'cardinal' laws that entrenched key policy and personnel rules (Bako 2022; Chronowski 2021). Revised parliamentary elections acts re-engineered districting, introduced single-round single-member district contests and recalibrated list-compensation rules, first applied in 2014 (Bozoki 2015; Biro-Nagy 2017). The central point for the disguise mechanism is not merely that rules changed, but that they changed under legalistic and technocratic justificatory frames while generating foreseeable cumulative partisan effects. In process-tracing terms, these reforms constitute dated decision points that plausibly increase reversal costs and alter the conversion of votes into seats, precisely the pathway implied by H3.

A parallel strand reworked the information environment through regulation, supplying the second pillar of advantage (H4). The 2010 media-law package (Act CIV on the Freedom of the Press; Act CLXXXV on Media Services and Mass Media) created the NMHH (Leszczynska 2025; Sherwood 2011) and a powerful Media Council with long terms, licensing control and sanctioning capacity (Griffen 2020). Whatever the balance of formal legality in the design, the mechanism relevant here is that regulatory architecture can generate low-visibility, high-leverage controls over entry, viability and incentives, shifting the information field without overt censorship. This is consistent with ecosystemic capture as ‘information gating’: The system remains formally pluralist, but the distribution of reach and resources changes in ways that systematically favour aligned actors. Market-mediated consolidation then supplied a structural channel through which ecosystemic capture became durable. By 2018, hundreds of outlets were pooled into the KESMA foundation, centralising pro-government media under a single umbrella (Gyori 2023; Stetka & Mihelj 2024). In the logic of disguise, the critical point is that control can be exercised indirectly: Selective subsidisation and resource allocation, including state advertising, can distort markets and content incentives, rewarding alignment and disciplining critical journalism while preserving the outward forms of legality. Under this configuration, the party does not need to police messages continuously; it reshapes the incentive structure such that favourable messages dominate and counter-narratives weaken. By the late 2010s, institutional engineering, regulatory leverage and market-mediated information power jointly sustained advantage while a mainstream-coded presentation and legal formalities were maintained.

Audience separation and sanction dampening (H2) help explain why this toolkit can operate without immediate, prohibitive penalties. The maintenance of mainstream cues, party-family signalling, legality claims and outward-facing moderation attenuates reputational costs among pivotal voters and external audiences, even as domestically targeted cues harden. The thinning of the ‘external shell’ between 2019 and 2021, as the party’s bridge with the EPP frayed (suspension and exit), does not invalidate the mechanism; rather, it illustrates an important implication: Once institutional and ecosystemic instruments have accumulated, domestic entrenchment can persist even as international reputation costs rise, because reversal costs and information gating reduce the electoral penalty for hardline practice.

The 2022 parliamentary elections illustrate this combination in operation. Assessments that elections were professionally administered but lacked a level playing field due to media imbalances (Polyak, 2019), blurred boundaries between state and party, and opaque campaign finance capture the central paradox (Auerbach & Kartner 2023; Ivan & Ilonszki 2006): Procedural features can remain intact while the competitive environment is structurally tilted. This is consistent with H2 (audience separation) and with H5 (cumulative entrench-

ment), in that alternation becomes harder and rollback more costly even when elections occur regularly. Cross-national diagnostics that register sustained deterioration in liberal-component measures (including constraints on the executive and media freedom) align with the expectation that multi-pillar disguise produces durable shifts rather than short-lived perturbations.

Adaptation under conditionality after 2023 further clarifies the logic of disguise as strategic sequencing. When external constraints tighten, incumbents can trade selective concessions in high-visibility arenas for continued movement in lower-visibility domains. The partial unfreezing of funds following findings that specific judicial-independence milestones had been addressed coexisted with subsequent moves framed in the idiom of sovereignty and security, including the creation of investigative capacity over alleged ‘foreign influence’. The point for the theory is not the legal label attached to these instruments, but the recurring pattern: Measures are presented as neutral governance responses while generating chilling effects on oversight, civil society and information flows, again consistent with the rule-by-law repertoire central to institutional and ecosystemic disguise.

The party-system context in 2024 highlights why competitive pressure can sustain rather than reverse disguise (H1). The European Parliament election results signalled a reshaped right-of-centre field, combining radical-right representation and a government-critical challenger (McDonnell & Werner 2019; McDonnell & Werner 2018). In a disguise framework, such pressure does not automatically induce moderation. Instead, it can be met by renewed issue hardening paired with targeted activation of administrative, legal and informational instruments that are less visible to casual monitoring. The mechanism predicts resilience under such conditions because mainstream presentation lowers reputational costs among pivotal voters (H2), while embedded institutional and ecosystemic advantages dampen the electoral penalties of hardline practice (H3-H5).

