How (not) to overcome right-wing populist governance:
Exploring the influence of structural and electoral factors in the latest parliamentary elections in Poland and Hungary

by

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Abstract

Poland is the first case of a state within the European Union in which a right-wing populist government has been voted out of office in regular parliamentary elections. One of several counter-examples to this is Hungary, where a right-wing populist government is continuing to hold power. Therefore, the aim of this thesis is to find out why the last parliamentary elections in Poland and Hungary had different outcomes. For this purpose, the following research question is posed: which factors explain the different election outcomes in the parliamentary elections in Poland (2023) and Hungary (2022)?

Methodologically, this thesis follows Mill's most similar cases design. First, the effects of right-wing populist governments on electoral fairness are examined by analysing 'type of government majority' and 'duration in power' as two structural factors. For this, I draw on the method of process tracing using quantitative data. To explore their influence, three indices measuring the quality of democracy are investigated. Then, the focus shifts to political strategies pursued by opposition and government in the electoral contest under consideration. It examines the impact of voter mobilisation and electoral alliances as opposition strategies on parliamentary election outcomes. For this purpose, the focus is on post-election surveys, as well as on further qualitative data like assessments and observations from country experts.

This study shows that in Poland the excellent mobilisation of voters by the opposition was the most influential of the factors examined. In Hungary, a transition failed primarily because the government efficiently used its two-thirds majority to implement measures that promoted its own retention of power. Based on these results, opposition parties in countries governed by right-wing populists can adapt their strategies and thus increase their chances of electoral success.

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1 Introduction

Right-wing populist parties are continuing to gain ground in Europe. From opposition parties that have long been neglected, strong and growing populist parties have emerged in many countries. Today, we see several examples in Europe where right-wing populist parties are represented in governments in European countries in different forms. Right-wing populist parties holding government positions can be found in Italy, Hungary, Slovakia and Finland, among others (Pieper, 2023). The minority government in Sweden relies on support from the populist opposition. Right-wing populists are also receiving consistently rising support in other major European states such as Germany and France (Statista, 2023). The Netherlands is the latest example of a major European country in which a right-wing populist party has received most of the votes in a latest parliamentary election (Kiesraad & NOS, 2023).

What unites many of these countries is the fact that they have been struggling to deal with right-wing populism, in some cases for decades, and are still doing so by being unable to substantially curb this phenomenon. Many different approaches have been applied across Europe: from total ignorance of right-wing populist parties by other parties, as happened in most European countries that now face right-wing populist parties in their parliaments (Mudde, 2004; Grzymala-Busse, 2019); to a minimum level of cooperation required for government action (Heidtmann & Mayer, 2023); to genuine cooperation in government responsibility, executed in several of the countries mentioned above. On content level one can observe a similarly wide-ranging variety of approaches from substantive and well-founded analyses of populist positions and proposals, through debunking misinformation spread by populists, to heated debates between political parties on controversial issues, sometimes at a low academic level (Müller, 2016; Pieper, 2023). Hardly any of these approaches have yet had any lasting impact with right-wing populist parties being continuously on the rise in several European countries.

Once in power, right-wing populist governments often face difficulties actually implementing their announced goals. Regularly, it becomes obvious that the transition of right-wing populists from anti-establishment opposition parties to actors in governing responsibility is hardly to reconcile with populist anti-elite premises. In cases of right-wing populist governments being unable to fundamentally improve the living conditions of their voters, their political failure is either explained by the fact that there are still “elites acting behind the scenes, whether at home or abroad” (Müller,

2016, p. 42). Or, as another strategy, populists go for the public search for, and denunciation of, scapegoats - in case of European right-wing populists, these are often non-European migrants or institutions of the European Union, which at the same time belongs to the despised elite. In any case, temporary failure does not harm the legitimacy of the populists, because in their view they are the only ones who continue to represent the real and only will of the people (Müller, 2016).

These divergent observations raise the question about the factors which explain the electoral success of right-wing populist governments in Europe. Hungary and Poland are two of several European countries that have been led by right-wing populist governments in the recent past. In Hungary, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán remains in power after his right-wing populist party Fidesz won the 2022 parliamentary elections, thereby reflecting the European trend of rising vote shares for populist parties and their increasing involvement in government responsibility. In Poland, we observe a European exception. Right-wing populist party PiS had to leave government after the 2023 parliamentary elections. In search of explanations for this circumstance, this thesis compares Hungary and Poland by analysing structural and electoral factors, subsequently asking:

> Which factors explain the different election outcomes in the parliamentary elections in Poland (2023) and Hungary (2022)?

To identify the factors that influenced the different election outcomes in Poland and Hungary, I classify potential factors into structural factors and electoral factors. Structural factors refer to the institutional arrangements which are seen as relevant for fair electoral competition, while electoral factors describe strategies that parties use in preparation for upcoming elections to increase their chances of electoral success. Both types of factors are assigned to one of the following sub-questions:

> To what extent did right-wing populist governments undermine freeness and fairness of these elections, and which tools did they use to do so?
>
> Which strategies did the opposition parties apply to increase their vote shares?

The subsequent structure looks like this: the introduction is followed by a theoretical chapter on right-wing populism and its links to liberal democracy and electoral competition. After some explanations of the methodology used, the analytical part of the thesis ensues. There, I first examine

the influences of right-wing populist governments and their measures on freedom and fairness in recent elections, before turning to election-specific factors. This is followed by a summary, including an outlook and notes on the limitations of this research.

2 Theory

The theoretical chapter of this thesis starts with an introduction to populist's ideology and their resulting motivations. The following literature review includes well-known and prestigious authors and academics and their definition of (right-wing) populism. This introduction serves to provide a better understanding of why and by what means right-wing populist parties came to power in Poland and Hungary in the first place, and how they were able to remain in government until the latest parliamentary elections. Of particular importance, especially for the next part of this chapter, is the connection between right-wing populist governments and how they dismantle a state's liberal institutions.

In a second step, the focus is on structural and electoral factors that derive from the sub-questions. With the help of the first sub-question, I examine whether the conditions of the last parliamentary elections in Poland and Hungary can be categorised as free and fair. The assumption that this may not have been the case is because right-wing populist governments have regularly dismantled liberal institutions like fair electoral competition in the past in order to increase their chances of electoral success (Mudde, 2007; 2010; Müller, 2016). Two structural factors are analysed in this context and translated into two directed hypotheses.

While the first sub-question deals with structural factors that can be used by right-wing governments to influence elections in their interest, the second sub-question aims at direct election campaign strategies of the opposition parties. These electoral factors are - at least partly - the result of unequal starting conditions in the election campaign. The thesis' goal here is to identify and assess factors that explain the different election outcomes in Poland and Hungary. Two electoral factors are examined for their influence and significance in the election campaign strategies of Polish and Hungarian parties. Further, their interdependence is analysed as well as their challenges and limits.

2.1 Introduction to right-wing populism

The rise of right-wing populism in Europe has become a pivotal focus of scholarly inquiry, with a myriad of studies shedding light on its multifaceted dimensions. This literature review provides an overview of key contributions by prominent scholars, each offering unique insights into the phenomenon of right-wing populism.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have made significant contributions to understanding the global rise of populism. Their work "Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism" (2019), delves into the cultural factors behind the surge in right-wing populism. Their research emphasizes the role of values, cultural shifts, and socio-economic factors in shaping populist movements. Jan-Werner Müller's influential work "What is Populism?" (2016) provides a theoretical framework for understanding populism while distinguishing it from other political phenomena. Müller's examination of the populist logic and its impact on liberal democracies is foundational. His more recent contribution “Democracy Rules” (2021), as well as further articles and interviews, continue to offer nuanced perspectives on the challenges posed by populism.

Cas Mudde is a leading expert in the study of political extremism and populism. Already back in 2004, he spoke about a “populist zeitgeist” and criticised the way (social) democracies dealt with it. He further has authored seminal works including "Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe" (2007), shifting his focus slightly from governments to right-wing political parties. Mudde's research explores their ideological foundations, electoral success, and impact (2010). Together with Chilean scholar Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Mudde further published the landmark book “Populism: A Very Short Introduction” (2017).

Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin contribute to populism literature with their work "National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy" (2018), in which they offer an in-depth exploration of core features and drivers of national populism. Their research investigates ideological foundations and electoral strategies contributing to the ascent of right-wing populist movements. Like Müller, Eatwell and Goodwin emphasise the anti-elite argument and describe the alienation of these elites from the (normal) people. Referring to electoral strategies, they cite cultural fears and identity issues that can be used to capture marginalised groups, a rhetoric of ‘popular rage’ as well as provocation and polarisation as driving forces.

2.2 Populism and liberal democracy

Particularly in countries with populist governments it is sensible to precede a substantive election analysis asking whether the elections under investigation were held fairly and in accordance with democratic principles. This refers not only to the technical organisation on election day itself, but above all to the preceding election campaign. Was there a fair distribution of state party funding? Were the media able to report freely and without pressure from the government on all parties? Did parties and organisations critical of the government also have the opportunity to present themselves to the public? These and other questions need to be analysed when examining the fairness of the above-mentioned elections.

The fact that the right-wing populist governments of Poland and Hungary have used various instruments to drive forward the dismantling of liberal institutions in their countries is neither a secret today, nor is it particularly surprising in retrospect. If one follows the understanding of Müller or Mudde, then it is easy to see why right-wing populists deliberately use structural factors and strategies to pursue their goals. According to classic populist ideology, populists claim to understand what the people want and that they can speak on behalf of them. In doing so, populists contest the powerful elites, whom they see as corrupt and whom they therefore deny the ability to legitimised representation. As leaders of the one and only true people, populists present themselves as the only legitimised group that can recognise and represent the general will of the people.

The notion that populists represent the general will of the people contrasts with a pluralist understanding of liberal democracy. Right-wing populists are therefore anti-pluralists by definition. According to this view, liberal institutions are not only not needed in right-wing populist governments, as the will of the people is already determined and defined by the populists anyway, they even pose a threat to the populists' retention of power. For example, through fair elections and a critical public discourse, another will of the people could develop that differs from the one set by populists. Due to this potential threat, it is a logical motivation for right-wing populists in power to dismantle liberal institutions to secure their own power claims. How does this work? To protect liberal institutions, there usually are major constitutional obstacles that populists need to overcome to undermine these institutions.

It is obvious that it is of great importance for the fairness of an election whether liberal institutions are under government control or not. The further populist governments can continue with

dismantling, the more they can change the conditions surrounding the election in their favour and at the same time deliberately weaken the opposition's chances of success. Significant disproportions in state party funding with dubious usage of state budgets for election campaigns, a partial or complete takeover of public media for targeted pro-government reporting, and the prevention of pluralistic expression of opinion, as well as the appointment of strong government supporters into key judicial posts to simplify the weakening or even banning of critical parties and organisations in case of doubt are just some of numerous examples how right-wing populists influence the fairness of elections.

This raises the question about the factors which enable populists to dismantle liberal institutions. Looking for answers, two structural factors - 'type of government majority' and 'duration in power' - are analysed in more detail. Populists need great majorities to amend the constitution as well as the longest possible time in power without interruption to come into a position that allows a realisation of their plans. With regard to populist ideology and liberal institutions as a threat to right-wing populists, the following two hypotheses about structural factors emerge:

> Hypothesis 1 (H1): The greater the majority of a right-wing populist government is, the more extensively it dismantles liberal institutions.
>
> Hypothesis 2 (H2): The longer a right-wing populist government is in power without interruption, the more extensively it dismantles liberal institutions.

2.3 Populism and electoral competition

Poland and Hungary are - at least formally - representative democracies. In such systems, political parties play a key role as organisations for political decision-making. They endeavour to occupy political positions through elections to subsequently implement their goals in a political community (Kneuer & Lauth, 2016). Whether a political party - regardless of whether it is right-wing populist or otherwise - is successful in the context of electoral competition or not, depends on a number of electoral factors, which the parties in turn try to influence using certain strategies. This chapter introduces two electoral factors: voter mobilisation and electoral alliances.

2.3.1 Voter mobilisation

Voter mobilisation, a central aspect of electoral politics, draws upon various theoretical frameworks. Significant contributions to theoretical foundations of voter mobilisation come from Green & Gerber (2019), and Kriesi (2008). Bartek Pytlas (2021) looks closer at the electoral rhetoric of PiS and shows how the party tries to mobilise voters this way. In their seminal work "Get Out the Vote!: How to Increase Voter Turnout", Green & Gerber (2019) present a comprehensive analysis of different mobilisation strategies, including the use of mass media, social media, and personal canvassing. In what is now the fourth edition of their landmark work, they emphasize the importance of personal contact and social pressure in mobilising voters, highlighting the role of campaign tactics in increasing voter turnout. Swiss political scientist Hanspeter Kriesi has been researching political participation and voter mobilisation for decades and is considered one of the most influential scientists in this field. His earlier contributions focus on social and contextual factors shaping voter mobilisation, highlighting the role of social networks, political cleavages, and institutional contexts in influencing individuals' participation in electoral politics. Although his article "Political Mobilisation, Political Participation and the Power of the Vote" (2008) deals with non-electoral forms of participation, too, it also provides important insights and implications for electoral participation and highlights the growing role of media. All in all, Kriesi's works underscore the interconnectedness between social structures and political behaviour in understanding voter mobilisation.

In Poland, voter mobilisation might have played a key role, as voter turnout in the 2023 parliamentary election was 74.38 per cent (NEC, 2024b), which is significantly higher compared to 2019, where it was 61.74 per cent (NEC, 2019). A different picture emerges for Hungary, where turnout was around 70 per cent in 2018 and 2022 (NVI, 2018; 2022). However, voter mobilisation in this context means much more than simply convincing previous non-voters to cast their vote again in the next election. It is also about the question of which voter groups a party seeks to mobilise. Activating young and educated voters living in urban areas might have opposite consequences than mobilising older, uneducated voters from rural areas. Thus, this chapter examines different voter groups, their respective turnout and behaviour, as well as different opportunities for government and opposition when it comes to voter mobilisation.

