CONTESTING ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM: ELECTORAL STRATEGIES OF THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION IN TURKEY AND HUNGARY

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Contesting Electoral Authoritarianism:

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

Contesting Electoral Authoritarianism:

Electoral Strategies of the Political Opposition in Turkey and Hungary

Despite receiving increasing scholarly attention in recent times, the actions, preferences, and strategies of political opposition actors in contexts of autocratization remain understudied in comparative political science literature. This dissertation investigates the electoral strategies pursued by opposition parties in Turkey and Hungary, two prominent examples of electoral autocracy that have undergone a process of populist autocratization. Identifying cooperation and depolarization as two main strategic elements for winning elections against the populist autocrats in power, the dissertation seeks to uncover how opposition parties change their electoral strategies over the course of autocratization and particularly understand when they manage to cooperate and/or depolarize. An in-depth qualitative analysis of the electoral strategies of opposition parties during the process of autocratization in Turkey and Hungary reveals that the pursuit of these two strategies depends on the presence of incentivizing electoral institutions, the transformation of fault lines dividing both the opposition's bases and the broader society, and the existence of positive feedback from the latest experiences. These findings demonstrate that the evolution in the electoral strategies pursued by opposition parties over the course of autocratization mainly takes place through a process of political learning triggered by the transformative impact of unfolding regime change on the opposition parties' approach to the fault lines dividing their societies.

ÖZET

Seçimli Otoriterlikle Mücadele:
Türkiye ve Macaristan'da Siyasi Muhalefetin Seçim Stratejileri

Karşılaştırmalı siyaset bilimi literatürüne bakıldığında, son zamanlarda nispeten artan akademik ilgiye rağmen, otoriterleşen ülkelerdeki siyasi muhalefet aktörlerinin eylem, tercih ve stratejilerinin üzerinde yeterince durulmadığı söylenebilir. Bu tez, uzun yıllar boyunca geçirdikleri popülist otoriterleşme süreci sonucunda birer seçimli otokrasi haline gelen Türkiye ve Macaristan'daki muhalefet partilerinin bu süreç boyunca izledikleri seçim stratejilerini incelemektedir. Tezin amacı muhalefet partilerinin izledikleri seçim stratejilerinin otoriterleşme süreci boyunca nasıl değiştiğini anlamak ve popülist otoriter iktidarlara karşı seçim kazanmak amacı kapsamında öne çıkan iki stratejik hedef olan partiler arası iş birliği ve toplumsal depolarizasyonu hangi koşullar altında gerçekleştirebildiklerini tespit etmektir. Türkiye ve Macaristan'da muhalefet partilerinin otoriterleşme süreci boyunca izlediği seçim stratejilerinin niteliksel analizi sonrasında elde edilen sonuçlar, iş birliği ve depolarizasyona dayanan seçim stratejilerinin izlenmesinin, kurumsal teşviklerin varlığına, genel kamuoyunu ve muhalefeti bölen toplumsal fay hatlarının dönüşümüne ve önceki tecrübelerden alınan olumlu sonuçlara bağlı olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu bulgular, muhalefet partilerinin otoriterleşme süreci boyunca izledikleri seçim stratejilerindeki değişimin büyük oranda bir öğrenme süreci sonucunda gerçekleştiğini, bu öğrenme sürecinin ise otoriter rejim değişikliği boyunca partilerin toplumsal fay hatlarına olan yaklaşımlarındaki dönüşüm sonucunda gerçekleştiğine dikkat çekmektedir.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL OPPOSITIONS IN ELECTORAL AUTOCRACIES

1.1 Introduction

On August 28, 2019, nearly one and half months before the local elections in Hungary, the joint opposition candidate for Budapest mayor Gergely Karácsony paid a visit to the newly elected mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu. Having won the elections twice in three months with the support of all the prominent opposition parties, İmamoğlu was the first opposition politician to hold this office since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in 2002. Hoping to win a similar victory in the local elections of October 2019, where he would take on the longtime incumbent mayor of Budapest István Tarlós, Karácsony had "an instructive exchange" with İmamoğlu, whereby they reportedly discussed whether the strategy that had worked in Istanbul could do so in Budapest as well ("Az Erdogan jelöltjét," 2019).

