

How Opposition Strategies Interact under Electoral Autocracy: Evidence from Hungary's TISZA Party

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Politics in Central Europe

(ISSN 1801-3422)

Vol. 22, No. 2

DOI: 10.51870/pce-2026-0009

Abstract: *Theories on political opposition and democratic backsliding have identified factors associated with opposition success under authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. Yet, they have paid limited attention to how these factors interact over time. This article applies insights from this literature – focusing on party policy positioning, opposition mobilisation capacity and democratic innovation – to the Hungarian case following the failed opposition coalition in the 2022 parliamentary election and the subsequent rise of the TISZA Party from 2024 to 2025. The article asks how the party can establish itself as a leading challenger to Fidesz amid democratic backsliding. Drawing on process-tracing analysis, it demonstrates that the interaction and sequencing of opposition strategies constituted a key mechanism behind TISZA's relative success in generating popular support in the context of electoral and informational autocracy. By specifying the timing and sequencing of opposition strategies, the findings show that factors of democratic resistance should be treated not as isolated variables but as interdependent processes whose order and timing shape opposition outcomes.*

Keywords: *oppositions, electoral autocracies, democratic resistance, Hungary, TISZA party*

Introduction

Theories concerning political opposition and democratic backsliding have pinpointed the conditions under which opposition parties can prevail against authoritarian regimes. Existing studies have identified numerous factors associated with opposition success, including moderate party positioning, high

opposition mobilisation capacity and democratic innovation under constrained political environments. Much of this literature, however, has treated these factors as discrete or static variables, often analysing their independent effects rather than their interactions over time.

By examining the case of the TISZA Party (Tisztelet és Szabadság Párt) in Hungary, this article argues that opposition success amid democratic backsliding cannot be fully understood without attention being paid to the interaction and sequencing of key opposition strategies, including policy positioning, mobilisation and democratic innovation. Rather than treating these factors as isolated, the article treats them as interdependent processes whose order and timing shape opposition outcomes, i.e. the emergence of a viable leading challenger to the ruling party under electoral autocracy. TISZA is a newly (re-) launched opposition party that rapidly gained popular support after Péter Magyar assumed its leadership in 2024 (Baranyai & Gyulai 2025). Although the outcome of the 2026 parliamentary election remains uncertain as of the time of writing this paper, TISZA at times surpasses Fidesz in opinion polls. While a single-case study inevitably limits generalisability, the Hungarian case allows for close examination of how alternative sequencing of opposition strategies can generate political momentum following the failure of broad pre-electoral coalitions.

This paper begins by reviewing the literature on political opposition in the context of democratic backsliding, identifying the conditions under which opposition can prevail against authoritarian regimes and highlighting the key factors associated with opposition success. It then examines Hungary following the 2022 parliamentary election, in which a rare unified pre-electoral opposition coalition was defeated (Mikola & Santos 2025), with particular attention to developments from 2024 to 2025, when Péter Magyar emerged as a new, single leading political challenger to Fidesz.

Political oppositions amid democratic backsliding

A growing body of scholarship has explored under what conditions political opposition can prevail against authoritarian regimes, highlighting factors that contribute to opposition victory such as pre-electoral coalitions and party defections, as well as opposition strategies and methods.

First, with regard to pre-electoral coalitions, Wahman (2013) found that opposition parties are more likely to form them when there is a realistic opportunity to defeat non-democratic regimes. Selçuk and Hekimci (2020) also demonstrate in the case of Turkey that opposition parties from across the political spectrum forged electoral alliances to ‘incentivise the opposition parties to coordinate in the name of fighting for democracy’ (ibid.: 1496).

However, uniting against incumbents does not necessarily lead to opposition victory. As Bunce and Wolchik (2010) emphasise, opposition parties need to enhance their mobilisation capacities through the ‘deployment of a set of innovative, well-planned, detailed, and sometimes dangerous strategies’ (p. 73) to defeat autocratic regimes. Under conditions of democratic backsliding, opposition parties require significantly greater levels of ‘mobilisation, unity, skill, and heroism’ than those operating in democratic contexts (Diamond 2002: 24). Equally important is strong political oppositions to authoritarian regimes, which may arise not only from established opposition parties, but also from within ruling elites through intra-regime splits (Tomini, Gibril & Bochev 2022). Theories on party defection have specified the conditions under which such intra-party divisions occur. For example, based on cases from Zimbabwe and Turkey, Gandhi and Reuter (2013) argue that poor economic performance increases the likelihood of intra-party splits. More recent studies support this argument while identifying additional facilitating conditions, such as weakened control over mass media and declining party cohesion (Rio 2022).