2.3.2 Electoral alliances

The formation of electoral alliances is a phenomenon on the rise that influences election outcomes. Here, several parties join forces before an election to increase their chances of success. This strategy is particularly widespread in Central and Eastern Europe. In Western Europe it has not yet become a common means, with France as an exception. This trend is explained by the fact that parties in Central and Eastern Europe are often less stable and therefore disappear from the political landscape more quickly (Berglund & Ekman, 2013; Deegan-Krause, 2013; Enyedi, 2016). The formation of electoral alliances is usually applied by opposition parties. However, it can also be advantageous for incumbent governing parties, mostly observed in cases where no single party holds an absolute majority.

What exactly does this strategy look like? In countries with a fragmented party system, where one party has been dominant for years, it is difficult if not impossible for smaller parties to catch up individually. The dominant party usually has more financial resources for campaigning, profits from greater media coverage and can employ a range of other strategies to manifest the status quo. For parties striving for a change, forming an electoral alliance might be the only realistic alternative to come to power. Further, being part of an electoral alliance might be beneficial for very small parties as they could overcome blocking clauses that way. It is not uncommon that even parties with very different contents or values join forces to defeat the incumbent government. Each party contributes to the alliances' success by being considered as competent on certain political issues or addressing distinct voter groups.

Analysing electoral alliances as election strategy starts with looking at reasons why alliance formation is sensible or necessary at all. This thesis explains the role of blocking clauses and the resulting issues that smaller parties face in parliamentary elections, as well as causes for unequal starting conditions for government and opposition parties when entering election campaigning. Further, four conditions are established that need to be fulfilled to make electoral alliances a potential game changer in parliamentary elections. This includes analysing whether the composition of an electoral alliance is rather homogeneous or rather heterogeneous. It might be easier for homogeneous alliances to achieve internal unity, but their electoral potential may be lower. More heterogeneous alliances might face a greater potential electorate but could struggle in finding an identity besides the joint goal to replace government and presenting themselves as a

coherent political camp. A cross-connection to the factor voter mobilisation becomes particularly clear in this regard.

Forming electoral alliances is a regularly applied election strategy in Poland and Hungary. In Poland, where specially formed committees run in parliamentary elections instead of parties, dominant party *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS) - in English *Law and Justice* - has been a member of the *United Rights* alliance *Zjednoczona Prawica* (ZP) since 2014. Alongside PiS, ZP included four significantly smaller parties for the 2023 parliamentary elections. Despite coming from distinct parties, all ZP candidates constantly compete in the name of PiS and their election committee (PKW, 2015; NEC, 2019; 2024b). In 2019, ZP achieved an absolute majority of seats in the Polish parliament *Sejm*, something that PiS would not have achieved if it had stood alone (NEC, 2019). Electoral alliance *Koalicja Obywatelska* (KO) - in English *Civic Coalition* - was formed in 2018 as an opposition alliance and competed in the 2019 and 2023 elections with identical line-up. In contrast to PiS, KO ran as an official coalition committee despite being clearly led by Donald Tusk's *Civic Platform* party *Platforma Obywatelska* (PO) (NEC, 2024b).

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's dominant party Fidesz has first formed an electoral alliance with Christian-democratic party *Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt* (KDNP) in 2006 and ever since. While the opposition parties mainly competed independently in the penultimate parliamentary elections, they formed the electoral alliance *Egységben Magyarországért – United For Hungary* (EM) for the 2022 elections (NVI, 2018; 2022). It comprised six parties for the 2022 elections, with two more parties in support that were not officially part of EM.

We can see that in both countries the government as well as the opposition seek to capitalise on the advantages of electoral alliances. Further, it is important to know that media does not always differentiate correctly between PiS and ZP and sometimes reports about Fidesz, when it means the Fidesz/KDNP alliance. This thesis claims to analyse in a nuanced way and to always work out the differences transparently.

3 Methodology

This thesis is methodologically located in the field of comparative political science. In this discipline, empirical phenomena are analysed and compared to each other to gain new insights, regardless of the specific method chosen. The control of relevant variables, which often is difficult in practice due to various factors, is both a condition and a challenge in comparative political science (Lauth et al., 2015). Arend Lijphart (1971) essentially distinguishes between four methods of comparison in political science: case studies, the comparative method, the experimental method and the statistical method. Comparative political science does not operate exclusively in the academic interest, that is, to generate theories and work out similarities and differences, but can also pursue political objectives, as it does in policy research (Lauth et al., 2015).

Before a comparison can be carried out methodically, the cases analysed need to be formed and selected. Although countries as popular subjects of investigation are principally well-suited for applying comparative methods, they have to be narrowed down in a meaningful way due to their almost endless characteristics that can be analysed. This is the only way to develop a country into an analysable case, the investigation of which enables a specific gain in knowledge. Consequently, the formation and selection of the relevant cases always remains in the researcher's hands, who should orientate individual case construction on the research question and the de-limitability of the cases from one another (Lauth et al., 2015). The points in time or time periods at which the selected cases are analysed also play a key role and should be chosen carefully to ensure maximum comparability.

In addition to case selection, the determination of analysed variables is the second basis for any comparative research. As already mentioned, the complexity of the research object needs to be reduced before it can be analysed in a sensible way. In comparative research, a distinction is usually made between three types of variables. The dependent variable describes the phenomenon that the researcher seeks to explain. The independent variables comprise all those factors that are used to explain the phenomenon in question. Since the number of possible independent variables in a comparative study is finite and the gain in knowledge threatens to be marginal if too many variables are included, context variables have to be taken into account, too. These are boundary conditions that determine the degree of equality of the analysed cases but were not determined as dependent or independent variables (Lauth et al., 2015).

Let us go back to the four methods of comparison according to Lijphart (1971). For him, a case study exists when there are several variables but only one case. This method is out of the question for this thesis due to the case selection made. The experimental method is not applicable in the social sciences because - unlike in natural science - it is never possible to control all variables in practice by setting up experimental conditions in advance. The statistical method is ruled out, too, which for Lijphart indeed represents the scientifically appropriate form of analysis but is almost only applicable to a large number of analysed cases. This leaves the comparative method, which is suitable for a small to medium-sized number of cases and includes several variables.

Within the comparative method, two strategies emerge as to how the case selection is to be carried out. Researchers achieve the greatest possible gain in knowledge when they either compare very similar cases to find an explanation for different outcomes (method of difference) or when they compare very different cases with very similar outcomes to find the determining variable(s) (method of agreement). Both methods go back to British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who first wrote down this idea in his book 'A System of Logic' (1843). The basic idea behind what is today known as ‘Mill’s methods’ is to achieve the highest possible degree of control over the variables under investigation in order to isolate and analyse individual causal relationships (Lauth et al., 2015). The similarity to the experimental method according to Lijphart (1971) becomes apparent here, which, as already explained, cannot be achieved in political science.

Mill's methods gave rise to two research designs: the most similar cases design (MSCD) and the most different cases design (MDCD). Although their basic principles are very similar to the method of difference and the method of agreement, they should not be mixed up (Jahn, 2012; Lauth et al, 2015). In MSCD, cases are selected according to the following criteria: different characteristics of the outcome (dependent variable), very similar context (independent and context variables). In contrast to context variables, which are ideally identical in MSCD, the independent variables must not be identical. Although the independent variables should be very similar, they should vary in a deliberately controlled manner (Lauth et al., 2015). The quasi-experimental nature of this research design becomes clear here. In MDCD, cases with similar outcomes (dependent variable) are analysed, but whose contexts differ greatly (independent and context variables). One or a few factors are sought that can be considered as sufficient condition(s) for the phenomenon to be explained.

3.1 Case selection

This thesis compares two countries using Lijphart's comparative method. Cases are constructed from the countries Poland and Hungary, which are analysed using MSCD to discover causes for a different outcome in very similar contexts. Poland and Hungary are both parliamentary democracies according to their respective constitutions and show a number of further domestic political similarities. On the legislative side, the parliaments of both countries are elected by the people every four years. Both parliaments are characterised by similar blocking clauses with five per cent for political parties and higher thresholds for electoral alliances, which vary between eight and 15 per cent (NEC, 2024b; NVI, 2022). The Polish parliament *Sejm* is the significantly more powerful chamber compared to the Senate in the state's bicameral system. Both chambers are elected by proportional representation. Hungary has a unicameral parliament, which is elected by a combination of majority vote and proportional representation. The executive is headed by a prime minister in both countries. In Poland, the state president also possesses little executive powers, while the Hungarian president fulfils almost exclusively representative functions.

In addition to currently finding themselves in relatable political systems, Poland and Hungary have also followed similar paths in recent history, particularly since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Both countries became democratic republics in 1989 after decades of communist rule under Soviet leadership. The lengthy transformation process not only took place on a political level, but also became visible in the economy through the abandonment of the planned economy, which was replaced by a market economy structure. Between 1992 and 2019, Poland's gross domestic product grew steadily and achieved growth rates of up to seven per cent (IMF, 2024a). The Hungarian economy also benefited greatly from the new system in the long term, although individual crises occasionally led to negative growth rates and the average increase was not as high as in Poland (IMF, 2024b). The 1990s can be seen as a decade of democratisation in both countries. Besides several changes of government, Poland also worked on a new constitution, which came into force in 1997. Although the Hungarian constitution formally remained in place, it was massively revised in 1989. Hungary also experienced regular changes of government in the 1990s, including a temporary political comeback of communist forces.

The countries' accessions to important alliances such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1999 and the European Union (EU) in 2004 also took place in parallel. Multilevel

reforms and democratisation processes peaked during the preparations for EU accession and subsequently never enjoyed the same priority in Poland and Hungary as before. National conservative forces became increasingly popular in the following years and have been in uninterrupted government in Poland since 2015 (PKW, 2015) and in Hungary since 2010 (NVI, 2010). The continued success of EU-sceptical parties and alliances is remarkable in that Poland is still by far the largest net recipient within the European Union in 2022, followed by Romania and Hungary (Busch et al., 2023).

However, despite their political similarities and comparable recent history, these two cases differ in one fundamental aspect: the results of their last parliamentary elections. In this regard, Poland is a special and exclusive case in the EU. In Poland, reigning right-wing populist party PiS and its committee received 35.38 percent and thus most of the votes cast, but clearly failed to achieve an absolute majority once again. The new cabinet led by Donald Tusk consists of his electoral alliance KO (30.70 per cent) and its coalition partners Trzecia Droga (14.40 per cent) and Lewica (8.61 per cent) (NEC, 2024b). In contrast, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party clearly won the 2022 parliamentary elections in Hungary together with its long-standing alliance partner KDNP. They gained 135 of 199 seats in the Hungarian parliament and were thus able to remain in power. The opposition alliance EM received 57 seats (NVI, 2022). In the recent past, Poland is the only case within EU in which a right-wing populist government has been voted out of office in regular parliamentary elections, making the case a special and unique one.

3.2 Operationalisation and data collection

The dependent variable of this MSCD study is the election outcome of the last parliamentary elections in Poland and Hungary. Subject of the study is the electoral success of right-wing populist parties Fidesz and PiS, including their electoral alliance partners, as well as the major opposition alliance in both countries. On a first level, electoral success of the political camps can be measured on the basis of vote share and the resulting distribution of parliamentary seats. These data are publicly available via the national electoral commissions. However, relying on these data only will lead to a false conclusion as it ignores two central aspects. On the one hand, the composition of the individual electoral alliances has slightly changed over the years. On the other hand, and much more significant, the fact that PiS's committee received the most votes overall was worthless, as it

was unable in finding a necessary coalition partner to achieve a majority with. It becomes obvious that focusing on vote share only is not sufficient. Therefore, the dependent variable ‘election outcome’ requires a second level on which the government is analysed and differentiated according to whether right-wing populist parties participate in power or not. Thus, ‘election outcome’ is a dichotomous variable as it distincts the right-wing populists into the relevant characteristics ‘in government’ or ‘in opposition’. The composition of current and previous governments is available via the national electoral commissions, too.

The independent variable ‘type of government majority’ measures power and influence that right-wing populist governments can exert based on its vote share. It is measured according to the following four categories: two-thirds majority, absolute majority, strongest actor in a coalition, minority government. These categories are sorted in descending order, meaning that actors with a two-thirds majority enjoy significantly more room for manoeuvre than actors in a minority government. The distinction between a two-thirds majority and an absolute majority is relevant because in both cases a two-thirds majority allows for constitutional amendments, which in turn are often used by right-wing populists to retain power. In terms of data collection, this variable draws on the same data as the dependent variable.

The second independent variable is ‘duration in power’. This structural factor is usually measured in electoral periods, with regular parliamentary elections being held every four years in both countries. A somewhat more nuanced view emerges when ‘duration in power’ is measured in years instead of electoral periods. It is true that no early elections were held in either country during the latest period of right-wing populist rule. However, it does happen that single parties leave electoral alliances, or new ones join, as happened in Poland during the last legislative period (Szczerbiak, 2021). *Porozumienie*'s withdrawal from electoral alliance ZP in led to a temporary minority government of just the same from 2021 to 2023. In addition, this study measures ‘duration in power’ without interruption. Particularly in countries where the political landscape is characterised by a strong right-wing populist camp and an opposition with very different interests, one election period might be sufficient to reverse structural reforms, as latest developments in Poland show (Minder, 2024). The independent variable ‘duration in power’ can be measured by looking at the composition of current and former governments in Poland and Hungary and thus also draws on the same data sources as do the aforementioned variables.

