

Summary of the 2018 Hungarian National Parliamentary Election: The 'rise' of Illiberal Democracy

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Introduction:

- Under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary has witnessed a lurch to the far right of the political spectrum in recent years. Orbán's ruling center right alliance of FIDESZ-KDNP made history by becoming the first party in Hungary to win three consecutive elections and retain office. The nature of Fidesz's decisive electoral victory and diminished political opposition has led to political commentators now calling Hungary an 'illiberal democracy.' Hungary's location in Central Eastern-Europe and post-Soviet legacy make both the political and electoral context different to the party competition witnessed in Western Europe. Clear party competition patterns and comparisons between both Western and Central Eastern European countries can therefore be difficult to make, due to the divergent historical contexts in both regions.
- The landslide victory at the Hungarian election held on the 8th April bears similarities to a number of recent elections throughout Europe, particularly with the use of identity politics (anti-immigration/refugee) sentiment alongside the growth of nationalist right-wing parties. Click on the link [here](#) for our previous briefing paper for our summary of the 2018 Italian General Election results.

- The case of Hungary is particularly important as it demonstrates two key patterns, namely (a) the further electoral decline of social democratic parties and at the same time (b) the systematic ‘rise’ of two right-wing nationalist parties in the Hungarian political system. This article briefly examines some of the key patterns of the 2018 Hungarian national parliamentary election alongside the implications that this election poses both domestically for Hungarian politics and externally for the future of the European Union (EU) project.

1. Key Patterns:

- **A landslide victory** for the nationalist center right party coalition Fidesz-KDNP (receiving around **49%** of the vote overall) demonstrates not only a clear lack of opposition in Hungarian politics, but more broadly that liberal democracy in Hungary has been eroded, with a one-party state on the horizon.
- **Parliamentary majority:** The Fidesz coalition had also secured **133 of the 199 seats** in parliament (the National Assembly). The minimum requirement for a constitutional two-thirds majority. It won two-thirds victories at both the **2010** and **2014 elections**.
- **Historically high turnout rate** in Hungary. At the 2018 election, the turnout reached nearly **70%**, its highest level since 2002.
- **Fragmented opposition and further decline of the left:** The largest opposition group is Jobbik, a nationalist far-right party which shares much of Fidesz’s anti-immigrant platform (claimed **26 seats**). The left-wing social democratic coalition MSZP-Parbszed took **20 seats**, but as in previous national parliamentary elections, saw a significant reduction in its overall vote share. Thus, the case of the center left MSZP further underlines the lack of electoral support for this party family in Hungarian politics and the increasing shift towards the far right of the political spectrum. In addition, the remaining were divided among an array of smaller parties (See Figures 1 and 2 below for the full election result breakdown).
- While Fidesz won in most rural constituencies and in provincial towns, the opposition parties took most seats in the capital (See Figure 3 below). The party also reportedly lost a large part of the youth vote at the election. However, this did not affect Fidesz overall in electoral terms.

Figure 1: Hungarian Parliamentary Election Results (Seats)

Source: POLITICO (April 20th, 2018)