Scholars have also examined the strategies and methods for opposition parties amid democratic backsliding, particularly the effectiveness of moderate opposition and democratic innovation. In terms of moderate opposition, Korkmaz (2024) argues that opposition can take either a rigid (radical and exclusive) or a flexible (moderate and inclusive) stance against electoral autocracies, and the latter is vital for oppositions to win against them. Gamboa (2022) similarly contends that opposition actors pursuing moderate policies are more likely to succeed in challenging incumbents than those positioned at the ideological extremes in electoral autocracies. Beyond ideological positioning, Stiers (2023) also found that voters are primarily concerned with opposition parties’ ability to fight the incumbent government rather than simply negatively and unconstructively blaming them. As Ong (2021) points out, emphasising ‘positive policy and material gains’ (ibid.: 2) can increase the likelihood that opposition parties defeat incumbents in electoral autocracies.

With respect to democratic innovation, Warren (2025) contends that, in representative democracies, newly emerging technologies and platforms, such as online forums and open-government initiatives, can play a supplementary role alongside existing institutions in deepening democracies. Unfortunately, some of these innovations are not readily applicable in authoritarian contexts and may instead be employed to suppress the public, as discussed in the digital-authoritarianism literature (Kendall-Taylor, Frantz & Wright 2020). Yet, digital technologies can also serve as tools of democratic contestation. As the experience of the Arab Uprisings demonstrates, online platforms – whose capacities have expanded significantly over recent decades – can be mobilised to challenge authoritarian rule and support the fight against autocratic leaders (Monshipouri 2014).

Case selection and methods

The remainder of this paper applies the aforementioned theories – moderate policy positioning, opposition mobilisation, party defection and democratic innovation – to the case of Hungary following the 2022 general elections. Particular focus is given to the rise of a new opposition party – namely the TISZA Party, led by Péter Magyar.

While Hungary was once regarded as a model of democratisation among post-communist nations, it took a sudden, sharp turn toward de-democratisation once Fidesz secured more than two-thirds of the seats in the 2010 national election and beyond. Through gerrymandering, Fidesz has weakened the voting power of urban and opposition-leaning constituencies (Scheppele 2022). Media pluralism has likewise deteriorated sharply: Rather than radically eliminating independent media outlets, the government has gradually suppressed critical coverage and distorted public perception through systematic media capture (Polyák, Urbán & Szávai 2022). Put differently, over the past decade, Hungary has experienced a gradual shift toward electoral autocracy and what has been termed an ‘informational autocracy’ (Krekó 2022).

Additionally, Hungary also saw the defeat of the pre-electoral opposition coalition against Fidesz in the 2022 national election amid democratic backsliding. However, despite the collapse of the united opposition coalition after the election, Hungary witnessed the rapid emergence of the TISZA Party as a new, single leading opposition. As Tomini, Gibril and Bochev (2022) note, political opposition may arise not only from established opposition parties but also from within ruling elites through intra-regime splits. This was also the case with Péter Magyar, a former Fidesz member who held several public positions during the Orbán administration but remained outside the party’s core decision-making circles. He positioned himself as an outsider and a political newcomer as an opposition party leader. TISZA employs strategies and methods that challenge and refine existing theoretical expectations, while Fidesz and other established opposition parties have been reconsidering their electoral strategies in response to its rise.

Methodologically, this paper employs theory-based process tracing, an approach widely used in recent political science research (Lupu 2016; Beach & Pedersen 2018; Morgan 2024), to unpack the causal mechanisms that produce the observed outcomes (Rohlfing 2012; Ricks & Liu 2018). The following sections review the relevant timelines and identify the causal mechanisms linking the emergence of Magyar as an opposition leader to his party’s successful challenge to Fidesz under electoral autocracy.