With the aim of measuring the extent to which right-wing populist governments undermine freedom and fairness of elections, this thesis analyses the development of democratic quality in Poland and Hungary under right-wing populist rule. To measure the quality of democracy, I use three of the most internationally recognised and well-known democracy indices: the Democracy Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the Freedom in the World rating on political rights and civil liberties (FIW) by Freedom House (FH), as well as the Electoral Democracy Index (EDI) and the Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) by the V-Dem Institute. The selection of these ratings is made in such a way that both the situation of individual voters and the situation of the voting population as a whole are taken into account. This ensures that higher scores in the democracy indices go hand in hand with a higher degree of freedom and fairness in elections, and vice versa. By selecting three independent institutions that use different measurement techniques, I avoid possible bias and uncertainty and increase the validity of analysed data.

The first index analysed is the Democracy Index from the *Economist Intelligence Unit Limited*. This index was invented in 2006, has been published annually since 2010 and currently covers 167 countries. Methodologically, the EIU's Democracy Index is characterised by a catalogue of 60 questions, each with two or three possible answers. These questions are distributed across five assessment categories: electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties. Depending on the answer, a country is awarded 0, 0.5 or 1 point. A country's points within one section are summed up, multiplied by 10 and divided by the number of questions. The average of all five sections gives the overall index. Based on this score, a country is then sorted into one of the four categories: full democracy (8.01 – 10 points), flawed democracy (6.01 – 8 points), hybrid regime (4.01 – 6 points), authoritarian regime (0 – 4 points). Expert judgements and public surveys in the respective countries build the basis for answering the questions (EIU, 2024).

Freedom House is an international non-governmental organisation, based in Washington, D.C. and founded in 1941. Its flagship publication is the annual report *Freedom in the World*, first published in 1973, which measures the degree of freedom and democracy in almost 200 countries. For FH, the special link between freedom and democracy lies in "the assumption that freedom for all people is best achieved in liberal democratic societies" (FIW, 2024, p. 1). This is reflected in FIW's methodological distinction between political rights and civil liberties. The catalogue of ten

questions on political rights circles around the sub-categories: electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and functioning of government. The civil liberties indicator is assessed based on 15 questions deriving from the following sub-categories: freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, as well as personal autonomy and individual rights. According to the answer, between 0 and 4 points are awarded, whereby no half points are given. The answers are provided by a team of internal and external analysts and expert advisers who draw on newspaper articles, academic analyses, reports from non-governmental organisations, individual professional contacts and data from on-the-ground research (FIW, 2024).

The points achieved within an indicator are added up and converted into a rating from 1 to 7. A rating of 1 corresponds to the best possible level, a rating of 7 to the worst. The combined average of both indicators produces the final Freedom Rating. Based on this score, countries are divided into the three categories 'Free' (1 – 2.5 points), 'Partly Free' (3 – 5) and 'Not Free' (5.5 – 7), also referred to as status. Since 2020, the converted rankings are no longer presented in the final report; instead, FH uses the exact scores. However, as the formula for converting scores into status remains identical and the raw data is still available, this thesis uses the rating from 1 to 7, as the period under investigation extends the year 2020.

The abbreviation V-Dem stands for *Varieties of Democracy* and refers to an academic project that measures democracy in a particularly complex and comprehensive way. The V-Dem Institute, which manages the project, was founded in 2014 by Staffan I. Lindberg and is now an independent research institute at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Although V-Dem has only been publishing annual democracy reports since 2017, it contains data going back to 1789 in its database. In terms of methodology, V-Dem distinguishes between the following five high-level principles of democracy: electoral and liberal, which are analysed in this thesis; as well as participatory, deliberative and egalitarian components of democracy (V-Dem, 2024). Altogether, V-Dem measures over 600 attributes of democracy. Each value measured is the result of aggregated assessments of at least five country experts. The huge amount of data allows the project scholars to create an almost infinite number of indices and to examine a wide range of correlations between the attributes analysed.

As mentioned above, this thesis focusses on the Electoral Democracy Index and the Liberal Democracy Index, which are each scaled from 0 to 1. The EDI measures "the *de facto* existence of

all the institutions in Robert Dahl's famous articulation of 'polyarchy' as electoral democracy" (V-Dem Institute, 2024, p. 53). This status can hardly be achieved to 100 per cent, although it shows fewer complex demands on democracy than does the LDI. That index is composed of parts of the EDI and parts of the Liberal Component Index (LCI), which in turn places particular emphasis on protecting individual freedoms, separation of powers and rule of law (V-Dem, 2024).

3.3 Data analysis

The method of process tracing is applied for the analysis of the structural factors 'type of government majority' and 'duration in power'. Process tracing is a research method used extensively in social science to investigate causal mechanisms within case studies. This method involves reconstructing the development of the phenomenon under investigation, allowing researchers to delve deeply into the sequence of events or steps that lead to a particular outcome (George & Bennett, 2005). Applied correctly, process tracing allows to discover causal links between the dependent variable and independent variables, providing a detailed understanding of how and why certain processes like election outcomes occur. Both structural factors on their own, as well as the combination of both variables can be analysed applying process tracing.

According to George and Bennett (2005), process tracing involves the systematic examination of selected evidence to develop an understanding of how a specific process unfolds. This method, which originates from single case studies, can be applied excellently in the context of this thesis, as initially two case studies are carried out, whose combination in the form of a comparison subsequently increases the external validity (Lauth et al., 2015; Schimmelfennig, 2006). Before analysing each case individually and conducting a follow-up cross-case comparison, it is necessary to do an appropriate and justified case selection, develop hypotheses about possible causal mechanisms and collect sufficient data from various sources, as mentioned above. Having said that, two within-case analyses seek to reveal influential factors of both election outcomes by testing respective hypotheses. Comparing the cases follow-up aims at assessing the effectiveness of certain strategies, as well as the influence of specific factors to determine findings that explain different election outcomes in similar environments.

The analysis of the electoral factors follows an inductive approach. Instead of using quantitative data to test hypotheses deductively, as in the case of the structural factors, I conduct a qualitative analysis to find about the role that voter mobilisation and electoral alliances played for the outcome of the parliamentary elections under investigation. The factor voter mobilisation can be extracted on a first level from voter turnout and offers scope for comparing the latest election with the penultimate one. Publicly available sources show both the turnout across the country and broken down to local level. Comparing turnout can provide initial indications and clues as to the extent to which voter mobilisation was an influential factor for the election results in Poland and Hungary. However, a comparison of voter turnout says nothing about which specific voter groups were mobilised particularly successfully and which were not. On a second level, data and statistics concerning specific voter groups provide information on the extent to which parties were successful in mobilising inside different social strata (old/young, educated/uneducated, urban/rural, ...). That makes it possible to analyse the extent to which a party or electoral alliance was able to mobilise the voter groups it targeted and to what extent it was also able to mobilise groups that were not primarily addressed by its substantive orientation.

4 Analysis

The first chapter of the analysis deals with populism and liberal democracy. The hypotheses about the structural factors ‘type of government majority’ and ‘duration in power’ are tested using the data of the democracy indices introduced above. The second chapter focusses on populism and electoral competition, exploring the extent to which voter mobilisation and electoral alliances were relevant aspects in explaining the latest election outcomes in Poland and Hungary.

4.1 Populism and liberal democracy

In the following chapter, the cases of Poland and Hungary are analysed separately, but in identical manner. Both case studies start just before the introduced right-wing populists last came to power. The upcoming analysis is provided in sections that are based on legislative periods. For every

period, I first trace the political developments in the country as comprehensively as necessary, but also as concisely as possible. Afterwards, I describe the effects of this development on the quality of democracy referring to the introduced democracy indices. This is not only a necessity for testing the hypotheses, but it further enables the contextual categorisation of measured values on the quality of democracy.

4.1.1 The case of Poland (2015 – 2023)

Before 2015. In the election period prior to the period under review, Poland was governed by a coalition consisting of PO and Polish People's Party *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (PSL). The latter is considered to represent the interests of farmers in Poland and has a Christian Democratic and conservative orientation, while PO favours economic liberalism and pursues a pro-European course. Their coalition had a narrow majority in the Sejm. Its lead in the Senate was somewhat greater. The coalition of PO and PSL went into the parliamentary elections in October 2015 significantly weakened. In June 2014, there was a wiretapping affair, as a result of which then Prime Minister Donald Tusk faced a vote of confidence in the *Sejm* - which he politically survived (Schmitz, 2014). Shortly afterwards, Tusk nevertheless left his post as Prime Minister as he moved to Brussels to become President of the European Council.

2015 – 2019. The period under review for Poland begins with the elections to the *Sejm* and the Senate in October 2015. In addition to PiS, *Solidarna Polska* (United Poland) and *Polska Razem* (Poland Together) also stood for the national conservative and Eurosceptic electoral alliance ZP, among others. ZP achieved 37.58 per cent of the vote in the parliamentary elections. This was enough for an absolute majority in the *Sejm* with ZP holding 235 out of 460 seats, as some opponents failed to overcome the blocking clauses. Previous coalition partners PO and PSL competed individually. PO won 24.09 per cent of the vote and 138 seats, PSL 5.13 per cent and 16 seats. Therefore, PO and PSL were unable to continue their previous coalition. In the Senate elections, PiS won 61 seats, PO 34 (PKW, 2015).

One of the first acts of ZP when sworn in was working on a controversial judicial reform. The European Commission, which objected to the reform plans from the outset on the grounds that they were incompatible with EU law, repeatedly admonished the Polish government. Out of concern for

the independence of the judiciary in Poland, the Commission ultimately even resorted to a particularly severe instrument: it initiated sanction proceedings against Poland under Article 7 TEU (Nuspliger, 2017). As a result, the prime minister was replaced at the instigation of PiS party leader Jarosław Kaczyński. Beata Szydło had to resign and was replaced by Mateusz Morawiecki. One of Morawiecki's first official acts was to replace three ministers who had repeatedly and deliberately fuelled the conflict with the EU during the first two years of government (Baumann, 2018). These personnel measures were not to be understood as a substantive reorientation of ZP, but primarily served to improve the relationship with the EU – on whose money Poland, as the largest net recipient for many years, was and is always dependent (Busch et al., 2023). However, the judicial reform that ZP continued to pursue could not be implemented as comprehensively as desired due to the pressure exerted on Poland by the initiated sanction proceedings.

At the time of the government transition at the end of 2015, the EIU's Democracy Index for Poland showed a score of 7.47. This has put Poland in the upper range of the category of flawed democracies, not far away from being considered a full democracy. The score of 7.47 was the highest for Poland since the Democracy Index was first published in 2006 - and also the highest score for the country to date (EIU, 2024). Under Prime Minister Beata Szydło, the score calculated by EIU fell to 6.83 within two years. This means that Poland was still considered a flawed democracy, but with this score the country was closer to the threshold for transition to a hybrid regime than to full democracy. This can also be observed in the scores of the Democracy Index in subsequent years. Poland slipped to a score of 6.62 by the end of this electoral term in 2019. However, the decline slows down and amounts to 0.05 points from 2018 to 2019 (EIU, 2024). Freedom House awarded Poland the best possible score of 1 for both indicators in 2015. One year later, the score for the civil liberties indicator had fallen to 2. The fact that this happened so soon after the election is all the more remarkable considering that the Freedom House score "is typically changed only if there has been a real-world development during the year that warrants a decline or improvement" (FIW, 2024, p. 2). In 2018, the score for the political rights indicator also falls to 2. V-Dem calculated a high EDI score of 0.88 for Poland in 2015. In the first year after the change of government, this score drops significantly to 0.73. The EDI then declines slightly until 2019. V-Dem calculated a lower starting value of 0.78 for the LDI. This index also fell sharply to 0.60 in the first year, followed by a slight but steady decline to 0.51 measured in 2019 (V-Dem, 2024).

2019 – 2021. In preparation for the regular parliamentary elections in October 2019, the electoral alliance KO was founded a good eighteen months earlier. Similar to ZP, KO is also characterised by one dominant party and several minor members. In the election to the *Sejm*, KO received 27.4 per cent of the vote, equating to 134 of 460 seats. The clear winner of the parliamentary election was PiS, which once again competed as part of the ZP alliance, this time with five further parties. ZP achieved 43.6 per cent of the vote, which was sufficient for another absolute majority of 235 parliamentary seats. The election to the Senate, which took place in parallel, brought an important change. ZP lost its absolute majority in the Senate, winning only 48 seats. The new alliance KO accounted for 43 of the 100 seats (NEC, 2019).

As a result, ZP emerged weakened from the 2019 elections. Losing the absolute majority in the Senate had concrete consequences for the work of the governing alliance. On the one hand, an absolute majority in the Senate is one of the requirements for passing amendments to the constitution. Secondly, the Senate has the right to veto the first proposal for legislation submitted by the *Sejm*. In fact, the final decision as to whether or not a law is submitted to the President for approval lies with the parliament. However, the exercise of the veto power can be used by the opposition as a strategy to deliberately delay the government's legislative intentions.

In addition to the loss of the absolute majority in the Senate and the ongoing smouldering conflict with the European Union concerning the independence of the Polish judiciary, Prime Minister Morawiecki was also facing domestic political problems. A new broadcasting law planned by ZP has been sharply criticised by the opposition and a number of civic movements, as it could restrict media freedom in Poland. This draft law has also met with resistance from within the alliance itself (Zeit Online, 2021). This bill was another proof that a Poland governed by ZP was continuously trying to dismantle essential liberal institutions such as the freedom of the media and press or an independent judiciary.

The fact that it was becoming more complicated for ZP to find majorities for its ideas was for the moment also reflected in the EIU's Democracy Index, which calculated a value of 6.85 for 2020. This was the first time that the index score has risen compared to the previous year during the period under review. For 2021, the index showed a slight decline for Poland to 6.80 (EIU, 2024). Both of the FIW scores remained constant at 2 until the end of 2021 (FIW, 2024). For both V-Dem

indices, noticeable declines from 0.68 to 0.61 (EDI) and from 0.51 to 0.45 can be observed from 2019 to 2020 (V-Dem, 2024).