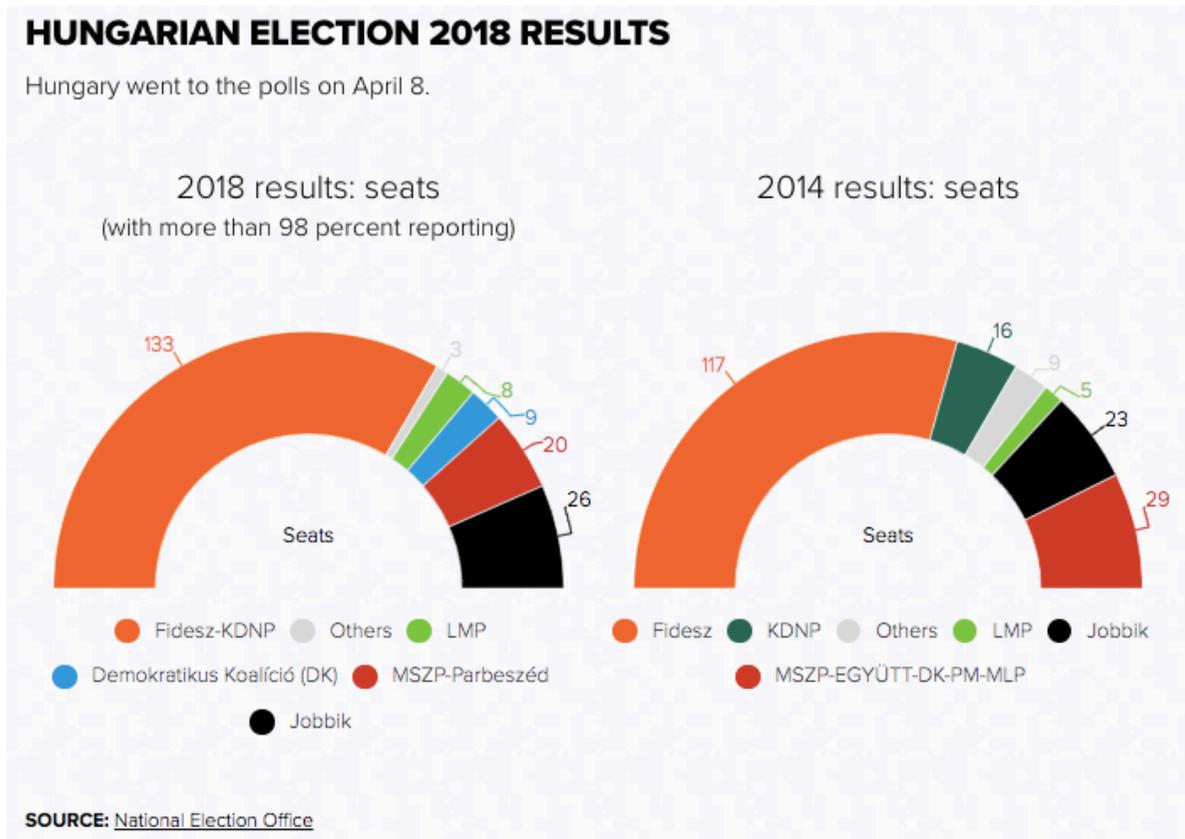
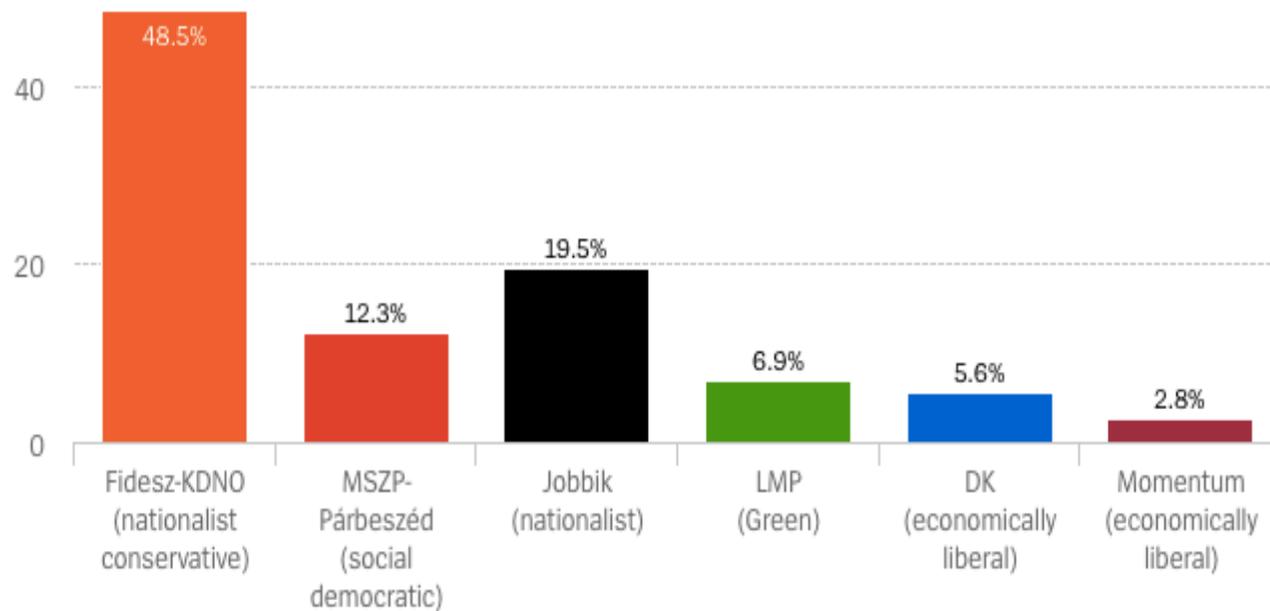


Figure 2: Hungarian Parliamentary Election Results (Votes)