From defeat of the united opposition to the rise of new opposition¹

'We won a victory so big that you can see it from the moon, and you can certainly see it from Brussels' (Euronews 2022). Speaking to supporters and party members gathered in Budapest, Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary, declared so on the night of 3 April 2022, after it became clear that his right-wing party Fidesz had once again secured a victory in the Hungarian parliamentary elections.

Prior to the election, some surveys suggested a tightening race, with the opposition coalition appearing to close the gap. Unlike in previous Hungarian elections, fragmented opposition parties chose to unite against Fidesz, driven by concerns over democratic backsliding and by an effort to increase their likelihood of electoral victory, as suggested by theories of pre-electoral coalitions (Mikola & Santos 2025). However, the opposition's efforts to secure the majority were hampered not only by Hungary's highly disproportionate electoral system and the lack of media pluralism, but also by the opposition's unstable, passive and uncoordinated united front against the ruling party (Mikola & Santos 2025). As theories of opposition mobilisation indicate, simply uniting the opposition was not sufficient enough to overcome the ruling party under the conditions of democratic backsliding. Furthermore, the defeat of the united opposition in Hungary posed serious fragmentation and disillusionment among opposition politicians and voters. One survey showed that opposition voters are becoming increasingly fragmented and pessimistic, as they express more dislike for each other's political leaders than for those of the ruling party, and 80% believe that Fidesz can no longer be removed through democratic means (Policy Solutions 2022).

Despite its landslide 2022 electoral victory, Fidesz also faced mounting challenges. Hungary has experienced a serious economic downturn, high inflation and rising housing costs since 2022. Compared with other EU member states, the war in Ukraine has posed particularly severe macroeconomic challenges for Hungary; for example, the country has recorded one of the highest inflation rates in the European Union (European Commission 2023).

Amid these circumstances, a major political scandal for Fidesz unfolded, followed by the emergence of a new opposition figure, Péter Magyar. In early February 2024, independent Hungarian media outlet 444.hu reported a sensational piece of news. It was based on a January report by HVG which stated that the 2023 amnesty list included the deputy director of a children's home who had been convicted of abusing more than ten boys between 2004 and 2016. The deputy director was secretly pardoned on 27 April 2023, ahead of the Pope's visit to Hungary (Urfi 2024).

1 The earlier version of part of the empirical sections appeared in Japanese commentaries published in *Foresight*: 'Will the 'Magyar Phenomenon' Win Conservatism with Conservatism?' (June 6, 2024) and 'Conservative New Party Redraws Hungary's Political Map' (March 27, 2025). The material has since been substantially revised and restructured for the present article.

Following this report, criticism surged against Katalin Novák, president of Hungary, who had decided on the pardon, and then-Justice Minister Judit Varga, who had approved it. Novák initially condemned the child sexual abuse but tried to deflect criticism by saying that the media coverage was a ‘political campaign’ by the opposition in a press conference on 6 February. However, this only resulted in further opposition and calls for her resignation. On 10 February 2024, just over a week after the scandal was widely reported, Novák announced her resignation, admitting that the decision to grant amnesty had been wrong. Varga announced her resignation from parliament on the same day.

In response to this situation, Magyar appeared on the political scene through the YouTube channel ‘Partizán’ on 12 February. In an interview, he expressed his indignation as a member of the conservative camp over the series of events surrounding the decision to grant clemency and its handling (Partizán 2024). In March, he organised the largest anti-government rally in recent years in Budapest – mobilising a crowd of around 30,000 people – and he announced that he would soon be launching a political party. He took over the TISZA Party in April 2024 as vice president and subsequently became its president.

Magyar is Varga’s ex-husband and his great-uncle is former President of Hungary Ferenc Mádl. After taking part in the anti-government demonstrations led by Fidesz in 2006, which was then in opposition, he worked as a diplomat at the Hungarian Mission to the European Union in the second Orbán government and as a coordinator with the EU in the prime minister’s office. After that, he held several positions until former Justice Minister Varga announced her retirement from politics. In recent years, he has served as a director of the Hungarian Development Bank (MFB) and the Student Loan Centre (Diákhitel Központ).

