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WHY OPPOSITIONS LOSE TOGETHER AND WIN ALONE

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On 12 April 2026, the voters of Hungary ended the sixteen-year run in office of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party. The opposition's win was sweeping—Fidesz and its junior partner lost 83 seats in the unicameral, 199-member National Assembly. Even more remarkably, the victory was achieved by a single newly prominent party, Respect and Freedom (or Tisza, an acronym that also is the name of a major Hungarian river), against one of the most sophisticated systems of state capture and electoral manipulation in Europe. Just four years earlier, in April 2022, a coalition of six ideologically diverse opposition parties had tried to unseat Orbán and Fidesz but had failed badly despite the high hopes that had surrounded their campaign.

A pattern of events somewhat similar to these unfolded in Turkey in 2024. On March 31 of that year, the Republican People's Party (CHP) won the nationwide local elections by a margin that had not been seen since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) first came to power in 2002. Running by itself with no coalition partners, the CHP not only swept Istanbul and Ankara, the two largest urban areas, but also made strides in cities long considered conservative strongholds of the ruling bloc. Less than a year earlier, a broad opposition coalition had fallen short in presidential and parliamentary voting despite having made itself as wide as it could and having witnessed months of survey data suggesting that Erdoğan and the AKP could be beaten.

In both Hungary in 2026 and Turkey two years prior, therefore, large single opposition parties succeeded where broad-front coalitions had failed. What can explain this pattern? The dominant view among schol-

ars and opposition strategists alike had been that broad-based alliances, formed before the election, were the only hope for unseating dominant parties in competitive authoritarian systems such as Hungary's and Turkey's. There was empirical evidence for this view. In 2019 local elections in both Hungary and Turkey, coordinated opposition campaigns had taken several major cities away from the respective ruling parties. Opposition leaders in both countries prepared to scale up this approach to the national level, only to meet with disappointment in 2022 and 2023.

If those defeats were unexpected, so were the political dynamics that followed. In each country, the opposition consolidated around a single party—not as part of a plan, but through a series of contingencies that reshaped the political landscape. In Turkey, the CHP renewed itself and gradually absorbed the broader opposition electorate in 2024. In Hungary, the discredited opposition created a political vacuum that was filled by Tisza's sudden rise after it was joined by Péter Magyar, a vocal Fidesz insider turned dissident whose main complaint was the Orbán regime's corruption. The upshot in both cases was the same: Instead of facing off against a wide-front alliance, the long-ruling party had to deal with a more threatening single challenger that was working effectively to enlarge the number of opposition voters.

Hungary and Turkey differ in important respects, reflecting distinct regime histories and divergent paths of democratic transition. They have also occupied different positions in relation to the European Union and its institutions: Hungary has been a full member since 2004; Turkey first applied to join the EU in 1987, but accession talks did not begin until 2005 and have been frozen since 2016. Under Orbán and Erdoğan, respectively, the two countries experienced competitive authoritarianism. In each case, this has meant a ruling-party decision to allow regular elections free of outright fraud—for fear that fraud would risk too much in terms of lost domestic legitimacy and backlash from Western liberal democracies—but replete with various methods of “tilting the playing field.” Such methods are core features of competitive authoritarian regimes and include media capture, selective law enforcement, gerrymandering, and the strategic use of state resources against opponents.¹ As a result, comparative analyses of the two cases have multiplied in recent years. The emerging shift from coalition failure to single-party breakthrough within the opposition space now calls for renewed attention.

Why Opposition Coordination Failed

Opposition coordination via preelection alliances has been an influential answer to the oft-debated question of which strategies are most likely to work against competitive authoritarian incumbents.² “Pool resources and keep the opposition vote from fragmenting” has been seen as the most rational response to the structural advantages that incum-

bents enjoy in electoral autocracies. In Croatia (2000), Kenya (2002), Malaysia (2018), and Slovakia (1998), coordinated opposition alliances did oust ruling parties or coalitions that had long seemed invincible.

Both the Turkish and Hungarian oppositions let crucial months be consumed by infighting over strategy while ideological differences played out in public and undermined perceptions of opposition competence and governance capacity. Incumbents capitalized on the disarray.

Could the oppositions in Hungary and Turkey achieve similar results? For a time, they seemed set to do so. In Hungary in 2022 and Turkey in 2023, opposition forces prepared for the year's general elections by forming alliances of unprecedented breadth to counter the advantages that incumbents had built in for themselves. For much of each country's campaign period, the prospect of a change of government seemed not only possible but highly probable.