2021 – 2023. The planned broadcasting law went too far for ZP member party *Porozumienie*, which is why it refused to cooperate with the governing alliance on this issue. Prime Minister Morawiecki then dismissed Jarosław Gowin, party founder and most influential politician of *Porozumienie*, and relieved him of his duties as his deputy. *Porozumienie's* reaction was not long in coming. The party left the ZP alliance and no longer wanted to cooperate with PiS (Wanat, 2021). With *Porozumienie's* departure, ZP formally lost its absolute majority in the *Sejm*. ZP hoped to continue finding majorities in the *Sejm* in the belief that some *Porozumienie* MPs would turn their backs on their party and instead join the electoral alliance as independent MPs. In fact, some of *Porozumienie's* MPs rejoined ZP, but as a new parliamentary group. However, this number of members was not sufficient to compensate for the lost seats, meaning that no absolute majority could be formed in the *Sejm*. With these conditions in the *Sejm* and Senate, ZP was not able to implement PiS's legislative plans to dismantle liberal institutions ever more drastically by the end of the election period.

This was also reflected in the development of the EIU Democracy Index. The lack of majorities for further undermining Poland's liberal institutions allowed the country's score to rise again: to 7.04 in 2022 and to 7.18 in 2023. Both FIW scores remained constant once again and showed a final score of 2 for both civil liberties and political rights (FIW, 2024). EDI and LDI reacted to these developments with stagnating scores, although both indices were rising minimally at the end of the investigation period. For 2023, the EDI displayed a score of 0.59, the LDI of 0.44 (V-Dem, 2024).

Conclusion. Hypothesis 1 claims that the greater the majority of a right-wing populist government is, the more extensively it dismantles liberal institutions. For the case of Poland, H1 is essentially confirmed by all three indices. Particularly at the end of ZP's first term in office within the investigation period (2019), the scores of all indices are significantly lower than at the beginning (2015). During this legislative period, ZP held absolute majorities in both *Sejm* and Senate. However, looking at the time span from 2019 to 2023, we also find arguments against the confirmation of H1. The fact that ZP lost its absolute majority in the Senate and later in the *Sejm*, too, was reflected in the indices in various ways. The EIU Democracy Index displayed itself volatile

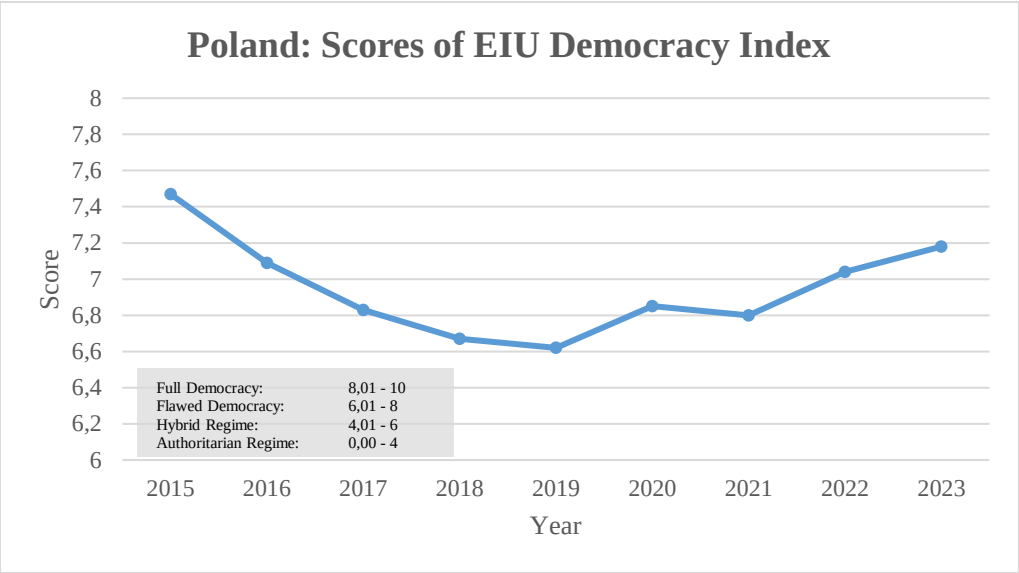

Figure 1: Poland: Scores of EIU Democracy Index (own illustration, based on EIU, 2024)

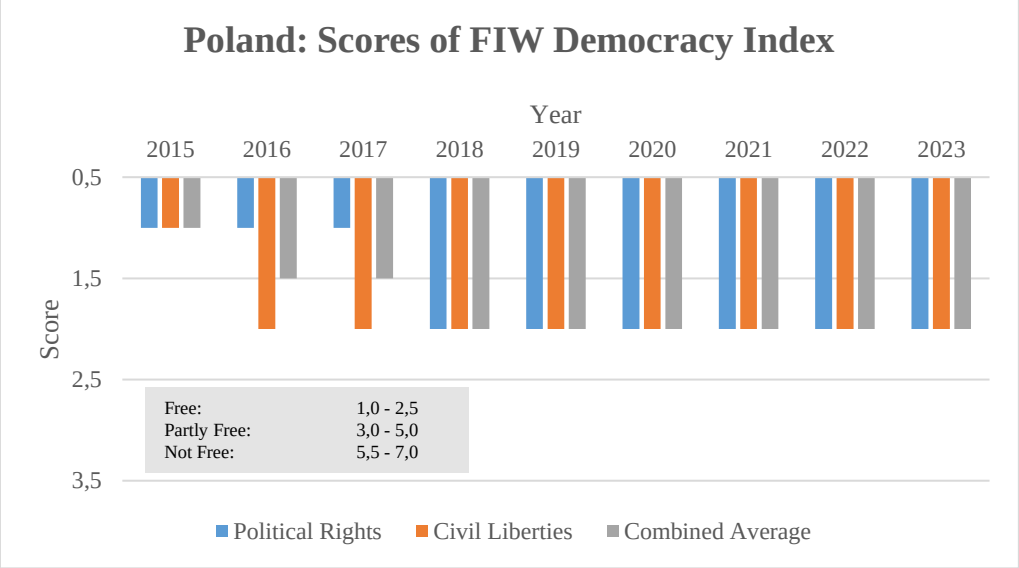

Figure 2: Poland: Scores of FIW Democracy Index (own illustration, based on FIW, 2024)

between 2019 and 2023 and recovered much of the lost quality of democracy during the reign of the minority government. In the end, index data from 2015 to 2019 is more meaningful compared to data from 2019 to 2023, which finally leads to the confirmation of H1.

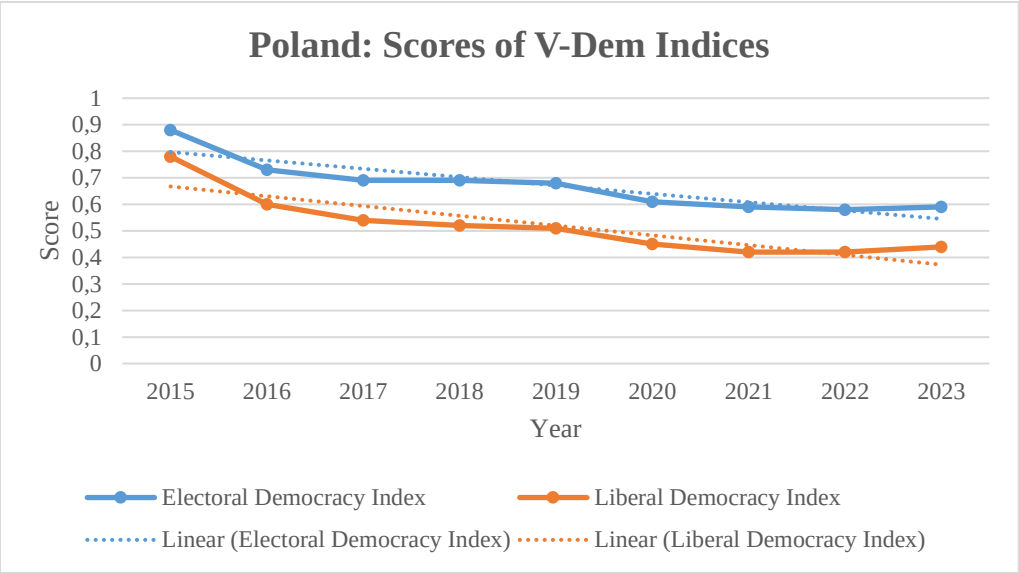

Figure 3: Poland: Scores of V-Dem Democracy Indices (own illustration, based on V-Dem, 2024)

Hypothesis 2 claims that the longer a right-wing populist government is in power without interruption, the more extensively it dismantles liberal institutions. For the case of Poland, H2 cannot be confirmed. The data of the three analysed indices combined do not produce a coherent overall picture. H2 is best supported by the V-Dem Indices, where the analysed scores fell constantly until 2021, before signs of a turnaround can be seen. EDI and LDI displayed significantly lower scores at the end of the investigation period when compared to 2015 - an important difference to the data from the EIU Democracy Index. EIU's 2023 score of 7.18 was the second-highest one in the period under review; only in 2015 a higher score was calculated. This clearly contradicts H2. The data from Freedom House neither confirms nor refutes the hypothesis, as this index stagnates during the second half of the study period. In summary, just the data from one index supports this hypothesis, and it does not do so in its entirety.

4.1.2 The case of Hungary (2010 – 2022)

The period under analysis for Hungary starts with the parliamentary elections in April 2010 and ends with the last parliamentary elections to date in April 2022. The fact that the reference period for Hungary is one election cycle longer than that of Poland is due to the circumstance that the right-wing populist party Fidesz has been in power together with KDNP for exactly that period

longer. This difference does not diminish the comparability of the two cases; rather, this criterion can help to determine whether a longer period in power is associated with a greater loss of democratic quality - as indicated by hypothesis 2.

Before 2010. Before the 2010 parliamentary elections, Hungary was in a deep economic and political crisis. The coalition that emerged from the last elections, consisting of the socialists from *Magyar Szocialista Párt* (MSZP) and the liberals from *Szabad Demokraták Szövetsége* (SZDSZ), has been under pressure since the moment it was sworn in. In May 2006, then Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány gave a speech in which he admitted, using strong and vulgar language, that he and his government had failed and lied to voters for years in order to win elections (BBC News, 2006). The unwanted publicising of this speech a few months later led to violent mass protests against the government (Deutsche Welle, 2006). Despite this, Gyurcsány remained in office until the beginning of 2009, before leaving his post following a self-initiated vote of no confidence (FAZ, 2009). In April 2009, the junior partner SZDSZ left the coalition, so that MSZP found itself in a minority government going into the 2010 parliamentary elections campaign. As the largest opposition party, Fidesz had no great difficulty in organising a successful election campaign against the governing parties.

2010 – 2014. Fidesz, which has always competed in an electoral alliance with the Christian Democrats of KDNP since 2006, emerged as the clear winner of the parliamentary elections in April 2010. Fidesz/KDNP won 52.73 per cent of the vote, while MSZP lost over half of its votes, achieving 19.3 per cent. The far-right Jobbik party received 16.67 per cent. In around a third of the total of 176 constituencies, the candidate with the most votes did not receive an absolute majority, meaning that a run-off vote was necessary in these districts. Fidesz-backed candidates won almost all the seats in the run-off election, giving its alliance a two-thirds majority in the unicameral parliament with 263 of the 386 seats (NVI, 2010).

In contrast to Poland, where elections in the analysis period were always held in October, Hungarian parliamentary elections are held in April. For this reason, the year 2009 is considered as the reference for the indices when analysing Hungary, as the government had more than six months to take political measures affecting the quality of democracy after coming to power in 2010 - which it did. Freedom House (2024) gave Hungary for 2009 the best possible score of 1 in both political rights and civil liberties. The V-Dem Institute (2024) assigned Hungary a score of 0.85 on

the Electoral Democracy Index and a score of 0.77 on the Liberal Democracy Index. The EIU report has only been published annually since 2010, meaning that the 2008 value of 7.44 will be taken as reference here (EIU, 2024). For both countries, the reference values at the time the right-wing populists came into office were very close to each other for all three indices analysed.

During the first legislative period, Fidesz/KDNP undertook a variety of political measures to restructure the Hungarian state according to its will and to make a future government transition more difficult. The three measures that were most relevant for the future fairness of elections are the following: firstly, at the end of 2010, the Hungarian parliament passed a media law that allows a newly established media organisation to have full control over all other media professionals and publishers. All media must register with this institution, which reports directly to parliament, and undertake to report only in a balanced manner from now on. Violations could result in heavy fines. Although the responsible EU Commissioner Neelie Kroes has criticised parts of the law, the Commission has not accused Hungary of explicitly restricting press freedom. Large sections of the European Parliament and non-governmental organisations took a different view. As a result, the Hungarian government complied with the Commission's minor requests for changes to the law, not least to avoid causing too much trouble with the EU during its own Council Presidency in the first half of 2011 (Ladwig-Tils, 2011).

The second measure concerned Hungary's new constitution, which was enacted in April 2011 thanks to two-thirds majority of Fidesz/KDNP. No other party voted in favour of the novel constitution and large sections of the opposition demonstratively stayed away from the vote. In addition to clear criticism regarding the formal process of drafting the constitution, there was also plenty of critique in terms of content on a broad basis. Among other things, various political groups in the European Parliament were calling for an independent judiciary to be guaranteed, for the recognition of international obligations to be enshrined and for no overstepping of competences and differences in interpretation between Hungarian courts and international courts (Ladwig-Tils, 2011). Future parliamentary elections will be influenced by the new constitution in that it will significantly change the electoral system. The parliament will be reduced from 386 to 199 seats, a considerably larger proportion of seats will be allocated according to the majority principle and the single-member constituencies will be reorganised. Renwick and Weichsel (2012) stated that the new electoral system is likely to cement Fidesz's position of power. The fact that Fidesz/KDNP

was able to secure a two-thirds majority in 2014 with a mere 44.87 per cent of the list votes proves this (NVI, 2014).