Taken together, the Hungarian case satisfies the portable checklist for disguise. Mainstream labelling was sustained for an extended period through party-family embedding and outward-facing moderation cues, even as governing practice increasingly aligned with radical-right projects (Brown, Mondon & Winter 2023; Feischmidt & Hervik 2015). Durability is satisfied across multiple electoral cycles after 2010. Multidimensionality is met on at least two pillars: institutional engineering (constitutional redesign, electoral-law engineering, oversight reconfiguration) and ecosystemic capture (regulatory leverage, ownership concentration and allocation mechanisms in the media field), with programmatic consolidation visible in manifestos and sustained rhetoric. Where these channels co-evolve, formal electoral ritual persists, but effective contestability thins, precisely the equilibrium implied by the theory of disguised parties.

Fidesz should therefore be treated not as the only possible instance of disguised-party dynamics, but as an unusually permissive one. Its parliamentary strength, constitutional latitude and control over institutional sequencing allowed the three pillars of disguise to develop in an unusually integrated form. Other cases need not replicate this depth to remain analytically relevant: Elsewhere, the same logic may appear in more constrained, partial or coalition-limited variants. The comparative question, then, is not whether other parties become ‘another Fidesz’, but rather combinations of authorisation, veto structure and ecosystemic leverage allow disguise to travel across settings.

Scope-condition probe: Slovenia’s SDS (2020–2022) as ‘partial disguise’ under coalition constraints

To demonstrate the portability of the disguised-party framework beyond Hungary’s super majoritarian setting, this section offers a scope-condition probe of Slovenia’s Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) under Janez Janša in 2020–2022. The aim is not to reproduce the within-case depth of the Fidesz analysis, but to test whether the core mechanisms, audience separation, selective legalistic engineering and ecosystemic capture appear in a different institutional environment characterised by proportional representation, coalition government and comparatively stronger alternation prospects. In such settings, the theory anticipates partial rather than comprehensive disguise: Programmatic hardening and ecosystem-building may be feasible, while deep constitutional entrenchment is constrained by coalition arithmetic and veto points. This ‘least-likely-for-maximal-entrenchment’ context is analytically valuable because it clarifies which components of disguise travel and which depend on concentrated power.

SDS is a useful probe because it retains an externally legible mainstream identity through its long-standing location on the centre-right and its European embedding (Hanley 2005; Vachudova 2008), even as the party’s domestic political style has been widely described as populist-nationalist and confrontational toward watchdog institutions (Mandelc 2025). Novak and Lajh (2023; 2024) characterise Janša as the long-time leader of SDS, emphasising both his political centrality and the party’s populist positioning closer to the extreme-right pole within Slovenian politics. This creates the precondition for audience separation (H2): A party can remain intelligible as a ‘normal’ conservative actor to segments of international and moderate audiences while deploying polarising narratives at home. In the disguised-party logic, such separation is not merely rhetorical; it functions as a sanction-dampening device that reduces the reputational and regulatory costs of illiberal manoeuvres, especially when public debate is saturated by threat frames and antagonistic moral binaries.

The COVID-19 period provides a critical window to examine how emergency governance can become an opportunity structure for democratic erosion when

incumbents feel electorally insecure. Pavlović's (2023) comparative study explicitly includes Slovenia and argues that incumbents uncertain of victory may use emergency contexts to expand executive capacity in ways that can outlast the immediate crisis. For the disguised-party framework, the key point is not that emergency politics automatically produces autocratisation, but that it can lower visibility and compress decision horizons, facilitating legalistic changes and administrative practices that are difficult to contest in real time. This matches the theory's expectation that consequential moves often migrate to technical, time-sensitive or low-salience domains where oversight is fragmented.

The strongest 'portable' signature in Slovenia concerns selective pressure on civil society and intermediary institutions, a pattern that tracks the institutional and ecosystemic pillars of disguise, albeit in a less entrenched form than Hungary. Novak and Lajh (2023; 2024) document that after the March 2020 government change, democratic backsliding became more apparent through liberal organised interests being publicly discredited, the obstruction of largely environmental organisations and attacks on the media; they also note a downgrade in civic space assessments during this period. Importantly, they frame these dynamics in terms consistent with 'selective closure': Rather than indiscriminate repression, pressure is often targeted at ideologically distant or government-critical actors, allowing incumbents to maintain democratic appearance while weakening specific counterweights. This is precisely the kind of pattern that a disguised-party configuration would produce under constraints: thin contestation without overt rupture, achieved through delegitimation campaigns, administrative obstruction and asymmetric access to decision-makers.