Karácsony's visit to İmamoğlu was no coincidence. İmamoğlu's victory in Istanbul mayoral race was undoubtedly the centerpiece of the achievements by the coordinated opposition in Turkey's local elections on March 31, 2019.[1] President Erdoğan, who has been ruling the country since 2002, became a renowned politician once he was elected Istanbul mayor in 1994. Since then, the mayoralty of this metropolis remained under the control of Islamist parties. Thus, losing Istanbul was

[1] According to the official election results, the joint candidates of the opposition from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) took the mayoral seats of the metropolitan provinces of Istanbul, Ankara, and Antalya from the ruling AKP and the metropolitan provinces of Mersin and Adana from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the junior partner of President Erdoğan's ruling bloc.

absolutely shocking for Erdoğan's ruling bloc on March 31. As a result, with a highly controversial ruling of the Supreme Electoral Board, whose credentials as an independent judicial body had long been under suspicion, the mayoral election in Istanbul was annulled to be re-run on June 23. However, İmamoğlu won the re-run election with a huge increase in his lead over his rival, former Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım. This was certainly the biggest electoral defeat for President Erdoğan ever since he started ruling the country. For according to him, "Whoever wins Istanbul, wins Turkey" ("Erdoğan: Çok kritik," 2017).

Just like Turkish opposition did in Istanbul and most of the other Turkish metropolises, the Hungarian opposition also pursued the strategy of nominating a single viable candidate against the nominees of the ruling bloc led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Budapest as well as in other cities around the country. Consequently, Karácsony and other joint candidates of the Hungarian opposition took on their competitors from the ruling bloc and achieved a triumphant victory in the local elections of October 13, 2019, taking control of ten major cities of the country including Budapest.[2]

In both Turkey and Hungary, which are two of the most prominent cases of the third wave of autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) with relatively high state capacities, the local elections in 2019 were the very first instances, where opposition parties emerged victorious vis-à-vis their autocratizing competitors, the ruling blocs led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán respectively. Previously, political oppositions of both countries experienced a rather long series of electoral defeats. The process of autocratization that had gone

[2] According to the official election results, the joint candidates of the opposition won 10 of the 23 larger cities including Budapest, taking eight of them from the Fidesz-KDNP alliance of Prime Minister Orbán. The opposition also took control of the 14 of the 23 districts of Budapest, taking ten of them from the ruling bloc.

hand in hand with consecutive electoral victories by the autocratizing incumbents finally dragged both countries into electoral autocracies with extremely unlevel playing fields, where it became barely possible for the opposition to prevail in the elections.

Although the reasons behind the first-time and long-awaited victories by the Turkish and Hungarian oppositions in the 2019 Local Elections that came after a rather long series of electoral defeats under autocratization are multifold, a change in electoral strategies pursued by political oppositions in both countries played an undeniable role. Particularly, the strategies of cooperation and depolarization that respectively allowed the opposition parties to overcome their long-lasting problem of fragmentation and to neutralize the effect of polarization by the incumbents were key in winning big metropolises like Istanbul and Budapest.

The development and pursuit of novel strategies like cooperation and depolarization, on the other hand, are not necessarily translated into electoral victory by all odds, as in the case of the general elections in Hungary and Turkey in April 2022 and May 2023. However, it is no less important to study these strategies beyond the elections results in order to understand how opposition parties strategically adapt themselves to the process of autocratization, which would eventually culminate in electoral authoritarianism and what changes this adaptation brings about in their electoral strategies during the course of autocratization.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation inquires what explains the strategic choices made by the political opposition with regard to cooperation and depolarization in Turkey and Hungary. Seeking to understand when and why actors of political opposition in both countries make the strategic choice of cooperation and depolarization, this dissertation scrutinizes the evolution of their electoral strategies

during the course of autocratization and possible reasons behind the changes along the way.