A constitutional amendment from early 2013, again widely discussed and criticised, marked the third major action taken during this legislative period. The most important aspect of this amendment was the extensive disempowerment of the Constitutional Court that it entailed. In future, constitutional judges will only be allowed to review amendments to the Basic Law for their formal legality, not their substantive legality. In addition, judgments that were passed before the new constitution came into force may no longer be invoked; in other words, customary law no longer applies. The background here is that the Constitutional Court had declared a large number of bills introduced by Orbán's government to be in breach of fundamental rights. This right to review the content of laws will no longer apply, meaning that the Fidesz/KDNP alliance will have significantly fewer limits when passing laws and amending the constitution. Critics at home and abroad called this plan “highly problematic” and spoke of either a “departure from the rule of law” or a “systematic abolition and a rampage against the constitutional order” (Verseck, 2013).

Between 2008 and 2014, the EIU's Democracy Index for Hungary fell continuously from 7.44 in 2009 to 6.90 in 2014 (EIU, 2024). This means that Hungary remained within the corridor for flawed democracies (6.01 to 8 points). In 2010, Freedom House rated Hungary with the best score of 1 in both categories. In 2011, the score for civil liberties fell to 2. The same applied to political rights in 2014 (FH, 2024). Nevertheless, with an average score of 2.0, Hungary initially remained in the highest category of ‘Free’ (1.0 to 2.5). V-Dem's EDI showed a constant decline from 0.85 to 0.67 for Hungary between 2010 and 2014. Of all the scores, the LDI displayed the sharpest decline, falling from 0.77 to 0.52 in the same period (V-Dem, 2024).

2014 – 2018. For the 2014 parliamentary elections, the Social Democrats of MSZP and four other parties joined forces to form a one-time centre-left alliance. This electoral alliance received 25.57 per cent of the list votes and once again had no chance against Fidesz/KDNP, which received 44.87 per cent of the list votes. Thanks to the reformed electoral system and the fact that their candidates won 96 of the 106 direct mandates, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party managed to retain the important two-thirds majority in co-operation with KDNP. This alliance now held the minimum of 133 of the 199 seats required for a two-thirds majority, while the alliance around MSZP had 38 seats and Jobbik 23 (NVI, 2014).

Parallel to its entering into office in June 2014, the government led by continuing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán introduced a bill that further restricts media and press freedom. In future, media companies will have to pay up to 40 per cent of their advertising revenue to the state. The additional tax revenue equivalent to 35 million euros predicted by the government represented only a fraction of the state budget but posed a massive financial threat to the remaining private media companies. Criticism has come from both anti-government and pro-government media, as well as from the opposition, which accused Fidesz/KDNP of wanting to squeeze out the last independent media outlets and force them to close down (Steiner-Gashi, 2014). Viktor Orbán continued to make no secret of his obvious anti-liberal agenda. In July 2014, he gave a speech to ethnic Hungarians in Romania in which he openly stated that "the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state" (Hungarian Government, 2014). Although the content of this speech was not surprising, it was the clarity with which Orbán proclaimed the end of liberal democracy - views that are diametrically opposed to the fundamental values of the EU, of which Hungary not only wants to remain a member but must remain a member at all costs from a financial perspective (Gall, 2014).

The government suffered an unforeseen setback in February 2015. After Fidesz MP Tibor Navracsics was sent to Brussels as new European Commissioner, a by-election was necessary in his district in the city of Veszprém. In the 2014 parliamentary elections, Navracsics had been able to win the district by a clear margin, but the by-election was won by an independent candidate who was supported by all centre-left parties and secured the parliamentary seat. As a result, Fidesz/KDNP lost its two-thirds majority in parliament. A short time later, Fidesz lost another mandate in a by-election, this time to the extreme right-wing Jobbik party, which won a direct mandate for the first time. Although Fidesz and Jobbik were not far apart on some nationalist issues, Orbán could not hope for votes from the other camp, as Jobbik was pursuing its own goals. Moreover, accompanied by ongoing, massive accusations of corruption and cronyism, Fidesz's popularity was waning at this time, while both the left-wing camp and the extreme right-wing Jobbik party were enjoying increasing popularity (Szombati, 2015).

The anti-liberal policies openly propagated by Viktor Orbán and his cabinet were also reflected in the indices analysed by EIU, Freedom House and the V-Dem Institute. The EIU's Democracy Index (2024) showed a constant but moderate decline from 6.90 in 2014 to 6.63 in 2018. Hungary

remained a flawed democracy for the EIU. Compared to their index, Freedom House and the V-Dem Institute saw a clearer weakening of democratic quality during this legislative period. In 2014, Hungary was still rated 2 in both categories, but in 2018 Freedom House only rated Hungary as 'Partly Free' with a score of 3 for both political rights and civil liberties (FH, 2024). Unlike in the previous analysis period, this time Freedom House adjusted the political rights score before the civil liberties score. V-Dem Institute's EDI fell from 0.67 to 0.48 between 2014 and 2018, while its LDI decreased from 0.52 to 0.38 (V-Dem, 2024). It is striking that the 2018 scores from Freedom House and the V-Dem Institute for Hungary are below the lowest scores ever measured within the investigation period analysed for Poland. With a difference of just 0.01, this is barely not the case for the EIU's Democracy Index. Even the temporary loss of its two-thirds majority seemed unlikely to prevent the government from continuing to dismantle liberal institutions and thus making future elections consistently less fair.

2018 – 2022. The pressure on ruling alliance Fidesz/KDNP was high before the 2018 parliamentary elections due to declining popularity ratings and regional losses of power. For that reason, the few remaining media outlets were intensively reporting about the government's successes. A series of election gifts for Fidesz's core electorate was also intended to appease the latter (Somfalvy, 2018). Surveys showed that no party could come close to threatening Fidesz/KDNP in terms of list votes. In constituency votes, the aforementioned by-elections and interim regional elections have shown that candidates who competed officially as independents were able to beat Fidesz-backed candidates, as long as they were supported by the entire left-wing party spectrum and far-right Jobbik. However, the opposition parties could only agree on such a joint candidate in very few constituencies (Spengler & Bauer, 2018). In the end, the balance of power in the Hungarian parliament after the 2014 elections was almost the same as before. Fidesz/KDNP, once again running together, received 49.27 per cent of the list votes. Their joint candidates failed to receive direct mandates in only 15 of 106 constituencies. As after the 2014 parliamentary elections, they were holding the slimmest possible two-thirds majority with 133 out of 199 seats. Far-right party Jobbik became the second strongest party with 19.06 per cent of the list votes and won 26 seats in total. social democratic party MSZP ran in a two-party alliance with 2013-founded green party *Párbeszéd Magyarországért* (PM). They achieved 11.91 per cent of the list votes. Including eight direct mandates, PM won 20 seats (NVI, 2018). The party leaders of Jobbik and MSZP resigned in unison after the election. Jobbik had hoped for a significant

narrowing of the gap between them and Fidesz/KDNP, while MSZP even missed its minimum goal of preventing a renewed two-thirds majority for the governing alliance (Than & Szakacs, 2018).

In his third consecutive term in office, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán no longer clashed exclusively with the European Commission at European level, but also with the European People's Party (EPP), of which Fidesz was a member. Orbán's political course was no longer compatible with the values represented by EPP. The result was that in March 2019 EPP decided to suspend Fidesz until further notice. EPP President Joseph Daul said: “We cannot compromise on democracy, rule of law, freedom of press, academic freedom or minorities rights. And anti-EU rhetoric is unacceptable” (EPP, 2021). The suspension affected Fidesz as a party, while individual MEPs from Fidesz were initially able to remain in the EPP, but with limited rights. After EPP adjusted its internal rules regarding the exclusion of parties and their MEPs, Orbán pre-empted a possible exclusion of Fidesz and announced the end of the party’s membership in the EPP in March 2021 (de La Baume, 2021).

Shortly after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in Hungary in early 2020, the parliament passed a law that gave Viktor Orbán more and more sole power in the country. This law authorised Orbán to rule by decree for an indefinite period of time - until he decides that the economic and social consequences of the crisis have been overcome. The Hungarian parliament, which passed the law with the two-thirds majority of Fidesz/KDNP, thus voluntarily deprived itself of any power (Mihai, 2020). Furthermore, the dissemination of false allegations about the work of the government was criminalised and up to five years imprisonment was threatened for violations, which was intended to further reduce the extent of government-critical media reports. It has become virtually impossible to gain an independent picture of the government's work for the run-up to the 2022 parliamentary elections. Kim Lane Scheppele (2021) refers to this law as an "Enabling Act" and states that "Hungary is on the edge of dictatorship".

With the closure of the last independent Hungarian radio station in February 2021, the government took further action against media and press freedom, which now barely deserved its name. There were just very few free-to-air media outlets left that report critical of the government. Alternative reporting was mainly shifted into internet channels (Schwarzer, 2021). This has also made it increasingly difficult for the opposition parties to present their election programmes to a broad public and thus decreased their chances of coming to power in the 2022 elections. To further secure his power, Orbán made yet another change to electoral law. The government has put a legal stop

to the opposition's increasingly successful tactic in regional elections, that was agreeing on non-party candidates and jointly helping them to win against Fidesz-backed candidates. In future, non-party MPs will no longer be allowed to join a parliamentary group in the aftermath of an election. Katarina Barley, Vice-President of the European Parliament and responsible for civil liberties and justice, listed a total of 700 changes to electoral law made by Orbán's cabinet between 2010 and 2022 (Neukirch, 2022).

Taking the aforementioned measures between 2018 and 2022 as a basis, the development of the EIU Democracy Index for this same period was somewhat surprising. It is true that the index fell from 6.63 in 2018 to 6.50 in 2021, which was the lowest value for Hungary in the period under review. However, a score of 6.64 was calculated for 2022, which even displayed a minimum increase in the quality of democracy for that period (EIU, 2024). A closer look at the scores for the five main assessment categories reveals where the increase originated. In the category 'electoral process and pluralism', Hungary achieved an above-average score of 8.33 out of 10 possible points, while the scores in the remaining four categories ranged between 4.44 and 6.88 (EIU, 2023). The authors did not provide a detailed evaluation about Hungary in the 2022 report. Consequently, attempts to explain their findings should be limited to the assumption that the demands on electoral process and pluralism ought to be lower than compared to the other two indices. Freedom House (2024) rated Hungary consistently with 3 for both categories in this period, making Hungary the sole bottom performer within the EU. The V-Dem Institute (2024) calculated a decline from 0.48 to 0.45 for the EDI; the LDI fell from 0.38 to 0.34. For both latter organisations, the 2022 score corresponds to the lowest value measured in the overall study period.

Conclusion. The question of whether H1 is to be confirmed for Hungary is not straightforward. Let us first look at the development of democratic quality indices and correlate them with the type of political majority: it is striking that the quality of democracy between 2015 and 2018 – the only phase without a two-thirds majority of Fidesz/KDNP – did not fall less sharply than before and after, although there was a significant loss of power. All three indices displayed no measurable difference for Hungary between the periods with a two-thirds majority for Fidesz/KDNP and the time in which they held an absolute majority. Based solely on this evidence, H1 cannot be confirmed for Hungary, but should rather be rejected. However, a cross-comparison with the Polish case might be useful to test this hypothesis more thoroughly.

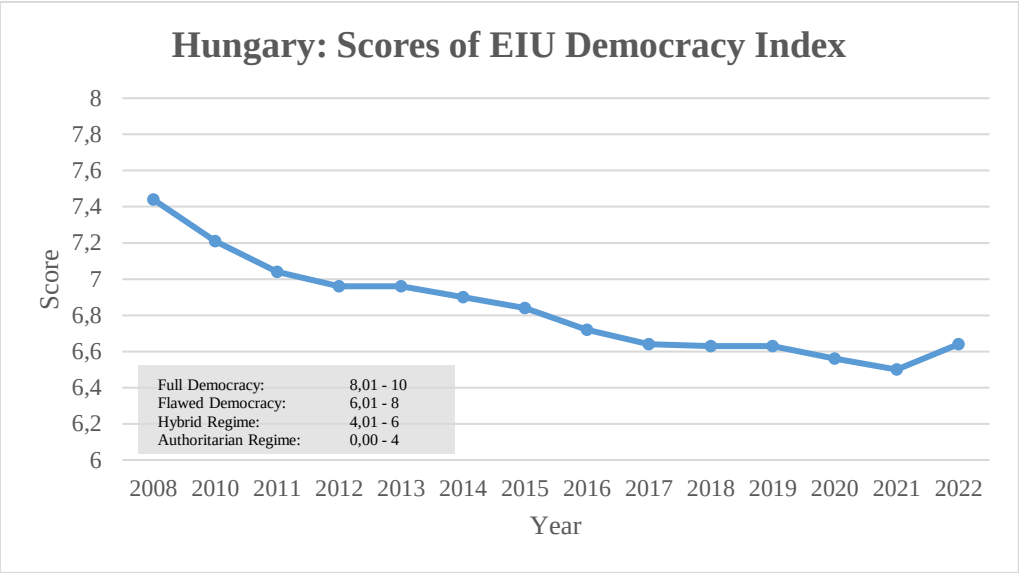

Figure 4: Hungary: Scores of EIU Democracy Index (own illustration, based on EIU, 2024)