By uniting diverse and historically antagonistic political factions—spanning a wide swath of the left-right spectrum—behind agreed-on candidates, the opposition coalitions had already wrested control of major economic and cultural hubs such as Ankara, Budapest, and Istanbul during 2019 municipal elections. The “spell” of the incumbents’ perceived power seemed to have been broken. A united front running a coordinated campaign could overcome the autocrats’ heavily tilted local playing fields.³ What could stop such a success from being reprised at the national level? For months, opinion surveys bolstered this confidence: Orbán and Erdoğan seemed to be running at best only slightly ahead, with the opposition even in some polls.⁴

Yet in both countries, the incumbents won. The wide coalitions fell short for three mutually reinforcing reasons. The first was infighting over strategy. The second was the mismanagement of ideological differences, giving rise to fringe protest parties that sapped coalition strength. The third was a failure to demonstrate to the voting public a credible capacity for governance. Together, these three problems demobilized too many opposition voters.

In neither Hungary nor Turkey was the opposition alliance a genuinely unified political force. In the latter, the nomination of CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu to be the joint presidential standard-bearer caused a major rift owing to doubts about his electability.⁵ The leader of an important nationalist party argued that either Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu or Ankara mayor Mansur Yavaş would be a stronger candidate. The dispute was smoothed over and Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy formally confirmed, but doubts about him lingered.

In Hungary (which does not have a presidential system), the opposi-

tion opted to hold a primary with a runoff to see who would campaign to be prime minister. Intended to generate democratic legitimacy, the primary process instead had the effect of heightening political conflict. In round one, the second- and third-place finishers, a pair of mayors,

In both Hungary and Turkey, efforts to hold together ideologically incompatible partners did more to sap the opposition coalition's appeal at the edges than to broaden it.

agreed that one of them should withdraw to help defeat the first-place finisher (a center-left candidate) and consolidate the anti-Fidesz vote. The mayors could not agree, however, on who should step back. The impasse dragged on until just days before the runoff, projecting an image of paralysis at the worst possible moment. The mayor who had come in third ultimately emerged as the nominee, but the damage had been done.

The second failure, which in both countries was related to the first, had to do with mismanaging the ideological compromises that a broad alliance presupposes. Meant to hold the coalition together, the attempts to bridge vast ideological distances instead produced protest parties at the fringes and cost crucial votes. In Hungary, the alliance of the left-liberal Democratic Coalition (DK) with the formerly far-right Jobbik party alienated the latter's traditional rural and right-wing base, whose voters fled to a far-right Jobbik spinoff called Our Homeland.⁶

The ideological tensions that afflicted the Turkish opposition a year later proved similarly damaging. The inclusion of candidates from small conservative parties on the secularist CHP's parliamentary lists bred severe voter-coordination problems: Secular-leaning voters hesitated to support strict conservatives, while conservative voters were reluctant to vote for anyone whose name appeared on the slate of the CHP (the party historically linked to the assertive, top-down secularism of the Turkish Republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk).⁷ At the same time, the opposition alliance's decision to seek implicit support from the leading pro-Kurdish party drove many nationalist voters to an ultranationalist protest party, weakening precisely the flank where the opposition needed to be strong and gain voters. In both Hungary and Turkey, efforts to hold together ideologically incompatible partners did more to sap the opposition coalition's appeal at the edges than to broaden it.

Finally, the disparate character of these alliances resulted in an inability to present a clear, convincing, and unified alternative to the incumbent. In Hungary, the 2022 opposition coalition struggled to produce a common platform and suffered from disjointed messaging. Its standard-bearer stumbled badly when he suggested that Hungary could send military support to Ukraine: Keeping Hungary out of a war into which he claimed the EU and NATO wanted to drag it was one of Orbán's key ap-

peals, and he immediately highlighted his opponent's gaffe.⁸ In Turkey, the anti-AKP alliance wrote a massive 2,000-goal policy document but failed to translate it into digestible campaign messaging.⁹ Voters were left guessing as to how a prospective cabinet full of veto players would actually govern amid compounding national crises. In neither Hungary nor Turkey did the opposition coalition do anything to show voters that it would be able to run the country. Orbán and Erdoğan readily exploited the vacuum, each man using his vast media dominance to paint his opponents as bunglers who would put national security and stability at risk.

In sum, both the Turkish and Hungarian oppositions let crucial months be consumed by infighting over strategy while ideological differences played out in public and undermined perceptions of opposition competence and governance capacity. Incumbents capitalized on the disarray. The perception problem fed voter demobilization as backers of the alliances' various member parties found it hard to get behind coalitions that seemed at least partly at odds with their own preferences as voters.