However, unlike Péter Szijjártó, who rose through the party’s youth organisation Fidelitas – one of the three main channels for recruiting young people in Hungary, alongside scholarship programmes for students and ideologically aligned educational institutions (Metz & Várnagy 2021) – Péter Magyar did not come from any of these paths, nor was he a central figure. According to Dezső (2024), he was ‘not given a political role [and was given] “only” a position in state-owned companies’. In this sense, he is what I would call an insider-outsider figure who understands the inner workings of the government but maintains a certain distance from it.

That characteristic not only appealed to Hungarian voters as a new challenger to Fidesz but also made it difficult for Fidesz to react to him.

Challenges for Fidesz and existing oppositions

The Orbán administration initially sought to counter Magyar’s rise through a targeted media strategy. To discredit him, the government channelled more than HUF 200 million into Facebook advertisements in the month following the

scandal through Megafon, a pro-government social media influencer platform established in 2020 (Papp 2024; Bene & Juhász 2025). Government-backed messaging extended to street posters for the European Parliament elections in June 2024. In the negative campaign against President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, who had been taking a confrontational stance, Orbán named Magyar one of her ‘humble servants’ (Bálint 2024).

Yet the Orbán administration’s attacks on Magyar have largely lacked persuasiveness. Even if Magyar is criticised as being ‘left-wing’ in the same way as other opposition parties, the effect is weak due to the nature of moderate opposition: He considers himself to be centre-right to conservative. Since the European migration crisis, Orbán has consistently relied on polarising ‘us vs. them’ narratives through anti-LGBTQ sentiment, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Agoston 2023; Sata 2023; Gizińska & Sadlecki 2025). However, similar criticism of Magyar potentially carries the risk of self-inflicted damage, as it draws attention to Fidesz’s past decisions to appoint him to political positions. Thus, while Fidesz has pursued a series of campaigns labelling both Magyar and the TISZA Party as ‘left-wing’, TISZA has been comparatively able to avoid such criticism, unlike other opposition parties, except for criticism focused on Magyar’s personal affairs. These factors enabled the TISZA Party to gain seats following Fidesz in the EU elections in June 2024 by attracting not only from pro-European voters who opposed Fidesz in the last national election but also some former Fidesz supporters who have become disappointed with the party in recent years (Kovarek 2025).

In addition to Magyar’s positioning of his party as moderate, his decision not to recruit former Fidesz politicians or to form pre- or post-electoral coalitions with existing opposition parties has further reinforced this perception. Even before the European election, Magyar emphasised that he is ‘interested in neither discredited opposition politicians nor figures from the National Cooperation System’ (Ábrahám 2024). Following the European elections and after holding talks with party leaders in the Budapest municipal councils, TISZA decided not to cooperate with any other political parties.

As TISZA’s support grew, traditional opposition parties and movements faced an existential crisis. Their responses were inconsistent; however, many opposition parties ultimately decided not to contest the elections due to a desire to break electoral autocracy or limited organisational capacity. For example, Momentum initially expressed openness to exploring cooperation with TISZA. The then leader of Momentum Donát Anna stated in April 2024 that ‘we should focus on what our shared goals are with Péter Magyar, who has shaken up the opposition’ (ATV 2024). However, such cooperation did not materialise, and after the TISZA Party officially announced in 2025 that it would field candidates in the 2026 parliamentary elections, Momentum decided not to run. Similarly, the Hungarian Green Party (LMP) ultimately announced that it would not

contest the 2026 parliamentary elections in order to avoid undermining the prospects for regime change (Nádor 2026a). Although motivated by different considerations, the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP) also announced that it would not participate in the elections, citing a lack of candidates and volunteers (HVG 2026). The far-right party 2RK likewise decided not to run primarily due to financial reasons (Nádor 2026b).