Parliamentary Elections in Hungary

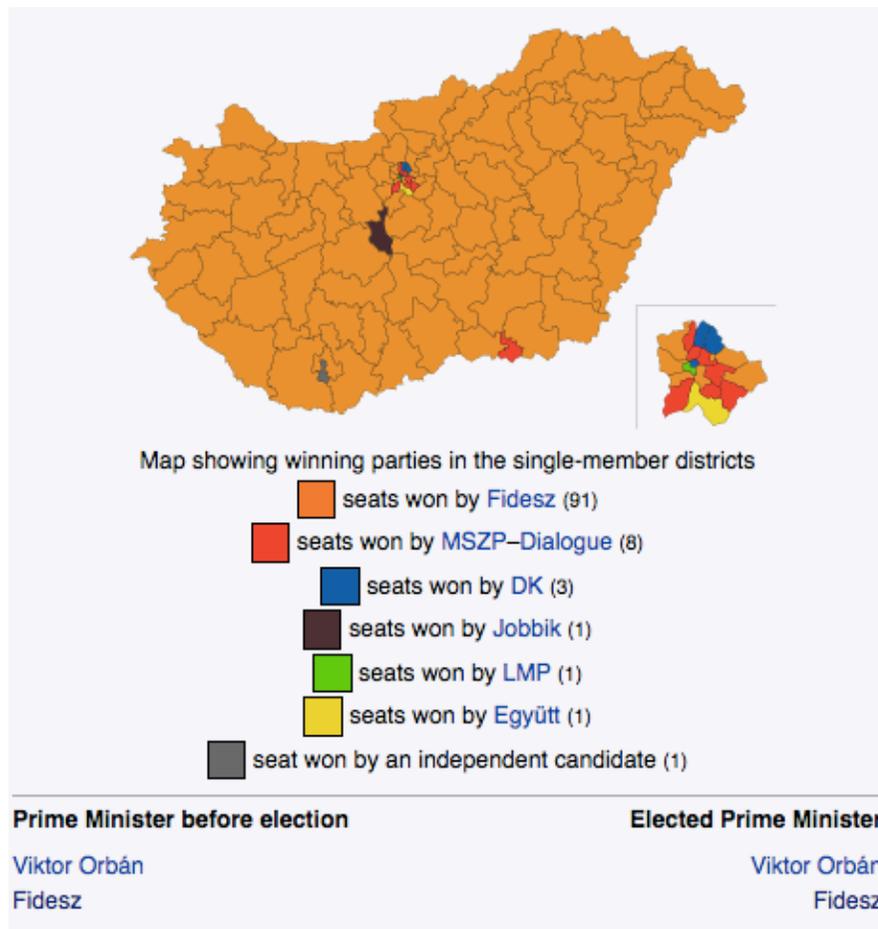
Results as a percentage; votes counted so far: 99.8% (as of 4:56 a.m.); voter turnout: 70%



Source: Hungarian National Election Office, index.hu

Source: 2014 egyéni eredmények.png

Figure 3: Map Showing Winning Parties in the Single-Member Districts Constituency results in the Hungarian parliamentary election, 2018



2. Key issues:

Electoral conduct: uneven playing field

- It was criticized by election observers that the vote was marred by media bias.
- The OCSE security organization concluded in a preliminary statement that, “voters had a wide range of political options, but intimidating and xenophobic rhetoric, media bias and opaque campaign financing constricted the space for genuine political debate”.
- This factor may also largely explain why Orbán’s nationalist Fidesz party won most of the rural constituencies where internet is limited.

Democratic checks and balances:

- Since returning as Prime Minister in 2010, Orbán has enacted changes to the country’s constitution.
- In October 2016, the government submitted a controversial referendum proposal to the Hungarian parliament on the ability of the EU to resettle migrants in Hungary without the parliament’s approval.
- The government proceeded the submission even though the turnout in the referendum stayed below the 50 percent threshold necessary for its validity due to a successful opposition campaign.
- The motion, however, failed after Jobbik and its members of parliament (MPs) voted against it.
- Fidesz’s **‘supermajority’** at this election effectively locks the opposition parties out of the governance process, meaning that major constitutional changes and laws can now effectively be passed by the ruling party coalition alone.

Press freedom:

- According to the Freedom House, Hungary’s independent media rating has declined from **3.75** in 2016 to **4.25** in 2017. Freedom of press is an important bastion of modern liberal democracies and the curbing of press freedom signals rising levels of authoritarianism in Hungary.¹

¹ The Freedom House Score are measured on a 1–7 scale. A score of 1 means the country is most democratic and 7 means that the country is least democratic.