From Coordination Flop to Single-Party Challenge

In both Hungary and Turkey, the opposition alliances lost, and then fell apart amid testy debates over who was to blame for defeat. Infighting broke out into the open as alliance partners publicly excoriated one another and mutual trust evaporated.¹⁰ In the minds of voters and politicians alike, the defeats discredited not only the specific coalitions but the very idea of opposition unity. There then ensued a strategic reorientation in both countries, though in neither was it planned. Instead, it emerged in both from contingent and unforeseen developments within the structural void left by the opposition alliances' collapse.

In Turkey, the CHP seemed like 2023's biggest loser. It had been the keystone party of the opposition alliance, and its leader had confounded promising opinion polls by losing to Erdoğan in the presidential race. Despite this heavy symbolic burden of defeat, however, the CHP proved to be the only opposition party capable of meaningfully renewing itself after the fiasco. In November 2023, the party's national congress elected a new leader, Özgür Özel, and doubled down on the ongoing process of becoming a centrist, catchall party centered on democratic figures who were proven electoral winners. The most notable of these was Istanbul's Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, who had come to embody both governing credibility and cross-partisan appeal.

Looking ahead to the March 2024 local elections, the new CHP leaders began with openness to some form of interparty coordination. They reached out to the conservative Kemalist İYİ Party but their offer was rejected, and other opposition parties chose to run their own candidates too. The CHP arranged limited coordination with the pro-Kurdish party in a couple of major cities, but that was all. Every major opposition

party fielded its own candidates in nearly all constituencies. This looked like a setback, but it turned out to be a decisive—if unplanned—advantage. The congeries of small parties running candidates convinced large numbers of opposition voters outside the CHP base that the only realistic path to unseating the AKP ran through its biggest challenger, the CHP.¹¹ The CHP embraced this dynamic, casting itself as the lynchpin of a notional “Türkiye Alliance” to appeal to backers of other opposition parties as well as disgruntled AKP voters. This was the rhetoric of a coalition without the practical challenges of actually forming and maintaining one.

Sticking to party figures who were both democratic and proven election winners also proved a sound strategic choice. İmamoğlu led the way as the popular mayor of the country’s biggest city, with a proven ability to govern.¹² The CHP touted its “Istanbul Model” of local governance and promised to extend it to every municipality it won in 2024.¹³ The idea was to show that putting the CHP in charge would secure for voters the competent delivery of public services to all citizens regardless of party. The CHP, in other words, was projecting itself as ready to govern, and refused to cede that field to the AKP.

In Hungary, the aftermath of defeat unfolded differently, though as in Turkey contingency played a key role. After the 2022 failure, the established opposition parties mutually recriminated, but none of them overhauled itself as the CHP would do in Turkey a couple of years later. The year 2024 arrived with the Hungarian opposition fragmented, discredited, and largely leaderless—the opposition space was effectively empty. Into this vacuum stepped Péter Magyar, a Fidesz politician who had left the party over the “pardon scandal” that broke out in early 2024 after the president of Hungary (in effect an Orbán appointee) pardoned an orphanage official who had been found guilty of covering up child sexual abuse committed by his superior at the facility.

Magyar flatly rejected the established opposition, condemning it as complicit in Fidesz and its corruption. The leading leftist party, the Democratic Coalition (DK), he dismissed as the “blue Fidesz.”¹⁴ By refusing to ally with discredited figures, Magyar positioned Tisza (a small new party) as a genuinely fresh, centrist force, capable of attracting disillusioned conservative voters who would never have supported a traditional left-wing coalition. He also capitalized on Hungary’s institutional framework, which offers public-financing incentives that favor large individual parties over coalitions.

Despite very different paths—one shaped by a party’s internal renewal and the unintended consequences of a fractured field, the other by the explosive emergence of a new political actor—the outcome in both Turkey and Hungary was highly similar. A single, consolidated opposition force came to dominate the anti-incumbent landscape, absorbing the voters of the collapsed alliances and projecting, for the first time in

years, the kind of clarity and credibility that the broad coalitions had never been able to achieve.

Why Single-Party Opposition Worked

The failures of the broad opposition coalitions in Hungary and Turkey reflected not merely the overwhelming strength of the respective incumbents but also the structural limits of the coalition model itself under competitive authoritarian conditions. Dispensing with the need to accommodate multiple veto players within heterogeneous alliances, the CHP and Tisza were able, each on its own, to mobilize voters and win via methods that the coalitions never managed.