A notable exception was the Democratic Coalition (DK), which remained sceptical of Magyar and his party. Following the elections and as early as November 2024, DK confirmed that the party would compete in all constituencies in the 2026 parliamentary elections. Several other parties, including the far-right Mi Hazánk and the joke party Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party (MKKP), also announced they would field candidates in the elections. In all, traditional opposition parties were forced to choose between confronting both Fidesz and TISZA or refraining from listing candidates for the election, thus illustrating that a pre-electoral coalition akin to that formed in 2022 was no longer feasible. Some parties opted not to run to maximise the chances of a democratic opposition victory, others withdrew due to internal organisational constraints and a smaller number chose to compete regardless of these strategic considerations. For TISZA, this process served as a mechanism to reduce fragmentation among opposition parties and strengthen its position as the main challenger against Fidesz.

Offline organising and online engagement

Returning to the political situation in 2024, Magyar actively pursued outreach beyond Budapest to local cities and rural areas both before and after the European elections. This is despite Fidesz's consolidated support in rural constituencies and the longstanding difficulties faced by other opposition parties in extending their appeal beyond urban centres into these areas (Jakli & Stenberg 2021). For example, Magyar's TISZA Party launched its campaign by mobilising a large crowd for a rally in Budapest in May 2024. A large-scale demonstration followed in Debrecen, where approximately 10,000 people participated. As Figure 1 shows, he has been more active – even more than Fidesz – in visiting countryside towns. After the 2024 European Parliament elections, he continued similar nationwide tour campaigns, such as the 'voice of the nation' campaign in early 2025, and an 80-day national campaign tour from summer to autumn 2025 (Figure 2).

For the TISZA Party, local community building has also been a cornerstone of TISZA's rural strategy. From July 2024, Magyar initiated a loosely affiliated network of grassroots supporters under the name Tisza Islands (Tisza Szigetek). This network operates independently of the party's formal structure and evokes parallels with the Movements of Civic Circles (Polgári Körök) that Fidesz sup-

Figure 1: List of towns major parties visited during 2024 European Elections campaigns

TISZA Party



Democratic Coalition



Fidesz (Orbán Viktor and Deutsch Tamás)



Source: Author; data was coded manually from Magyar Peter's Facebook, DK's official website, and Telex's campaign analysis of Fidesz politicians (Bakró-Nagy & Cseke 2024)

Figure 2: List of towns major parties visited after 2024 European Elections (until December 2025)



Source: Author; data was coded manually from Magyar Peter's YouTube lives

porters were encouraged to form following the party's loss in the 2002 parliamentary elections (Enyedi 2005). Drawing on both his insider understanding of the factors that contributed to Fidesz's earlier success and his outsider perspective, Magyar selectively adapted elements of the ruling party's mobilisation strategies, reframing them within a democratic context.

Along with these offline organising efforts across Hungary, Magyar is also focusing on online engagement across major and lesser-known social networking services, as the theories of democratic innovation suggest. Similar to offline organising, he has continued to innovate, at times borrowing from Prime Minister Orbán's past playbook and at other times introducing strategies unused by the ruling party.

Before the 2024 European parliamentary elections, Magyar livestreamed the national tour campaigns on his Facebook and YouTube channels. Unlike Fidesz, the TISZA Party has primarily relied on organic reach rather than paid advertising. As Szentirmai (2024) reported, the party had 'conquered Facebook' during the spring European Parliament elections through its extensive use of unpaid engagement. After the European Parliament elections, he launched regular livestreams for subscribers on his YouTube channel, arguably as a response to Prime Minister Orbán's regular radio broadcasts, to 'discuss current events and future issues in a more informal way each week' (Spirk 2024) and to foster a sense of online community.

While Magyar's overall social media following still lags that of Prime Minister Orbán, Magyar initially had more followers than Orbán on YouTube and later on his Instagram channel as well. Beyond the dominant platforms, Magyar

has also temporarily adopted Discord, a two-way communication tool increasingly favoured by younger audiences, and Reddit, a US-based forum platform. Magyar's use of online platforms also differentiates his content by platform: While YouTube hosts speeches and work-related updates, TikTok and Instagram are used for more casual, light-hearted videos, such as cooking clips aimed at humanising his image (Márton 2025).

When viewed through the lens of audience engagement rather than sheer follower counts, Magyar's online influence appears even more pronounced. For example, although Prime Minister Orbán has approximately three times as many followers as Magyar on Facebook, the latter consistently garners higher levels of interaction, measured by post likes.