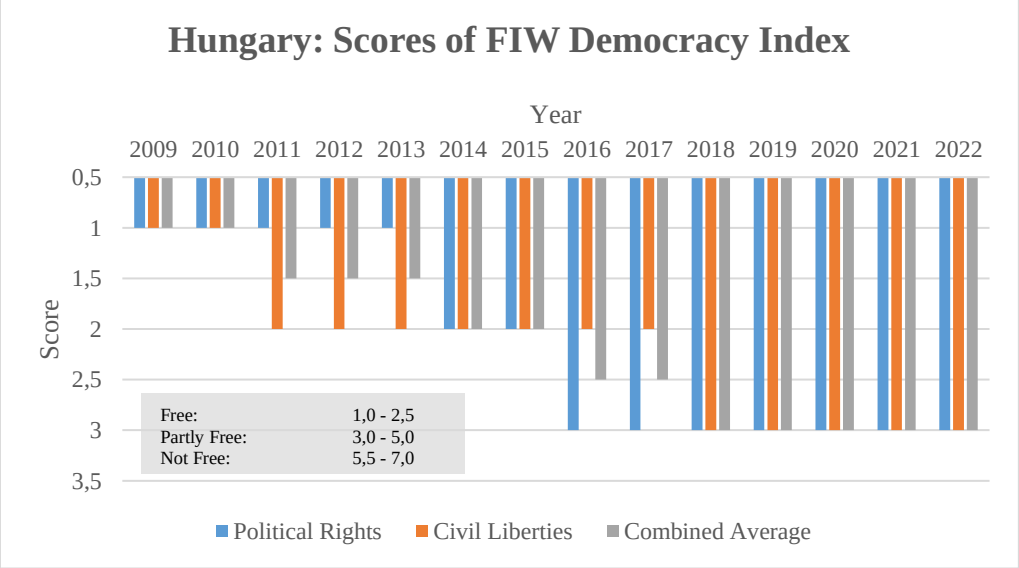

Figure 5: Hungary: Scores of FIW Democracy Index (own illustration, based on FIW, 2024)

As described earlier, Poland and Hungary displayed identical (Freedom House) or very similar scores (EIU; V-Dem) at the start of their respective study periods. While their highest scores were similar, we could observe differences in the lowest scores. In the EIU's Democracy Index (2024), the bottom score for Poland was 6.62, for Hungary 6.50. Freedom House (2024) never rated both

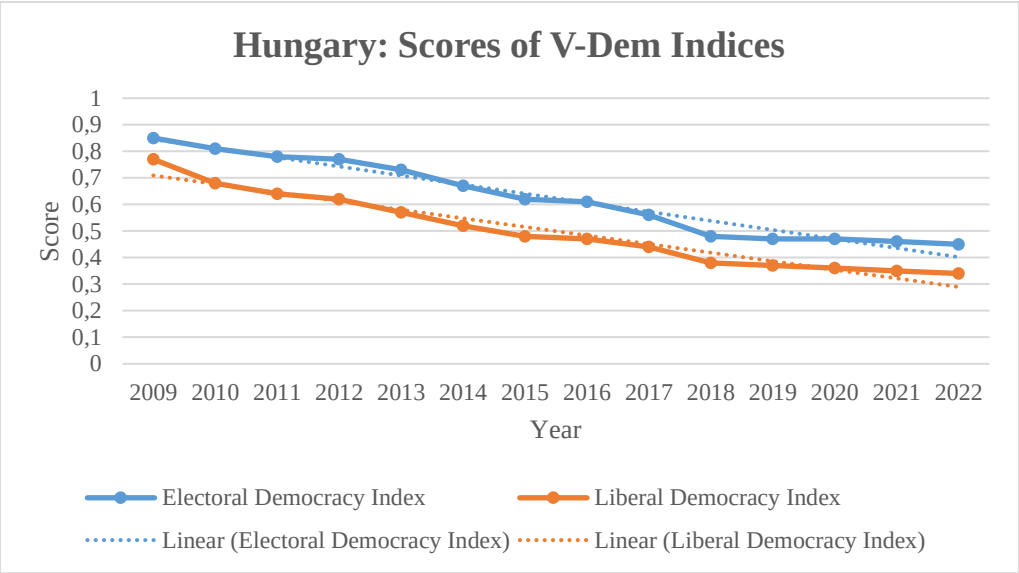

Figure 6: Hungary: Scores of V-Dem Indices (own illustration, based on V-Dem, 2024)

political rights and civil liberties in Poland worse than 2, meaning that the country is constantly categorised as 'Free'. Hungary had a low-score of 3 for both categories, which led to a rating of 'Partly Free'. The EDI from V-Dem did not fall below 0.58 for Poland, while it dropped to 0.44 for Hungary. The same applied to the LDI with smallest scores of 0.42 for Poland and 0.33 for Hungary (V-Dem, 2024). If we deliberately disregard the factor 'duration in power', it is noticeable that all indices attest to a greater decline in the quality of democracy in Hungary than in Poland. This outcome is more in line with the assumption of H1. For the moment, we leave open whether this circumstance can be explained by 'type of government majority' or by 'duration in power'.

We continue by examining whether H2 is to be confirmed in the case of Hungary. A distinction has to be made here between the different indices. According to EIU's Democracy Index (2024), the quality of democracy in Hungary declined continuously until 2021. Except for the increase in 2022, which is difficult to explain, the development corresponds to the assumption from H2. Freedom House (2024) saw a continuous decline in Hungary, too, at least for the period from 2009 to 2018. After 2018, it stagnated. Nevertheless, I categorise this development as supporting this hypothesis. Once again, it should be noted that the FIW rating is less nuanced than the other ones, and therefore, stagnating scores do not necessarily mean stagnating quality of democracy. The indices from the V-Dem Institute fully support H2. Both indices showed the lowest value at the

end of the study period and fell continuously over time (V-Dem, 2024). Taken together, it can be concluded for Hungary that a longer, uninterrupted duration in power causes the quality of democracy to decline, thus making it more unlikely for upcoming elections to be free and fair.

4.1.3 Conclusion

Before making a final judgement on H1 and H2, it is helpful to once again take a brief look at the different analysis periods in the respective countries, as well as at the governments acting there. Which expectations are derived from the hypotheses? The analysis period for Poland is eight years (two electoral periods), in which the right-wing populist government dominated by PiS initially held an absolute, but not a two-thirds majority for six years (2015 – 2021), and then operated as a minority government for two years (2021 – 2023). The period under review for Hungary is twelve years (three electoral periods). From 2010 to 2015 and from 2018 to 2022, the Hungarian government dominated by right-wing populist party Fidesz had a two-thirds majority; in the meantime, it was an absolute majority.

According to the assumptions of H1 and H2, the quality of democracy should have declined more significantly in Hungary than in Poland by the time of the last parliamentary elections for two reasons. Firstly, this is because the Hungarian government had a more significant majority than the Polish government. In particular, periods with a two-thirds majority, which in both states authorises constitutional amendments, gave Fidesz/KDNP greater room for manoeuvre in dismantling liberal institutions. Secondly, Fidesz/KDNP had a total of twelve years without interruption to implement such plans, while Polish alliance ZP had eight years. The three indices analysed not only shed light on whether these assumptions are indeed true, but also on whether one of the factors can be attributed a more important role in explaining the latest election outcomes.

Taking the findings for both cases together, we can conclude that the basic assumptions behind H1 and H2 are correct; yet neither hypothesis can be fully confirmed. The existence of a two-thirds majority helped a right-wing populist government in dismantling liberal institutions - if only due to the possibility of making constitutional amendments. However, similarly strong declines in democratic quality could also be achieved under governments holding an absolute majority, whereas a minority government could not reduce it. The analysis further showed that a longer term

in power was likewise beneficial, as the lowest values of the indices examined – with one exception – were measured during the last terms in office.

From the above analysis, in conjunction with the fact that the Hungarian government was able to remain in office after the last parliamentary elections, while the Polish government was not, two aspects can be concluded. First: in particular, a combination of the two structural factors ‘type of government majority’ and ‘duration in power’ increased the likelihood of an extensive dismantling of liberal institutions, which in turn negatively influenced the freedom and fairness of future elections and thus cements the power positions of right-wing populist governments. Second: these two factors only cannot explain the different election results in Poland and Hungary. There need to be further qualitative and soft factors that influenced the outcome of those elections.

4.2 Populism and electoral competition

4.2.1 Voter mobilisation

The election results studied in the previous part of the analysis are always the result of a sometimes more, sometimes less successful mobilisation of voters – depending on point of view. Tables 1 and 2 show some interesting data that are linked to voter mobilisation but have not been considered in detail in the thesis so far. Looking at the most recent parliamentary elections, it is immediately apparent that voter turnout in Poland has risen by over twelve percentage points compared to the penultimate one. More than three million additional votes were cast, even though the number of people eligible to vote fell by over 700,000. The 74.38 per cent voter turnout is the country's highest since the end of communism (Papazoski, 2023). In contrast, voter turnout in Hungary for 2022 remained virtually unchanged compared to 2018, although it is also quite high at around 70 per cent. Based on voter turnout data, it can therefore be assumed that in Poland the opposition was able to mobilise significantly more new voters than ZP. This group includes both young people taking part in the election as first-time voters, as well as previous non-voters. I will discuss at a later stage which voter groups the Polish opposition was able to mobilise in particular and why the opposition in Hungary was unable to do likewise.

Table 1: Eligible voters, votes cast, and voter turnout in Polish parliamentary elections (own illustration, based on NEC, 2019; 2024b; PKW, 2015)

Data/Year	**2015**	**2019**	**2023**
Eligible Voters	30,629,150	30,253,556	29,532,595
Votes Cast	15,595,335	18,678,457	21,966,891
Voter Turnout (in %)	50.92	61.74	74.38

Table 2: Eligible voters, votes cast, and voter turnout in Hungarian Parliamentary Elections (own illustration, based on NVI, 2010; 2014; 2018; 2022)

Data/Year	**20 10**		**20 14**		**20 18**		**20 22**	
	Constituency Votes	List Votes	Constituency Votes	List Votes	Constituency Votes	List Votes	Constituency Votes	List Votes
Eligible Voters	8,034,394	8,034,394	8,047,769	8,241,488	7,933,815	8,312,173	7,759,175	8,215,304
Votes Cast	5,172,222	5,172,222	4,964,336	5,093,536	5,564,410	5,791,868	5,448,020	5,717,182
Voter Turnout (in %)	64.38	64.38	61.67	61.80	70.14	69.68	70.21	69.59

Another striking figure is the decline in domestic (constituency) votes of over two per cent in both cases when comparing last and second to last elections. In addition to traditional explanatory factors such as net migration or birth rate, the increased mortality rate due to the Covid-19 pandemic is the main explanation in this context (BiB, 2024). Older and generally less affluent people show a higher risk of fatalities (Butterwegge, 2020). This characteristic applied to typical core voters of both PiS and Fidesz (Lang, 2023; Republikon Institute, 2023). In Poland, ZP lost around 410,000 votes in total despite rising turnout (NEC, 2019; 2024b), while Fidesz/KDNP won

	Inhaber/ Mitinhaber eines Unternehmens	Direktor/ Leiter/ Facharbeiter	Angestellter der Verwaltung/ des öffentlichen Dienstes	Bauer	Arbeiter	Schüler/ Student	Arbeitsloser	Rentner	Andere
Wahlbündnis Bürgerkoalition	42,2 %	40,4 %	31,6 %	9,5 %	19,8 %	31,0 %	21,4 %	30,6 %	34,7 %
Recht und Gerechtigkeit	20,3 %	18,4 %	29,2 %	66,6 %	49,6 %	11,0 %	45,2 %	53,4 %	27,4 %
Neue Linke	7,4 %	11,3 %	10,7 %	3,0 %	5,1 %	21,6 %	7,7 %	5,5 %	8,9 %
Wahlbündnis Dritter Weg	15,9 %	19,2 %	17,2 %	11,5 %	11,1 %	18,6 %	11,8 %	7,8 %	15,8 %
Konföderation	10,9 %	7,3 %	7,1 %	5,3 %	9,6 %	13,4 %	9,0 %	1,1 %	8,5 %

Figure 7: Voting behaviour in Poland 2023: occupation (Garsztecki, 2023)

around 190,000 votes in Hungary with similar turnout (NVI, 2018; 2022). Thus, Fidesz/KDP appears to have been more successful than ZP in compensating for the loss of core voters through mobilisation.

Let us now take a closer look at various voter groups in Poland and analyse how successfully they have been mobilised for the 2023 parliamentary elections. PiS continued to be successful with its traditional voter groups of farmers, workers, the unemployed and pensioners. In no other voter group did the party win more than 30 per cent of votes (Figure 1). The largest opposition party, PO, is particularly popular among the self-employed and highly qualified and managerial employees. This correlates with the data in Figure 2, which shows voting behaviour by level of education. Three out of five people without secondary education vote for PiS, while four out of five university graduates do not vote for PiS. We can conclude that the higher the level of education, the fewer people vote for PiS. PiS's core voter groups tend not to live in urban cities, but predominantly in rural areas and small towns. Figure 3 shows that PiS only received around 21 per cent of the vote among residents of cities with a population of more than 500,000. The fact that PiS's core electorate is composed largely of older, less educated people who live in rural areas is not surprising. The logical consequence is that the opposition parties are mainly favoured by younger, more educated people who live in larger cities. "The political camps in Poland are deeply

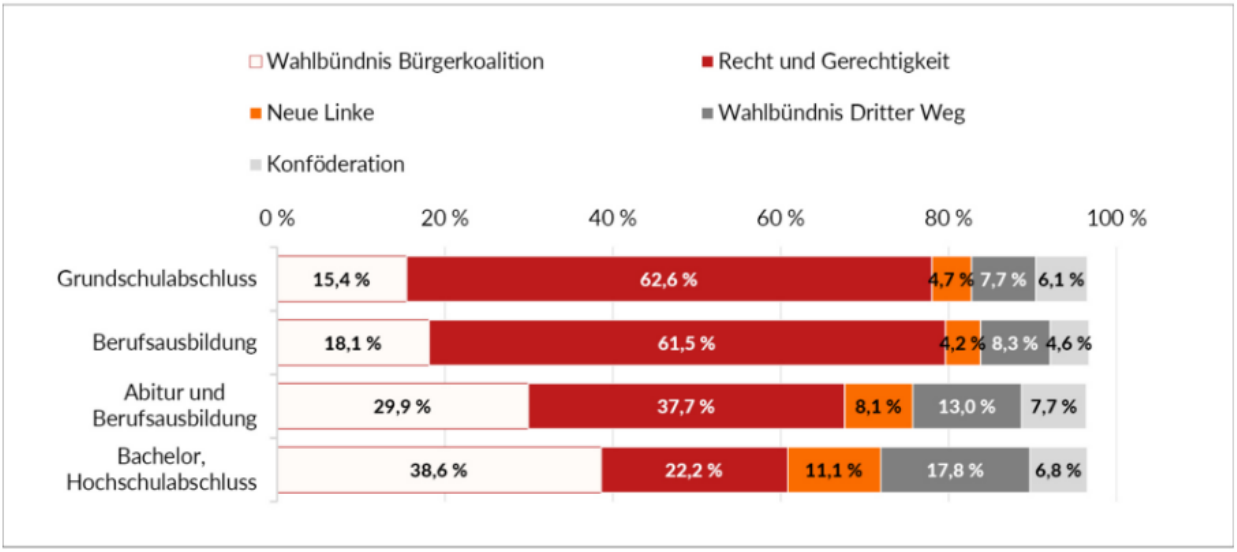

Figure 8: Voting behaviour in Poland 2023: education (Garsztecki, 2023)

divided and so is society as a whole" say the correspondents of the German broadcaster ARD in Warsaw, Kristin Joachim and Martin Adam (2023). For a long time, this division was not a problem for PiS; in fact, the party and its leading politicians even encouraged it (Lang, 2023; Pytlas, 2021; Szczerbiak, 2021).