Within the context of this dissertation, cooperation and depolarization are taken to constitute the two main pillars of the electoral strategy to be pursued by the political opposition under autocratization. This is not because they reflect the substance of the novel strategies recently developed by the opposition parties in Turkey and Hungary, but rather, more broadly, because of the particular type of autocratization that these both countries have been through, namely the populist autocratization, which became particularly prevalent beginning from the late 1990s and has left its mark on the still-ongoing third wave of autocratization.

The process of populist autocratization usually unfolds as a populist party comes to power with a strong mandate through democratic means, stays in power long enough to dismantle the democratic institutions and eventually renders the elections significantly unfair, thereby making sure that it cannot be easily replaced by the opposition. During this process, the populist incumbents, who draw their legitimacy from having won the elections, usually pursue a long-term strategy of polarization by instrumentalizing the existing fault lines that simultaneously divide their societies and the actors of political opposition in order to weaken the opposition and continue to prevail in the elections. The strategy of polarization helps populist incumbents win the elections by (1) facilitating the maintenance of the majority support in a political atmosphere, where opposition is severely discredited and voter fluidity becomes increasingly less likely, and (2) keeping the opposition fragmented to ensure that it does not join forces and becomes a bloc. In cases, where populist incumbents stay in power long enough by means of this strategy, they usually manage to carry out the institutional changes through which to stay more easily in

power, thereby leading their countries out of democracy despite the elections that continue to exist as a means to draw legitimacy, albeit in an extremely unfair form (Urbinati, 1998; Abts & Rummens, 2007, Sözen, 2019b). Such countries practically become electoral autocracies, where the playing field is significantly skewed in favor of the autocratizing incumbents and the chances of the political opposition to replace the incumbents via elections are significantly low if not merely on paper (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2006). Nevertheless, under such circumstances the political oppositions have often no choice but to develop a strategy to take their chances in the best possible way against the populist incumbents in the unfair but at least not unreal elections. If it is ever to eliminate the powerful weapon of polarization in the hands of the populist autocrats, the electoral strategy to be pursued by the opposition parties needs to involve (1) a cooperation strategy that would help them get rid of their fragmentation and build a bloc powerful enough to be a real contender against the incumbents and (2) a depolarization strategy that would allow them to neutralize the existing axes of politics providing the incumbents with a stable majority support and enable voter fluidity to mobilize a new majority in support of the opposition.

Nevertheless, neither cooperation nor depolarization automatically ensues following populist autocratization. As explained above, the process entails both pillars as indispensable parts of an electoral strategy that would be to succeed against the populist autocrats in power. However, whether the actors of political opposition make the strategic choice of cooperation and depolarization, and if they do, what motivates them to do so and how these strategic choices change over the course of autocratization remain to be rather important empirical questions that this dissertation seeks to elucidate.

Moreover, even if actors of political opposition in an autocratizing context are determinedly eager to incorporate cooperation and/or depolarization to their electoral strategies, they would still have to clear various hurdles arising from ideological distinctions, confidence-building, and electoral systems (Ong, 2022). Even more importantly, the social-political fault lines that simultaneously divide the oppositions and their larger societies remain to be the most challenging obstacle to the pursuit of such novel strategies. Often rooted in intractable and historically embedded issues that might be traced all the way back to the periods of state (re)formation, these fault lines are far more deep-rooted than ordinary social and ideological distinctions. Moreover, as underlined above, these fault lines usually become practical instruments in the hands of the populist autocrats in power, who constantly reactivate them in order to preserve its majority support by exacerbating the polarization between its own base and that of the opposition, and keep the opposition fundamentally divided. Confining the opposition parties to the boundaries of these not easily surmountable fault lines, the populist autocrats in power make sure that they cannot make any political appeal beyond their respective "natural bases". While a political attempt to reach out beyond these fault lines by means of cooperation and depolarization might very well help the actors of political opposition spoil the working strategy of the autocratizing incumbents, it would also force them to make compromises, which might put the full of support of their natural bases in jeopardy by impeding their full mobilization and perhaps even triggering defections. Therefore, not only are novel electoral strategies like cooperation and depolarization not an automatic result of populist autocratization, but their willful pursuit also entails notable challenges, requiring the opposition parties to leave their political comfort zones.