Ecosystemic mechanisms are even more directly visible. A core proposition of the disguised-party approach is that durable advantage can be generated not only through legal changes but also through restructuring the information field, ownership concentration, preferential resource flows and the construction of loyal media-civic infrastructures (H4). The Media Ownership Monitor's Slovenia profile (Valic, Roncevic & Tomsic 2023; Milosavljevic & Gerjevic 2022) describes a party-controlled or party-aligned media architecture around SDS, including a TV/online network (Nova24TV) and affiliated print/online outlets, noting the role of Hungarian-linked capital and cross-border investments connected to pro-government media networks (Delic 2020). While this evidence base is not identical to the Hungarian case's scale, it fits the theoretical claim that ecosystem-building can substitute for or complement hard institutional redesign where coalition constraints limit constitutional engineering. The relevant mechanism is information gating by structural means: Even without formal censorship, preferential financing and ownership concentration can shift survival odds and content incentives in favour of aligned outlets, thereby weakening the opposition's capacity to set agendas or mobilise credible counter-narratives.

A further dimension that reinforces the probe is the growing scholarly attention to ‘illiberal’ strategies implemented through policy domains that are symbolically potent but institutionally under-theorised in backsliding research, especially culture. Čufar and Hawlina (2025) analyse Slovenia’s 2020–2022 period through the lens of illiberal cultural policy, conceptualising ‘weaponisation’ as a strategy that reshapes cultural institutions and symbolic repertoires in ways that support broader illiberal agendas. For the disguised-party framework, this matters because cultural policy can operate as a low-visibility channel that (i) signals civilisational alignment to core constituencies, (ii) imposes reputational costs on liberal opponents and (iii) reinforces ecosystemic infrastructures by reallocating symbolic and material resources. The result is a complement to media-ecosystem strategies: Cultural fields can become additional arenas for entrenching a loyalist ‘civil society’ veneer while delegitimising pluralist intermediaries.

Taken together, the Slovenian probe supports a constrained but meaningful interpretation of SDS as a partial disguised-party configuration. Durability is present insofar as polarising, anti-watchdog political style and ecosystem-building are not episodic; yet the institutional pillar is structurally bounded by coalition dependence and a competitive environment in which alternation remains plausible. The most robust mapping is therefore to a typological variant in which programmatic hardening and ecosystemic capture are prominent, while institutional engineering appears more in the form of administrative pressure, attempted regulatory shifts and emergency-enabled executive aggrandisement than in wholesale constitutional redesign. In theoretical terms, the SDS case clarifies an important scope implication: Disguise does not require the Hungarian level of super majoritarian legal reconstruction to be analytically meaningful. Rather, in coalition settings the equilibrium can be sustained through audience separation + ecosystem-building + selective administrative/legal tactics, generating thinner contestation even when full lock-in is unattainable.

This probe also sharpens the article’s comparative agenda. If the disguised-party syndrome travels into coalition democracies as a partial form, then cross-case variation is likely to hinge on (i) the density of party-controlled media infrastructures, (ii) the availability of cross-border or domestic financing channels that can sustain aligned outlets and (iii) the degree to which emergency governance or administrative discretion can be leveraged without provoking decisive backlash. In other words, the Slovenian case suggests that the disguised-party framework should not be read as a ‘Hungary-only’ story of super majoritarian entrenchment, but as a broader account of how mainstream-labelled actors can normalise illiberal governance through modular combinations of programmatic, institutional and ecosystemic instruments, combinations that adapt to opportunity structures and veto constraints.

Implications for democratic competition and regulation

The Fidesz case clarifies why ex post rule-enforcement is routinely outpaced when incumbents operate as disguised parties: The formal shell of competition (regular elections, legality, institutional continuity) is preserved, while its effective contestability is thinned through low-visibility changes to rules, resource flows and the information environment. The regulatory challenge is therefore not primarily to arbitrate speech or to police isolated violations, but to raise the ex-ante cost of legalistic engineering and to reduce the returns to audience separation without constraining legitimate government communication or pluralist contestation. The practical lesson is structural: Safeguards must be designed to detect and deter the package of mechanisms (media-market steering, indirect public support and rule manipulation) that allows a mainstream label to normalise illiberal governance.