In Turkey in 2024 and Hungary in 2026, a single-party challenger proved markedly more effective than a recent broad-front coalition in three ways: 1) Each challenger threw itself into one disciplined campaign strategy; 2) each took away the incumbents' key polarizing appeal; and 3) each ran on an inclusive, centrist platform that seemed far more credible than anything a disparate "broad-front" coalition could produce.

First and foremost, the single-party challenger model freed both the CHP and Tisza from the travails of interparty bargaining over candidate selection. With a single party in control, coherent and disciplined campaign organization and messaging became far easier to achieve, and energy did not have to be spent on squabbles within a grand coalition. The demonstration of credible governing capacity also became easier in a one-party opposition environment.

In Turkey, the CHP could point to its governance record in municipalities where infrastructure upgrades and social-support programs for the poor, the elderly, and students had benefited citizens without regard to party affiliation. The CHP mayors of Istanbul and Ankara had shown administrative competence in those two large and complex cities, allowing the CHP to contrast its effectiveness with the ruling AKP's perceived penchants for nepotism and the mismanagement of public resources.¹⁵

In Hungary, Tisza's expression of governing credibility took a different but equally deliberate form. Learning from 2022's messaging disaster, Magyar built a united and disciplined public front.¹⁶ Tisza's well-run campaign was, in effect, also an advertisement for its ability to govern.

Second, by discarding the broad-coalition framework, both the CHP and Tisza blunted polarizing appeals that the AKP and Fidesz had long used against challengers. In Turkey, the opposition coalition's dealings with a pro-Kurdish party had led to charges of being soft on Kurdish militancy and even of secretly cooperating with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, which up until its 2025 dissolution had been banned as a terror group. Such accusations had proven devastatingly effective in 2023, but

in the local elections of the following year, a legal pro-Kurdish party ran its own mayoral candidates. Erdoğan had to make do without one of his favorite attack lines.¹⁷

In Hungary, Orbán had long run against the political left and, above all, the figure of Ferenc Gyurcsány, who had been prime minister (as a member of the Socialist Party) between 2004 and 2009, and whose DK had been a prominent member of the 2022 coalition. Orbán often reminded voters of the government crises and scandals of the Gyurcsány era, which included a notorious May 2006 speech (leaked four months later) to a closed-door Socialist Party meeting at which Gyurcsány said his party had been lying to the country “morning, evening, and night.”¹⁸ Although the man himself was largely invisible in 2022, his party’s presence in the anti-Fidesz alliance was all Orbán needed.

Magyar, an ex-Fidesz member given to denouncing DK and all the traditional opposition parties, presented nothing like the kind of target for Orbán that the former Socialist premier had. When Fidesz attempted to force Tisza into familiar culture-war traps around LGBTQ rights and drug policy, Magyar successfully sidestepped these attacks, having already staked out conservative positions on migration and other sensitive issues that made him hard to paint as a tool of left-wing globalism.¹⁹

Third, despite operating without a formal multiparty coalition, both the CHP and Tisza proved able to craft inclusive appeals that the alliances had promised but not delivered. This requires some explanation, because broad coalitions are supposed to be better at representing all anti-incumbent voters than any single party can be. In both Hungary in 2022 and Turkey in 2023, the opposition coalition was conspicuously inclusive—at the elite level. That last qualifying phrase is key. Party leaders got together and made awkward bargains among themselves, but so many ordinary voters rejected these elite maneuvers that protest parties sprang up and leached away opposition votes. Gathering many disparate parties behind one banner, it turned out, did not make the coalition more appealing to voters but instead pushed some of them away.

The single-party challengers, by contrast, achieved inclusivity not through elite deals across ideological divides, but rather through compelling messaging and grassroots mobilization. Rather than letting the competing demands of multiple veto players distract them from voter outreach, both the CHP and Tisza were free to focus on appealing to wide segments of society. In Turkey, the post-2023 CHP still spoke of itself as aspiring to lead an “alliance” on behalf of the whole country. This tone invited voters from across the former coalition to rally behind the CHP. With the other opposition parties running independently in 2024, the CHP could bypass worries of managing a coalition and simply put itself forward as the best bet for anyone who wanted to put the brakes on the AKP. A record of nonpartisan local governance backed up the inclusive message.

In Hungary in 2026, Tisza achieved a comparable consolidation through a combination of Magyar's centrist, cross-partisan messaging and innovative grassroots structures. The so-called Tisza Islands—decentralized community hubs that bypassed traditional party organization—directly engaged voters in areas of the country that the old opposition had never reached. The top-down, elite-driven pacts of the old opposition could not produce the civic engagement that Tisza's methods did. Tisza even raised money through crowdfunding, letting supporters buy “change-the-system cards” that conveyed a sense of shared investment in the election's outcome.