How do opposition parties in autocratizing contexts arrive at the strategies of cooperation and depolarization despite all the hurdles? Although the motivation is clearly to put a spoke in the authoritarian wheel that keeps the opposition parties the losers of the game, it remains to be answered how the actors of political opposition clear the abovementioned hurdles. While the existing literature on the electoral strategies of political opposition in electoral authoritarian contexts provides certain answers to this question, investigating with what particular strategies opposition parties resist autocratization as it unfolds remains relatively uncharted territory (Lührmann, 2021; Tomini et al., 2023).

Focusing mainly on cooperation and much less on depolarization, the existing studies that are thoroughly reviewed in the upcoming sections feature various variables in attempt to account for oppositions' strategic decisions on whether or not to cooperate. While regime vulnerability is the most mentioned variable (van de Walle, 2006; Gandhi & Reuter, 2008; Wahman, 2011; Ong, 2022), there are also other variables that extant studies have brought up, such as the level of repression (Gandhi & Reuter, 2013; Jiménez, 2021), policy orientation of the opposition parties (Wahman, 2011), intra-opposition competition (Breadsworth, 2016) and the perception of mutual dependence among the actors of political opposition (Ong, 2022). There are also some other factors, i.e., institutional, historical/cultural, socio-economic, and international factors (van de Walle, 2006), which might be expected to somehow have an impact on whether or not opposition actors cooperate.

As relevant as all these accounts are to understand the dynamics of electoral cooperation by opposition parties in various electoral authoritarian contexts, they do not particularly take into account the transformative impact of the gradual process of populist autocratization on the way that the actors of political opposition think while

developing their electoral strategies. In fact, the changes in electoral strategies of the opposition parties are directly associated with this transformative impact, through which what was once unthinkable for them gradually turns into a dominant approach in their strategic thinking. Therefore, the process of populist autocratization and the gradual transformation that it creates in the entirety of electoral politics should be recognized as a key parameter in the accounts for how political opposition strategizes in a given context, where transition into electoral authoritarianism occurred through such a process.

1.2 The argument in brief

As underlined above, the process of populist autocratization creates an extremely unfair playing field, whereby the opposition parties keep losing elections time and time again. Having lived long enough under an increasingly autocratizing regime and experienced a long series of costly defeats, opposition parties draw lessons from their past experiences of failure, through which they reevaluate and, if deemed necessary, modify their strategies. This is how opposition parties can finally conclude that they need to incorporate novel elements like cooperation and/or depolarization into their electoral strategies. Nonetheless, as underlined above, because of the social-political fault lines instrumentalized by the populist autocrats in power through their "menu of manipulation" (Schedler, 2002), the pursuit of these novel strategies entails significant risks and challenges. This dissertation argues that a mechanism of political learning triggered by three factors helps the actors of political opposition clear all the hurdles and make the strategic choices of cooperation and/or depolarization: (1) the presence of incentives provided by electoral institutions, (2) the transformative impact of populist autocratization on the deep-rooted social-

political fault lines dividing the opposition as well as the larger society, and (3) the feedback from the latest elections. While for the cooperation strategy all three variables come to play, for the depolarization strategy only two of them are involved with the institutional setting not being an outright factor.