A comparison of average post likes underscores this disparity. For example, in January 2025, Orbán's posts received an average of 11,700 likes, while Magyar's averaged 26,300 likes. Orbán's most-liked post that month – a standard New Year's greeting – reached about 64,000 likes. Orbán followed this up with a video post positively highlighting the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite Hungary ranking among the five worst countries globally in per capita death rates. The latter's COVID-related video only drew 30,000 likes.

By contrast, Magyar achieved 45,000 likes for a satirical video targeting a Fidesz member of the European Parliament, while a more serious post titled 'I Have a Dream' outlining his political vision for Hungary received approximately 81,000 likes (see Table 1). These figures illustrate how Magyar has sustained reader engagement by blending humorous content with substantive political messaging.

Table 1: Comparison of the number of Facebook likes for Magyar and Orban (Jan 2025)

	Orbán	Magyar
Average	11,700 likes	26,300 likes
Max.	64,000 likes	81,000 likes
Min.	3,500 likes	10,000 likes

Source: Author's calculation

Assuming agenda-setting power

At the same time, Magyar has increasingly assumed agenda-setting power from Fidesz and shaped the political agenda by either continuously generating controversy or strategically responding to the ruling party's initiatives.

Following the European Parliament elections, Magyar again conducted his nationwide tour in autumn 2024, focusing on the deteriorating conditions of the hospital system. The summer of 2024 was the hottest since 1906, and the extreme heat caused serious issues, including the breakdown of hospital air

conditioning systems and the postponement of medical procedures. Public criticism has grown over the government's failure to invest in essential infrastructure, despite its generous benefit schemes aimed at addressing issues such as the declining birth rate. The poor state of public healthcare is widely acknowledged; public hospitals often lack basic supplies such as toilet paper, and facility maintenance remains a persistent concern for the government. Acknowledging these issues in August 2024, Magyar visited St. János Hospital in Budapest, demanded the resignation of the minister of the interior and the secretary of state, and called for an extraordinary cabinet meeting with Prime Minister Orbán while he was on summer holiday (Vida 2024). During a nationwide tour in the autumn and winter of 2024, Magyar shifted his focus slightly but continued to spotlight public facilities by criticising the poor conditions in children's homes, thereby sustaining public attention on the issue.

In response to this, the government tried to prevent Magyar from visiting the facilities. On 3 December, when he tried to visit a children's home in the small southern city of Pécs, the government authorities – which had initially granted permission – refused him entry at the last minute. Meanwhile, Fidesz's head of public relations, Tamás Menzel, was waiting for him in front of the facility. Menzel refused to shake hands with Magyar and hurled insults at him, calling him 'short' and a 'liar', and the two men got into an argument (Barnóczki 2024). This was reported in the media and spread quickly on social networking sites causing a stir across the country and prompting many memes. It even led to an increase in donations to the TISZA Party and its number of followers on social networking sites (Bakró-Nagy 2024).

Another illustration of Magyar's agenda-setting role is his opposition to the so-called 'Mini Dubai project' – a government plan to sell land near Budapest's Nyugati Railway Station to an Arab real estate development company and to invest more than HUF 50.9 billion in high-rise buildings. In response to rising housing costs in Budapest and other Hungarian cities, Magyar instead argued for more liveable urban planning centred on the construction of affordable rental housing (Hamvay 2025). The Orbán administration was ultimately unable to ignore this opposition and cancelled the sale to the foreign developer, later allowing the city of Budapest to assume responsibility for the project.

The interaction between moderate party positioning and a sustained series of initiatives enabled TISZA to maintain mobilisation capacity while preventing Fidesz from occupying or co-opting its political agenda. This contrasts both with the 2022 parliamentary election, in which opposition parties failed to exercise agenda control against a ruling party that deployed state resources to dominate policy debates (Vidra & Messing 2025), and with the mid-2010s, when Fidesz 'put Jobbik under pressure to distinguish its stance from the government's rhetoric' by selectively co-opting Jobbik's core policy issues (Borbáth & Gessler 2023: 89).

Moderate policies and position blurring

Since the TISZA Party's relaunch under Péter Magyar, it has announced policy changes on important issues such as domestic affairs and relations with the EU. However, it has adopted a more moderate and selective approach to other policies, such as foreign policy.