A first implication concerns the information environment. Research on media capture and state advertising shows that governments can weaken watchdog capacity (Johnson 2014) without overt censorship by steering ownership and revenues, especially public advertising, towards aligned outlets, thereby altering outlet survival probabilities and shifting content incentives. In smaller or advertising-dependent markets, public advertising can function as a selective subsidy with measurable editorial and competitive effects. A rights-preserving response is to regulate spending structures and disclosure, not content. Concretely, states should maintain a single, machine-readable registry of all public communication spending (including central government, sub-national authorities, agencies and SOEs), with contract-level disclosure (beneficiary, amount, timing, placement channel and a standardised audience rationale). Allocation rules should be benchmarked against transparent audience and price metrics, with rebuttable presumptions against persistent deviations. These measures align with the European Media Freedom Act's emphasis on transparency and safeguards around state advertising and media-market integrity.

A second implication concerns political finance. As party membership revenues and private civil sources shrink, parties rely more heavily on public resources and regulatory privileges; oversight must therefore treat party finance as an ecosystem encompassing procurement, state advertising, foundation funding and government information campaigns, not merely donations and formal subsidies. The operational move is data integration: Party-finance authorities should link beneficial-ownership registries, procurement data and public communication-spending registries to party accounts and campaign reporting to detect resource-alignment congruence (for example, spikes in publicly mediated revenue paired with shifts in editorial or campaign alignment). This is a structural analogue to cartel-party insights about how state-embedded

resource channels can entrench incumbents when allocation formulas and audits are not insulated from governing control.

A third implication concerns electoral-law safeguards and timing. Contemporary integrity risks often arise less from ballot fraud than from legalistic manipulation, districting changes, compensation-formula tweaks, threshold adjustments, regulator redesign and compressed legislative timetables, justified as technical corrections. Procedural guardrails should therefore be codified: minimum consultation windows; independent impact assessments for any reform plausibly affecting contestability and automatic correction mechanisms when malapportionment exceeds pre-defined limits. These recommendations are consistent with the Venice Commission's guidance stressing the stability of electoral law and cautioning against changing fundamental elements close to elections (Hauser 2020; Fasone & Piccirilli 2017; Gamper 2022). Stability is not cosmetic. In fragmented oppositions, small rule changes can materially alter coordination incentives and replacement feasibility; for that reason, simulation studies (pre/post counterfactuals) should be published before adoption and a rebuttable presumption against 'late-cycle' reforms should apply unless cross-party thresholds are met.

A fourth implication concerns platform governance. Platforms mediate visibility, targeting and agenda-setting; they can reinforce audience separation when incumbents combine public-money campaigns with algorithmic amplification and opaque targeting. The regulatory move is to shift from narrow takedown logics to systemic-risk transparency and research access. Under the Digital Services Act, vetted researchers may request data from very large online platforms and search engines for research into systemic risks (Article 40) and EU enforcement bodies have issued guidance to operationalise that access. Separately, the EU's regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising creates an additional 'traceability' layer for political ads and their targeting practices. For democratic competition, the actionable design principle is linkage: On-platform transparency (ad libraries, delivery metrics, targeting parameters) becomes substantially more informative when it can be matched to off-platform structures (ownership mapping, public communication-spending flows and procurement/finance data).

Finally, enforcement should be sequenced and joined up. Comparative experience suggests that judicial tools alone can be insufficient once domestic media structures and oversight bodies are compromised; credible conditionality and coordinated venue choice outperform isolated actions. Nationally, independent regulators need mandates and capacity to investigate both media-market structure and public communication spending, while audit institutions should run integrated checks across party-finance returns and procurement/advertising registries. During election years, pre-clearance mechanisms for consequential rule changes and quiet-period presumptions against adoption can reduce the

payoff to technocratic manipulation. Supranationally, legal action is most effective when coupled with measurable indicators that demonstrate systemic competition risks: (i) concentration indices and cross-market ownership mapping; (ii) public-money skew (the gap between state-advertising share and measured audience share); (iii) procedural stress (fast-track frequency, consultation-window length and malapportionment deviations); and (iv) platform-distribution diagnostics enabled by DSA research access.

Normative trade-offs remain. Transparency regimes can chill editorial autonomy; spending benchmarks can constrain legitimate public information; and algorithmic access raises privacy and trade-secret concerns. The remedy is narrow tailoring and rights-preserving procedure: publish-first transparency, due-process guarantees before sanctions and time-limited emergency exceptions subject to independent review. Properly designed, this agenda does not engineer electoral outcomes; it re-equalises the informational and administrative terrain so voters can evaluate political projects on their merits rather than through engineered scarcity and tilted rules, the terrain on which disguised parties thrive.