We now know that the two political camps have very different electorates and that the deep divide in the country makes significant voter migration rather unlikely. Looking only at different voter groups does not reveal how the 2023 election result came about, but a look at the mobilisation of these groups does. According to observers, PiS possesses an absolutely loyal core electorate, which generally amounts to around a third of those eligible to vote (Joachim & Adam, 2023). Added to this are the votes of people who opt for a party shortly before the election. However, PiS has only little additional voter potential due to its conservative, nationalist and increasingly right-wing populist orientation, which strongly discourages many social classes (Joachim & Adam, 2023; Lang, 2023). This circumstance does not jeopardise PiS and its course of maintaining power as long as the opposition does not manage to mobilise its cumulatively larger voter reserves.

But that is exactly what the opposition parties achieved in the 2023 parliamentary election. Figure 4 shows that the larger the place of residence, the higher the voter turnout there. This clearly benefits the opposition, which, as shown, performs significantly better in urban areas than in rural

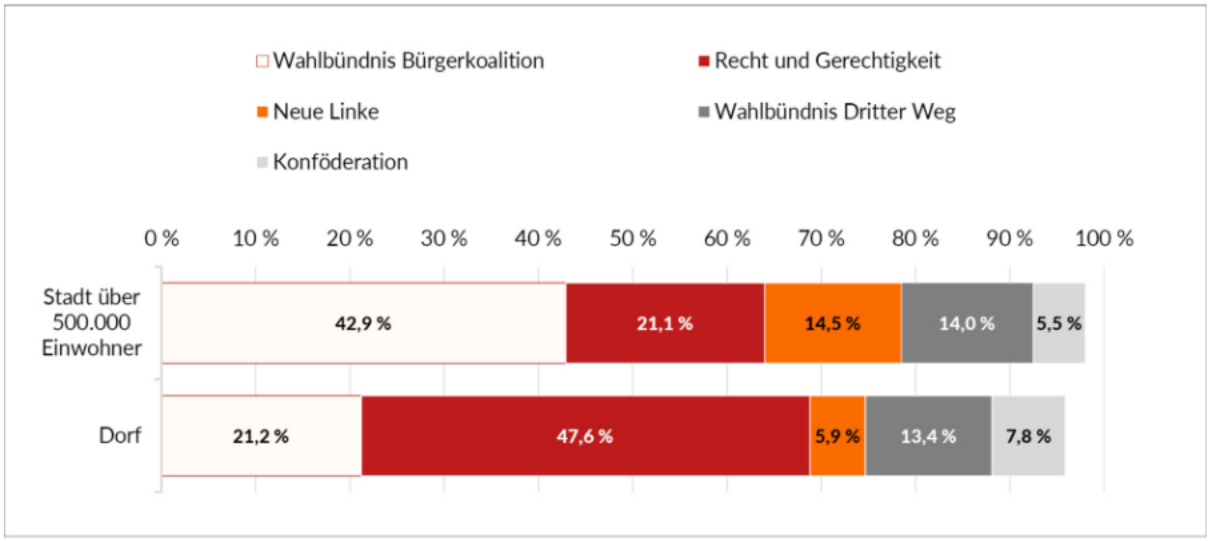

Figure 9: Voting behaviour in Poland 2023: urban – rural (Garsztecki, 2023)

areas. As a result, the opposition parties managed to do both: persuade an above-average number of voters to go to the polls and convince them to vote for one of the opposition parties rather than PiS. The opposition was similarly successful in mobilising young voters. In the penultimate election, only 46 per cent of the population aged between 18 and 29 took part, compared to 70 per cent in 2023 (Papazoski, 2023). That contributed to PiS's defeat, too. This is because the group of young voters hardly includes farmers and unemployed people, let alone pensioners, but rather adult pupils and students, only 11 per cent of whom voted for PiS. The opposition's mobilisation was also more successful among people who deliberately did not vote in 2019. While 30 per cent of the votes of this voter group went to KO, PiS was only able to achieve 15.5 per cent here (Papazoski, 2023).

A brief comparison with the Hungarian case also shows how important and decisive the strategy of extensive voter mobilisation was for the Polish opposition. In Hungary, voter turnout remained constant, but the cumulative number of votes for all parties in the opposition alliance EM fell by twelve percentage points compared to the previous parliamentary election (Biró-Nagy & Györi, 2022). This corresponds to approximately 900,000 votes. If the opposition alliance had been able to mobilise these 900,000 voters again, it would have almost caught up with Fidesz in terms of the number of list votes and even surpassed it in terms of constituency votes. In this admittedly

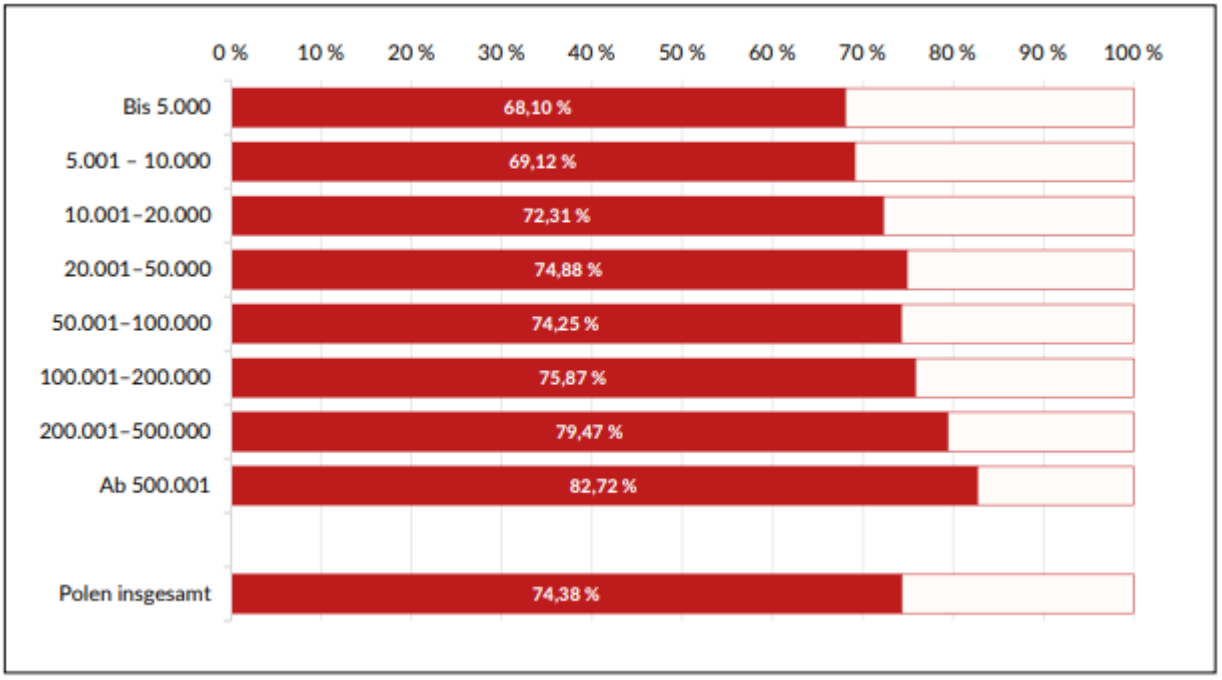

Figure 10: Voting behaviour in Poland 2023: turnout by size of residence (Garsztecki, 2023)

theoretical case, far more than the 19 of 106 direct mandates would have gone to the opposition. Because: the trend we recognise in Poland of a divide between urban and rural areas is also evident in Hungary, where the opposition won 17 out of 18 direct mandates in the capital Budapest, as well as one each in the larger cities of Szeged and Pécs (NVI, 2022).

Although the alliance of Fidesz and KDNP ultimately won the 2022 parliamentary elections by a very clear margin, the government could not be certain about this for long stretches of the past legislative period. Similar to the case of PiS in Poland, it is assumed that Fidesz and KDNP also have a very loyal core electorate but can only hope to mobilise a small number of additional voters. Spengler and Bauer (2018) estimate the number of core voters of Fidesz and KDNP at 2.3 million and the number of supporters of all opposition parties at 2.8 million. According to survey data from April to June 2021, conducted by Závecz Research on behalf of the liberal and politically independent magazine Heti Világgazdaság (HVG, 2021), 47 to 48 per cent of respondents favoured the Fidesz/KDNP electoral list, while 49 to 50 per cent preferred the united opposition. It becomes clear that, in addition to the numerous hurdles installed for the opposition, the government still needed to mobilise a large share of its voters in order to retain its strong position of power.

Shortly after, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced a referendum on an already passed law dealing with homosexuality and gender reassignment (Zimmermann & Gutschker, 2021). These issues are extremely sensitive and controversial among the conservative voters of Fidesz and KDNP. Subsequently, Orbán deliberately stirred up fears by accusing the opposition of sympathising with paedophiles and claiming that they would deprive parents of any influence in the sexual education of their children (Kolb, 2021). Finally, the referendum consists of four questions that are clearly directed against the LGBTQ community and can be described as 'cynical' (Kolb, 2021), 'rhetorical' (Petter, 2021) and 'highly suggestive' (Naumann, 2022). By saying that 'the future of our children is at stake' (Kovács, 2021), Orbán tried to mobilise as many Fidesz and KDNP voters as possible and make them believe that a potential victory for the opposition would be tantamount to the downfall of Hungary. In the end, all four questions in the referendum failed to achieve the required quorum of more than 50 per cent, as many opposition supporters consciously boycotted this part of the elections (Naumann, 2022; NVI, 2022). Nonetheless, linking the parliamentary elections with the referendum mobilised additional Fidesz and KDNP voters and helped the government to achieve a two-thirds majority once again; a lead that seemed unlikely nine months before the election.

Back to Poland, where PiS and its electoral alliance ZP were facing problems comparable to those of Fidesz and KDNP in Hungary just a few months before the election. The government realised that it was facing a neck-and-neck race and therefore needed to mobilise as many voters as possible. Despite being a minority government, ZP succeeded in calling a referendum in August 2023, which was to be held in parallel with the parliamentary elections just two months away (Florkiewicz & Charlish, 2023). According to a survey by Polish research agency IBRiS, ZP was polling at 34.9 per cent at the end of July 2023, while the three later coalition partners KO, Lewica and Trzecia Droga achieved a cumulative support of 49.8 per cent (PolitPro, 2023).

The Polish government not only copied the Hungarian idea of using a referendum as an instrument for additional voter mobilisation, but also replicated major elements of the referendum's design. It also contained four questions that were formulated in a suggestive manner and in principle did not allow for any answer other than 'no'. In addition to raising the retirement age and privatising state-owned companies, the main issues were refugees and migration - all typical election campaign topics of PiS and its partners. A quote from Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek during the

presentation of the referendum questions makes it clear that the government was not interested in the opinion of the citizens, but rather in mobilisation and scaremongering. Referring to European migration policy and directly addressing the opposition, he said: "They want women to be raped in Poland like in France, Belgium or Germany" (Adam, 2023). Such unfounded slander against the opposition, which was intended to stir up fear among the Polish people, was another characteristic that could be observed in both countries shortly before their respective parliamentary elections.

Looking at the referenda isolated from the respective parliamentary elections, the results in Poland and Hungary were also identical. All four questions were answered with at least 94 per cent 'no'. However, the referendum is not binding, as voter turnout of 40.91 per cent was well below the required quorum of 50 per cent (NEC, 2024a). Just as in Hungary, it can be assumed that large sections of the opposition deliberately boycotted the referendum in Poland. However, while in Hungary the overarching goal of Fidesz and the KDNP was achieved, namely, to keep themselves in power, in Poland even the late-called referendum could not prevent the power transition.

Conclusion. In summary, it can be stated that voter mobilisation played a crucial role in the parliamentary elections under review. In both cases, we can observe that the successful mobilisation of the victorious side is something of a necessary condition, but not yet a sufficient one. Only the fact that the opposing political camp did not succeed in doing the same simultaneously makes voter mobilisation an explaining factor for the different election results.

In the case of Poland, the opposition mobilised very successfully, which made a decisive contribution to the transition of power. The exceptionally high voter turnout is almost exclusively due to additionally mobilised opposition voters from PiS-critical social classes. PiS and its partners in the ZP alliance were unable to benefit from the twelve percentage points increase in voter turnout and instead actually lost voters. This time, even the renewed mobilisation of their more than eight million voters from the 2019 parliamentary election or a five percentage points better election result in 2023 would not have been enough to prevent a change of government.