- The decline of press freedom can be attributed to the “strong political intervention in the Hungarian media market, several acquisitions financed with the help of state-controlled banks, and the controversial circumstances leading to the shutdown of the newspaper *Népszabadság*, Hungary’s leading critical daily”.

Civil Society freedom:

- Orbán’s government has outlined plans (“Stop Soros”) for a new law that would give it the power to ban civil society groups that help immigrants and refugees.
- Thus, proposed laws would require NGOs that work on migration-related issues to register with the interior ministry. They could be rejected on a national security basis after vetting by security agencies. Any foreign funding for migration-related activities would be subjected to a 25% tax.
- In addition, the European Commission has also taken Hungary to the European Court of Justice (ECJ) over the NGO laws.

Immigration:

- Fidesz’s rhetoric on immigration in recent years is closer to that of populist radical right parties than to that of other center right parties. This has important implications for contemporary party politics in Europe, as it demonstrates that political parties (particularly mainstream parties) on the center right can further shift to the right-wing nationalist dimension in order to appeal to more disaffected voters. From an issue position perspective, this strategy has arguably enabled Fidesz [to crowd out its main far right nationalist competitor Jobbik](#).
- The election campaign was dominated by immigration, with Orbán promising to defend the country's borders and block migration by Muslims. This hardline rhetoric bears much more resemblance to that of a nationalist far right party than to a traditional ‘conservative’ center right party.
- In 2015, Hungary built a fence along its borders with Serbia and Croatia to stop illegal migrants.

3. Implications for the EU Project:

- There are a number of important implications that the 2018 Hungarian national election poses for the future of the EU project. Previous Dutch, French and German

national parliamentary elections last year further demonstrated the different ideals outlined by political parties on the left and right of the political spectrum in regard to the future direction of the EU.

- In terms of foreign policy, Orbán wants to reform the EU, essentially transforming it into merely an administrator of European subsidies and a single market- and not a Europe of shared political values. Furthermore, the country has also decided, along with Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to reject EU migrant quotas.
- In addition, the European Commission has recently stated that it intends to sue Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic at the ECJ for refusing to take in asylum seekers.
- The continued backslide of liberal democracy in Hungary has led the EU to look at whether Hungary's voting rights should be stripped.
- In a resolution adopted by **393 votes to 221**, the European Parliament called for the EU to commence proceedings against Hungary under **Article 7** of the Treaty of the European Union.
- The resolution called for Hungary to repeal laws tightening rules against asylum seekers and non-governmental organizations and to allow the Central European University to remain open in Budapest.
- **Article 7** states that the bloc can impose sanctions, such as the suspension of voting rights, against a member country found to be in "serious and persistent breach" of founding values such as "respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights." (Click on the link here for more comprehensive information on the "**Article 7 procedure**").
- **Important Note:** The European Commission has launched **Article 7** proceedings against Poland for its judicial reforms that is said to have undermined independence of the judiciary.
- However, all other EU members would have to conclude that there had been such a breach—a very high bar for action. The suspension of voting right has never been used before.
- The resolution will be put to a vote in plenary in **September 2018**.

Summary:

- Therefore, the 2018 Hungarian national parliamentary election is particularly important as it demonstrates two important patterns, namely (a) the further electoral decline of social democratic parties and at the same time (b) the systematic 'rise' of two right-wing nationalist parties in the Hungarian political system, particularly that of the chameleon like Fidesz party, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.
- This article examined some of the key patterns of the 2018 Hungarian national parliamentary election. The decisive electoral victory of Orbán's Fidesz Party means that Fidesz has now secured a 2/3 majority for constitutional changes to take place. The 2/3 majority is significant as it allows Fidesz to effectively make sweeping changes to the Hungarian constitution and the diminished opposition parties in Hungary can do little to stop this. The center left MSZP party suffered its worst electoral result since 1990. Not only does this continue the center left trend of rapid electoral decline in Europe, but most importantly Hungary is now arguably under the auspices of an 'illiberal democracy' and one which challenges the foundations of the overall EU project. This election result cannot also just be seen through the lens of a single election. The significance of this election has much more importance, particularly in the influence it may have for the future of the EU project and the ongoing reforms that must be taken by the EU's institutions on key issues such as asylum seekers alongside the potential violations committed by Orbán's government on this issue.