On the one hand, Magyar has clearly stated that Hungary needs to build closer ties with the EU through anti-corruption measures, the independence of public media and the restoration of the rule of law. He has strongly criticised the stance of the Orbán administration, saying, 'Hungary today is a family-run limited company' (HVG 2024). The TISZA Party pledged ahead of the 2024 European Parliament election to 'get back the trillions of dollars of EU funds that are owed to our country from Brussels' (Tisza Párt 2024). In terms of more everyday concerns, TISZA further announced a ten-point 'Szent István' programme in August 2025. Reflecting criticism of Fidesz's limited focus on improving public infrastructure, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, the programme promised the construction of modern, large-scale hospitals. It also emphasised commitments to community building, education and the strengthening of municipal autonomy, among other policy priorities.

On the other hand, some of TISZA's policy positions do not represent a radical departure from those of Fidesz but rather a more moderate variation. For example, commenting on nuclear policy in an interview with Reuters, Magyar stated that suspending the Paks nuclear project was not realistic, although he emphasised that he would 'negotiate pragmatically' for reducing 'disadvantageous parts' (Komuves & Than 2025). Simultaneously, in the aforementioned 10-point programme, TISZA pledged to eliminate Hungary's energy dependence on Russia by 2035, and expressed support for sanctions against Russia. Regarding the war in Ukraine, both parties oppose Ukraine joining NATO and providing military assistance. At the same time, however, TISZA has expressed its intention to support Ukraine joining the EU, based on the results of the party's informal 'voice of the nation' referendum on Ukraine's EU membership in March 2025. Similarly, both parties oppose Ukraine joining NATO and providing military assistance.

Even with regard to TISZA's stance on the European Union, while the party has endorsed the introduction of the euro and emphasised the need to resume access to EU funds suspended due to rule-of-law violations in Hungary, it has expressed opposition to EU-level regulation of labour and social rights (Table 2).² Benedek and Sebestyén (2025) characterise it as neither pro-European nor Eurosceptic, but rather as 'Euroambivalent Euroscepticism', which 'strategically avoids the Eurosceptic label and deprioritises EU-related issues' (p. 195).

At times and as part of TISZA's strategy of moderate party positioning, Magyar has also refrained from engaging in government-induced contentious issues

Table 2: Policy differences between Fidesz (incumbent) and TISZA (opposition)²

Category	Theme	Fidesz	TISZA
The War in Ukraine	Ukraine's accession to the EU	Disagree	Unclear
The War in Ukraine	Sanction against Russia	Disagree	Agree
The War in Ukraine	Ukraine's accession to NATO	Disagree	Disagree
The War in Ukraine	Military support for Ukraine	Disagree	Disagree
EU	Introduction of Euro	Disagree	Agree
EU	EU's suspension of fund to Hungary due to rule of law issues	Disagree	Agree
Economy	Strengthening regulation at the EU level regarding EV factories	Disagree	Agree
Economy	Nuclear energy as a sustainable energy	Agree	Agree
Local	Restoration of autonomy for local governments	Disagree	Agree
Human Rights	EU-level regulation of labour and social rights	Disagree	Disagree
Human Rights	Rights of LGBTQ	Disagree	Unclear
Social	Family allowance	Agree	Agree
Social	Improvement of the environment at medical institutions and child protection facilities	Agree (but largely neglected)	Agree

Source: K-Monitor 2024; Komuves & Than 2025; Botos 2024; Vida 2024; Tisza Párt 2025

and joining other oppositions' broader mobilisation against Fidesz. A notable example concerns TISZA's stance on Fidesz's anti-LGBTQ policies. Magyar initially avoided adopting a specific position on the government's constitutional ban on Pride events, despite widespread condemnation from other EU member states in early 2025 (De Groot 2025). Not only did Magyar state that the anti-LGBTQ stance of the Orbán administration is 'not the most important issue at the moment' (Pataki 2024), but also emphasised that discussing such controversial issues would primarily benefit the government, as focusing on them could divert public attention away from everyday socio-economic concerns (Telex 2024). A similar pattern can be observed in TISZA's approach to Ukraine's accession to the EU. While the party has expressed its intention to support Ukraine's EU membership, based on the results of the party's informal 'voice of the nation' referendum on Ukraine's EU membership in March 2025, Magyar had previously argued that the Western Balkan countries should be prioritised in the enlargement process (Botos 2024).