In the Hungarian case, the situation is the opposite. The incumbent Fidesz-KDNP alliance succeeded in mobilising additional voters in both constituency votes and list votes while voter turnout remained constant. In both fields, this alliance received an absolute majority of the votes cast. Consequently, it was hardly possible for the united opposition EM to effect a change in government. Nevertheless, the voter mobilisation of the opposition parties must be criticised as the

votes cast for these parties fell by twelve percentage points compared to the 2018 elections. This circumstance allows Fidesz-KDNP to govern in the current legislative period with a narrow two-thirds majority. Potential reasons why EM's voter mobilisation was unsuccessful are discussed in the following chapter on electoral alliances.

4.2.2 Electoral alliances

What does voter mobilisation have to do with electoral alliances and what role did electoral alliances play in the parliamentary elections in Poland and Hungary? There are two major reasons why the importance of electoral alliances as an electoral campaigning strategy has increased in recent years.

Firstly, the political landscapes of Poland and Hungary are characterised by a fragmented party system at the top. PiS and Fidesz have been able to build up a core electorate that is extremely loyal and accounts for around a third of the electorate in each case (Joachim & Adam, 2023; Spengler & Bauer, 2018). Beyond them, there is constant movement in the party landscape and a low level of party loyalty among voters (Berglund & Ekman, 2013; Deegan-Krause, 2013). For a single party to jeopardise PiS or Fidesz, it would need, among several other aspects, a large campaign budget and huge media attention during the election campaign, something the established parties do not allow. Given the developments outlined in the section on populism and liberal democracy, an election victory for an opposition party therefore seems extremely unlikely.

The logical conclusion of the first argument is that only a coalition of several parties has a realistic chance of bringing about a change of government. However, smaller parties, whose vote shares might ultimately be decisive when it comes to coalition formation, would first have to overcome the blocking clause of five per cent of the list votes that applies for both parliaments. The Polish parliamentary election in 2015 shows that these blocking clauses can have a significant influence. Over 16 per cent of votes were "lost" there because parties or alliances failed to overcome the blocking clause. Despite their election committee receiving less than 38 per cent of the vote, this enabled PiS to achieve an absolute majority of seats in the Sejm (PKW, 2015). In the case of Hungary, the fact that the electoral system is a mixture of majority vote and proportional representation adds to the difficulties for the opposition. Since the above-discussed constitutional

amendments from 2011, more than half of the parliamentary seats are allocated to direct candidates. A simple majority is sufficient; there are no more run-off elections (Renwick & Weichsel, 2012). If the opposition parties all put up their own candidates, this would be more or less equivalent to giving up most of the direct mandates due to Fidesz's supremacy, making a chance of government practically impossible.

The aforementioned reasons taken together made it necessary if not indispensable for the opposition in Poland and Hungary to form electoral alliances before the last parliamentary elections. This strategy can provide a number of advantages. Small opposition parties, which would probably fail to overcome the five per cent clause, can get into parliament by joining an electoral alliance. Then, their vote share not only benefits the selected alliance, but also the opposition as a whole, as those votes are no longer wasted. Although electoral alliances are subject to higher blocking clauses, this strategy means that significantly more votes are taken into account when distributing parliamentary seats. In the seven parliamentary elections analysed in this thesis, only once did a significant electoral alliance fail to pass the blocking clause (PKW, 2015). In the Hungarian election system, electoral alliances can further contribute by seriously challenging direct candidates of Fidesz/KDNP with opposition candidates. The prerequisite here is that the opposition can agree on a joint nominee.

If we remember that PiS and Fidesz each have a core electorate of around one third, a change of government with an electoral alliance that includes the entire opposition suddenly appears less unrealistic. But it is obviously not as simple as that. Many factors have to coincide for a power transition to become reality, as happened in the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland. Alongside the condition that a plurality of voters has to be dissatisfied with the government, the basis for such an outcome is that most, ideally all, of the opposition parties are determined to achieve a change of government, too, and are open to give up some parts of their political programmes in return. This is because the potential electorate of the parties forming an electoral alliance is as broad as their political orientation.

At this point, electoral alliances often face a dilemma: the inclusion of each additional party could be supportive in further closing the gap between itself and the government as well as addressing voter groups that may not have been targeted so far. However, an electoral alliance tends to lose identity and substantial coherence with each additional party. For example, voters of a left-wing

party could turn away from it if it competes in an electoral alliance that also includes right-wing parties. In addition, a particularly 'colourful' or heterogeneous alliance could struggle in mobilising new voters when it does not demonstrate a distinct political orientation or is unable to position itself clearly on core issues of an election campaign. Therefore, leading politicians of involved parties need to assess very carefully the extent to which an electoral alliance is sensible and actually improves the chances of success of the parties in discussion.

From these theoretical thoughts, four concrete conditions can be derived for practice, which must be fulfilled so that the strategy of electoral alliances can play an important role in electoral competition against right-wing populists. In the case of Poland, these conditions were met as follows. First: the population wants a transition of power. A survey conducted a few days before the election revealed that 61 per cent of respondents wanted a change of government, while only 26 per cent favoured PiS remaining in power (Garsztecki, 2023; Großmann, 2023). Second: the opposition is united, and its primary goal is to achieve a change of government by working together. Opposition leader Donald Tusk from KO announced in the run-up to the parliamentary elections that he would like to form a coalition with the two other significant opposition players. Lewica and Trzecia Droga returned these overtures (Garsztecki, 2023; Großmann, 2023). Third: all relevant parties and electoral alliances enter parliament. Both KO and Trzecia Droga, which each competed as an electoral alliance, as well as Lewica, which officially ran as a single party, easily overcame their blocking clauses (NEC, 2023). Fourth: the election result allows for a coalition of the united opposition. As demonstrated in the chapter on voter mobilisation, the aforementioned players were able to mobilise sufficiently to form a coalition which holds an absolutely majority in Sejm - without PiS and without the right-wing extremists from Konfederacja, who were ignored by both camps.

Checking whether these four conditions were also met in the Hungarian 2022 parliamentary elections shows where the differences lay between both cases. In the example of Hungary, the situation was like this. First: the population wants a transition of power. The picture was not entirely clear. There were voices predicting a neck-and-neck race between Fidesz/KDNP and the opposition alliance EM (HVG, 2021; Vichtl, 2022), while other analysts observed no desire for a change of government in times of crisis, especially after the outbreak of war in Ukraine (Bíró-Nagy & Györi, 2022). Second: the opposition is united, and its primary goal is to achieve a change of government

by working together. The “colourful emergency union”, as ARD correspondent Vichtl (2022) called EM, presented itself well united before the election. Compared to 2018, the opposition appeared better organised and was also strengthened by its successes in regional elections during the current legislative period (Bíró-Nagy & Györi, 2022; Spengler & Bauer, 2018). Third: all relevant parties and electoral alliances enter parliament. The fact that virtually all opposition parties formed the EM alliance meant that overcoming the 15 per cent blocking clause was not a problem (NVI, 2022). The far-right MHM was the only other party to enter parliament, but it was too radical for both camps to co-operate. Fourth: the election result allows for a coalition of the united opposition. It does not. The opposition alliance EM could not mobilise enough voters, as discussed in the chapter on voter mobilisation. Bíró-Nagy and Györi (2022) assume that EM was too heterogeneous overall and that this deterred many voters. They also say that it would probably have made more sense for the opposition parties to stand alone in terms of their aggregate support. However, this would have meant that they would have given up any chance of winning direct mandates. In other words, there was no alternative to forming the largest possible electoral alliance. This further illustrates the correlation between voter mobilisation and electoral alliances mentioned at the end of the previous chapter.

5 Conclusion

This thesis pursues the following research question: which factors explain the different election outcomes in the parliamentary elections in Poland (2023) and Hungary (2022)? With ‘type of government majority’ and ‘duration in power’, two structural factors were investigated, and with voter mobilisation and electoral alliances, the influence of two electoral factors was analysed. We can already state that all of these four factors influenced the election results in Poland and Hungary, albeit to different degrees in each case. For the final assessment, let us refer back to the sub-questions of the research question and answer them.

The first sub-question revolves around the extent to which right-wing populist governments undermine the freeness and fairness of elections and around the tools populist use to do so. To answer this sub-question, two hypotheses have been put forward. The analysis of the quantitative

data shows that neither hypothesis can be fully confirmed, but that the basic assumptions on which they are based are not false. Particularly large government majorities and particularly long durations in power can support right-wing populist governments in their endeavours to dismantle liberal institutions effectively. If both structural factors occur together, then they are more influential, but cannot explain the election results in Poland and Hungary alone.

Analysing the democracy indices further revealed that the right-wing populist governments of both countries began to dismantle liberal institutions and restructure the state order in their own interests as soon as they entered office. How did they do it? In Poland as well as in Hungary, the freedom of the media and press was massively restricted by the passing of corresponding laws. Further, the independence of the judiciary was almost non-existent in both countries under right-wing populist rule due to questionable appointments to crucial posts and the revocation of numerous essential competences. In addition, a new constitution was adopted in Hungary, which, among other measures, introduced an electoral system that was very favourable towards the government. Furthermore, a law was passed that allows Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to govern by decree in times of crisis, thereby making parliament virtually obsolete.

The fairness of the elections in both countries has suffered enormously as a result of the aforementioned measures. The lack of media and press freedom led to one-sided and unfair reporting by state-controlled media towards the opposition. The latter's visibility in and access to relevant media was reduced to a minimum. In Hungary, the fairness of parliamentary elections was further impaired by the new constitution, which included a new electoral system. The most relevant measures were the reduction in the size of parliament from 386 to 199 seats, a change in the layout of constituencies, an increase in the number of directly elected MPs and the move from run-off elections to a simple majority in constituency votes. Both governments have exhausted their respective type of majority. Actors in which right-wing populists recognised the potential to block their own interests (critical media, independent courts) or contest their power (opposition parties) were deliberately weakened on an ongoing basis using the means available. While all of these actions and measures had a negative impact on the fairness of the parliamentary elections in Poland and Hungary, freedom of election was by and large given in both cases.

The second sub-question asks about the opposition's strategies for the parliamentary elections. With voter mobilisation and electoral alliances, two strategies have been examined for their influence in

Poland and Hungary. The factor of voter mobilisation played a decisive role regarding the election outcome in Poland. There, the opposition was very successful in mobilising voters across all social groups that are critical of PiS or do not belong to PiS's core electorate. This is also the reason for the record-high voter turnout in 2023. The governing alliance ZP, and above all PiS, was hardly able to mobilise more than its core electorate; a specially arranged referendum on election day, which dealt with core issues of PiS voters, was unable to turn this around. The voter mobilisation factor was not as significant in the Hungarian elections as it was in Poland, but nevertheless played an important role. The large opposition alliance EM did not succeed in fully mobilising its voter potential; instead, it lost support compared to the penultimate election. The governing alliance Fidesz/KDNP managed to mobilise a few additional voters while voter turnout remained stable. Overall, the Hungarian election outcome was influenced to a greater extent by other factors than by voter mobilisation.

The factor of electoral alliances played its part in the Polish case, although it was not as influential as the voter mobilisation factor. The four requirements for electoral alliances were all met in Poland. Yet this circumstance can be seen more as a necessary condition for a government transition than as a decisive factor. Overall, it was not only the opposition that employed the strategy of forming electoral alliances sensibly and effectively; the government did not make any significant mistakes here either. Compared to Poland, the influence of the electoral alliances factor on the election outcome in Hungary was higher. Not all of the conditions set could be fulfilled. The assumption arises that for several voters the large opposition alliance was too heterogeneous in its formation to represent an electable alternative to the ruling Fidesz/KDNP alliance. However, when evaluating the electoral alliance EM, it should always be borne in mind that EM hardly had a real alternative to its chosen formation, mainly due to the electoral law reforms discussed.

Referring to the research question, it needs to be concluded that all the factors analysed influenced the parliamentary elections in Poland (2023) and Hungary (2022) to varying degrees. None of the factors was without any influence; however, there is also no factor that single-handedly decided one election. In the case of Poland, the opposition's excellent voter mobilisation was the most influential of the factors examined, enabling a change of government. In Hungary, such a government transition failed to materialise primarily because the government very efficiently used

its two-thirds majority for measures that dismantled liberal institutions and thereby promoted its own retention of power.

Nevertheless, election outcomes are always the result of a myriad of factors and circumstances, which builds a bridge to the limitations of this research. There are strong reasons to assume that the factors analysed in this thesis were among the most influential ones. However, an analysis focusing on four different factors cannot be concluding and does not claim to be able to fully explain specific election outcomes. Rather, researchers can draw on this work to identify significant factors that led to the first regular de-selection of a right-wing populist government in Europe.

In addition to the recommendation of re-examining the long-term success of the Polish case with more time having passed, two concrete approaches for subsequent research become immediately apparent: a repeated comparison of Poland and Hungary, taking into account further factors and indicators, including an analysis of their influence on the respective election outcomes; and the inclusion of other countries for a broader comparison, which could further test the transferability of the discovered indicators. In addition, it seems sensible for follow-up research to deal even more intensively with the policy implications to be derived from the analysis results than the limited scope of this thesis allows. Approaches to a best-practice model can be taken from this work, as well as a series of challenges that other countries under right-wing populist rule are likely to face, too. The further development of effective and efficient policy implications and their early transfer into national law can be of decisive importance when it comes to reducing the liberal-democratic effects of right-wing populist rule to a level that is tolerable for a Western democracy.

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Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)

During the preparation of this thesis, I used auto-generative chatbot system *ChatGPT* to gain a basic understanding of hitherto undiscovered topics and specialist terminology. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome. At no point in this work did I adopt information verbatim or incorporated them into this work without double-checking.

Münster, 4 Dec 2024

Robert Smidt

Affidavit

I declare in lieu of oath that I have prepared the above thesis independently and without outside help and have not used any aids other than those specified in the thesis. All passages that have been taken verbatim or in spirit from publications are labelled as such. This thesis has not been submitted to any other examination authority and has not yet been published.

Münster, 4 Dec 2024

Robert Smidt