Conclusion

This article theorised disguised parties as electoral organisations that preserve a mainstream label while durably institutionalising radical-right practice through an instrumental combination of programmatic hardening, institutional engineering and ecosystemic capture. The conceptual contribution is to specify this composite mechanism, how legality claims and respectability cues operate as camouflage, while drawing sharper boundaries vis-à-vis mainstreaming, rebranding, cartelisation and satellite formations. Empirically, the article introduced a portable operationalisation and testable expectations (H1–H5) and then developed the argument through theory-guided process tracing of Fidesz (2010–2025). The Hungarian sequence shows how audience separation can dampen reputational sanctions, how legalistic redesign can raise seat-vote advantages and reversal costs and how selective subsidisation can reshape the information ecosystem without resort to formal bans.

Two payoffs follow. First, the framework replaces ad hoc labelling with decision rules: a necessary label-practice divergence, minimum durability ($\geq$ two national electoral cycles or $\geq$ four years) and multidimensionality (movement on $\geq$ two pillars), each tied to observable indicators (e.g. party-family distance in expert placements, manifesto trends, rule-of-law components, ownership concentration and state-advertising skew). These rules increase comparability across cases and time, reduce coder discretion and provide a basis for cumulative research. Second, the Fidesz analysis clarifies sequencing. Programmatic shifts become politically consequential when paired with institutional and ecosystemic instruments that alter the conversion of votes into governing author-

ity and restructure message reach and survival in the information field. Where these channels co-evolve, effective contestability can thin even as electoral ritual, procedural legality and the outward appearance of pluralism persist. The scope-diversity probe further underscores that the mechanism is modular: In more coalition-constrained settings, disguise may appear in partial or incipient form, which is analytically valuable for specifying boundary conditions rather than diluting the concept.

The argument also reframes regulatory debates. Safeguards that focus on single infractions, post hoc content disputes or isolated legal challenges are often poorly matched to disguised strategies. Structural, ex-ante instruments are more effective because they target the channels through which durable advantage is produced rather than the opinions that ride on them. The implications developed in the preceding section – rule-change stability, regulator insulation, transparency and neutrality in public communications spending, ownership disclosure and joined-up auditing across media, money and rules – are deliberately content-neutral and compatible with free expression. They specify measurable compliance (for example, disclosure standards; auditing seat-vote counterfactuals before reforms; benchmarked allocation rules for state advertising) and in doing so, raise the maintenance costs of disguised strategies.

Limitations remain. The proposed thresholds are heuristic and should be stress-tested across media systems and legal architectures; what counts as a substantively meaningful ‘pillar shift’ may vary with institutional baselines. The single critical-case design privileges causal clarity over breadth and external validity must ultimately be established through multi-country designs, near-miss comparisons and structured case selection. Data availability also remains uneven, especially outlet-level advertising microdata and beneficial-ownership registries, so the replication package prioritises transparent transformations, uncertainty reporting and sensitivity checks, but future work would benefit from statutory transparency and researcher-access portals.

A research agenda follows naturally. Comparative scope conditions should be specified more tightly: Disguise should be more likely where constitutional change can be framed as technocratic modernisation, media markets are small and advertising-dependent and oversight is proceduralist and slow to aggregate diffuse harms. Micro-foundations can be tested with experiments and panel designs that examine sanction dampening among moderates when mainstream cues remain salient. Measurement should be harmonised by pre-registering coding rules for party-family distance, legal-text timelines and ecosystemic indicators and by publishing uncertainty intervals rather than point classifications alone. Finally, counterfactual work can refine seat-vote simulations to quantify gains from legalistic engineering and to assess rollback feasibility under alternative coalitional and institutional constraints.

Recognising disguise prevents two recurring errors: mistaking proceduralism for democratic health and treating illiberal moves as isolated episodes. By identifying how illiberal projects can be advanced under respectable labels, through audience separation, legalistic entrenchment and information gating and by providing portable diagnostics, this article aims to help scholars accumulate comparable evidence and to help policymakers target the mechanics of advantage rather than the content of political contestation. The framework is designed to travel across cases that differ in institutional authorisation, coalition dependence and veto structure. Fidesz represents an unusually permissive and fully developed configuration, but the underlying logic of disguise may also appear in more partial or constrained forms where mainstream cover, selective institutional change and ecosystemic leverage can still be combined. Where rule stability, regulator independence and resource neutrality hold, disguised parties face higher maintenance costs; where they do not, structural tilt can persist behind a mainstream label. The practical task, then, is to re-equalise the field so voters can evaluate projects on their merits rather than through engineered scarcity of information and a tilted administrative terrain.

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