² Please note that Table 2 is based on data up to 2025, the main scope of the analysis, and was compiled before TISZA's detailed programme, 'Működő és emberséges Magyarország alapjai', was published in February 2026.

These TISZA approaches from 2024 to 2025 reflect not only its positioning as a moderate party but also a blurring of strategic position. As Nasr (2023) suggests, when voters hold relatively positive images of a party, they are more likely to tolerate policy ambiguity rather than penalise it. TISZA appears to have leveraged its popularity to pursue a strategy that would attract as wide a range of voters as possible. This approach from TISZA enabled the party, as suggested by McCoy and Somer (2021) and further developed by Benedek in relation to TISZA (2026), to avoid intensifying polarisation (i.e. depolarisation) or transform polarisation (i.e. repolarisation) by focusing instead on widely shared underlying grievances, such as everyday socio-economic concerns.

Conclusion

This study has examined processes and interactions, as illustrated in Figure 3, linking the rise of TISZA to the party's relative success as the main challenger to Fidesz. Following the electoral defeat of a united pre-electoral coalition under conditions of electoral autocracy, TISZA has at times even led Fidesz in independent opinion polls. Not all of the individual factors – i.e. moderate party positioning, mobilisation through imitation and innovation, and avoidance of polarisation – are unique to TISZA. As discussed in the existing literature, neither the moderation strategy pursued by the formerly far-right Jobbik in the mid-2010s (Polyakova & Shekhovtsov 2016; Borbáth & Gessler 2023), nor the selective adoption of Fidesz's policies – such as family policies by Peter Marki-Zay, the leader of the joint opposition list in 2022 – has posed sustained challenges to Fidesz. It is the interaction and sequencing of each factor that enabled and sustained the TISZA Party's relative success.

Figure 3: Processes and interactions of the rise of TISZA to the party's relative success



Source: Author

The emergence of Magyar as another conservative opposition politician, following Jobbik yet without roots in the far-right, began with his party defection from Fidesz. Magyar, who held several public positions as a bureaucrat in the Orbán

administration but was never a central figure within it, emerged as another, single opposition figure amid political scandals and an economic downturn. The subsequent stage consisted of moderate party positioning. Magyar's cultivation of an 'insider-outsider' profile not only enabled him to present TISZA as a moderate party, but also allowed him to draw on insider know-how while simultaneously emphasising his position as an outsider. The rejection of a pre-electoral coalition and the exclusion of former establishment politicians from joining TISZA further reinforced this positioning.

The above phase was followed by TISZA's hybrid of online and offline mobilisation campaigning. At times, these efforts borrowed from Fidesz's campaign playbook, while at other moments they introduced innovative techniques. This interplay between online and offline mobilisation interacted effectively with TISZA's agenda-setting capacity, which further enhanced the party's mobilisation ability as an opposition. As TISZA's popularity increased and election day approached, Magyar and the party faced the question of whether and what kinds of policy commitments to offer voters. While articulating positions on certain issues that aligned closely with Fidesz, except for TISZA's key policy promises, the party avoided polarisation by focusing on widely shared underlying grievances, such as everyday socio-economic concerns, as McCoy and Somer (2021) suggested, and by maintaining strategic ambiguity on more sensitive policy areas, consistent with TISZA's strategy of moderate party positioning.

The interaction of these components across successive stages constituted a key mechanism underlying TISZA's relative success under conditions of electoral and informational autocracy. Even in a systematically disadvantaged position relative to the ruling party, the combined dynamics of moderate party positioning, mobilisation through both imitation and innovation, and the strategic avoidance of polarisation translated into sustained momentum for TISZA as the main challenger.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2025 IPSA World Congress of Political Science in Seoul, South Korea, in July 2025. I am grateful for the comments from participants. The author would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, editors, and proofreaders for their valuable comments and suggestions.

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