In the final analysis, both the CHP and Tisza were seeking the same goal: To convince skeptical or apathetic citizens that defeating the incumbents was possible. Each party recognized the lack of such confidence as a huge drag on popular mobilization. To build trust from the ground up—via competent local governance, grassroots activism, and clarity of messaging—was key to bringing opposition confidence back. In both countries, incumbents assumed to be unbeatable turned out to be vulnerable to a challenger that could present itself not as a compromise among competing interests, but as a genuine, unified alternative.

Why Individual Challengers Met Different Fates

The similar trajectories of opposition politics in Turkey and Hungary suggest that when a maximally broad opposition alliance fails to unseat the incumbent, this failure discredits the broad-alliance model and creates conditions for a single party to absorb the anti-incumbent electorate (without ideologically driven “edge leakage”), often under renewed leadership or as an entirely new political vehicle.²⁰ Crucially, this consolidation is not driven by voter disengagement or demobilization. The opposition electorate remains largely intact, but in a reconfigured partisan alignment. Both the CHP and Tisza emerged as single-party challengers by abandoning elite-driven coalitions in favor of acting as unified, disciplined political vehicles.

Here we must pause to note an important difference between the cases: Tisza won a national election in 2026 and the incumbents conceded. The CHP, stymied at the head of a coalition in 2023, remained out of power at the national level. The significant blow that the CHP struck to the ruling AKP in 2024 was purely in local elections, and has been met by a severe and sustained authoritarian crackdown that has stalled opposition momentum. Since March 2024, the Turkish judiciary and interior ministry have removed 22 CHP mayors. Most prominent among them has been Istanbul's Ekrem İmamoğlu, who has been in prison on spurious terrorism and corruption charges since March 2025. The regime cannot hide its desperate urge to reclaim control over vital municipal resources while sidelining a popular politician who threatens Erdoğan's

grip on the presidency.²¹ The CHP has responded with protests, boycotts, and charges that the AKP government is disregarding the “national will” as expressed in the 2024 local elections.

By contrast, Tisza’s emergence culminated in a historic national electoral victory in 2026, largely because Orbán’s regime, while structurally unfair, did not resort to the overt physical repression and imprisonment utilized in Turkey. Orbán relied on his carefully engineered “political forcefield” of gerrymandering, captive media outlets, and unequal campaign finance, but never tried to have Magyar arrested.²² Unlike the CHP, Tisza had the exact leverage needed to mobilize a frustrated electorate and secure a constitutional supermajority capable of dismantling the autocracy.

This stark difference between the two cases—a ruling party that concedes versus one that lashes out and gets away with it—has to do not merely with how strong each opposition party is, but also with the institutional and international constraints that shape the costs and benefits a given government must weigh when contemplating a crackdown. Hungary’s status as a small EU member creates a dense web of constraints on whoever holds power in Budapest. There are treaties, rule-of-law conditionalities, oversight actions that the European Commission and the European Court of Justice can apply, and (not least) there are funds that come from the EU. Any obvious violations of liberal-democratic norms would trigger judicial proceedings, funding suspensions, and prolonged financial uncertainty. The Orbán government had strong incentives to avoid all of this, so it had to operate through mechanisms that could be at least plausibly defended as lawful. The game was to tilt things as heavily in favor of the regime as possible while keeping up democratic appearances and minimizing exposure to external sanctions or financial retaliation.

The Turkish state, by contrast, is far less constrained by such supranational institutional frameworks. Although Turkey remains linked to European institutions through arrangements such as the customs union, the EU-accession framework, and various Council of Europe mechanisms, the country does not have to reckon with the binding legal-enforcement structure and automatic financial conditionality that come with EU membership. Aided by Turkey’s strategic geographical position, the Erdoğan government has developed a transactional relationship with the EU in an evolving security environment. The country is a NATO member and a necessary military partner for the states of Europe at a time when shifting U.S. commitments are driving Europeans to become more self-reliant in defense matters. This situation gives the Turkish president more leeway to use domestic coercion. Criminal charges against opposition figures, arrests of municipal officials, and the dismissal of elected mayors in favor of appointed trustees may draw international criticism, but that is a price the AKP regime is willing to pay for deploying these still viable instruments of political control.

Will Tisza be able to turn its electoral breakthrough into a sustained process of democratic renewal despite structural constraints and entrenched networks? It remains to be seen. Can the CHP convert its mobilizational momentum into a win in the next national election despite escalating government repression? That too is unknown.

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