To begin with, for the pursuit of the cooperation strategy, the first variable to check is the institutional setting. The opposition parties that are substantially separated from each other by strong social-political fault lines are not likely to engage in electoral cooperation, unless, first of all, there are electoral institutions that enable, incentivize, or compel such a cooperation. If electoral institutions are deemed to provide enough incentives by the opposition parties, the second variable comes into play, which is whether with the increasing repression under autocratization the opposition parties perceive the anti-incumbent fault line to be more dominant than the intra-opposition fault lines. If this is the case, then electoral cooperation by opposition parties separated by social-political fault lines becomes a viable strategic option that is likely to be pursued. Even so, however, the dominance of the anti-incumbent fault line over the intra-opposition fault lines is not enough to be sure of opposition cooperation for feedback from latest experiences looms large in deciding whether to pursue a strategy or not. At this point, there are three possible outcomes: First, in case of a series of losses where the strategy of electoral cooperation has never been pursued, the actors of political opposition would most likely give it a go. Second, if the strategy of electoral cooperation pursued in the latest elections is widely deemed to have worked, then the opposition parties would most likely be eager to maintain it. Finally, if the strategy of electoral cooperation pursued in the latest elections is widely deemed not to have worked, then the opposition parties

would either try a different cooperation strategy or entirely give up the cooperation strategy (see Figure 1).

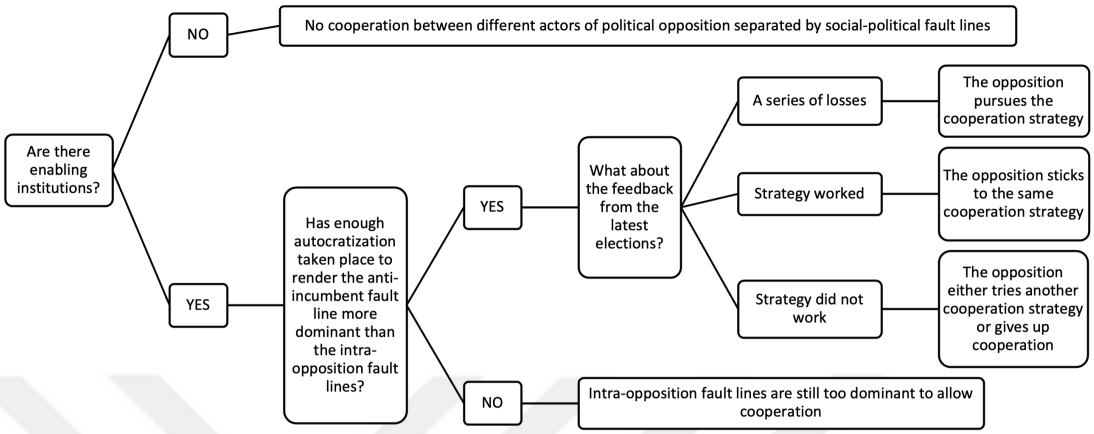

Figure 1 A theory of the pursuit of the cooperation strategy by political opposition in autocratizing contexts

As for the pursuit of the depolarization strategy, the first variable to check is whether the deepening autocratization has triggered the necessity for the opposition parties to reach out beyond their conventional bases. As underlined above, one of the biggest challenges for the pursuit of the depolarization strategy by an opposition party is that it might seem as if it compromises its core values, principles, beliefs, or ideologies, which would expectedly create certain discontent among the party's own organization and base, thereby risking demobilization and even defections. The proponents of reaching out beyond party's conventional bases via the strategy of depolarization, on the other hand, would argue that the party would always be condemned to defeat, unless a new style of politics is developed that goes beyond the fault lines imposed by the populist autocratic government and help the party turn the scale in its favor. If the balance between the proponents and opponents of the depolarization strategy within an opposition party shifts in favor of the former with

deepening autocratization, then depolarization becomes a viable strategic option that is likely to be pursued by an opposition party. Even so, however, this is not enough to be sure of the pursuit of depolarization for, as is exactly the case with the strategy of cooperation, feedback from latest experiences looms large in deciding whether or not to pursue the strategy of depolarization as well. At this point, there are three possible outcomes: First, in case of a series of losses where the strategy of depolarization has never been tried, then the actors of political opposition would most likely give it a go. Second, if the strategy of depolarization is widely deemed to have worked in the latest elections, the parties pursuing it would most likely be eager to maintain it. Finally, if the strategy of electoral cooperation is widely deemed not to have worked in the latest elections, the opposition parties would either try a different depolarization strategy or totally give it up and go back to the strategy of polarization (see Figure 2).

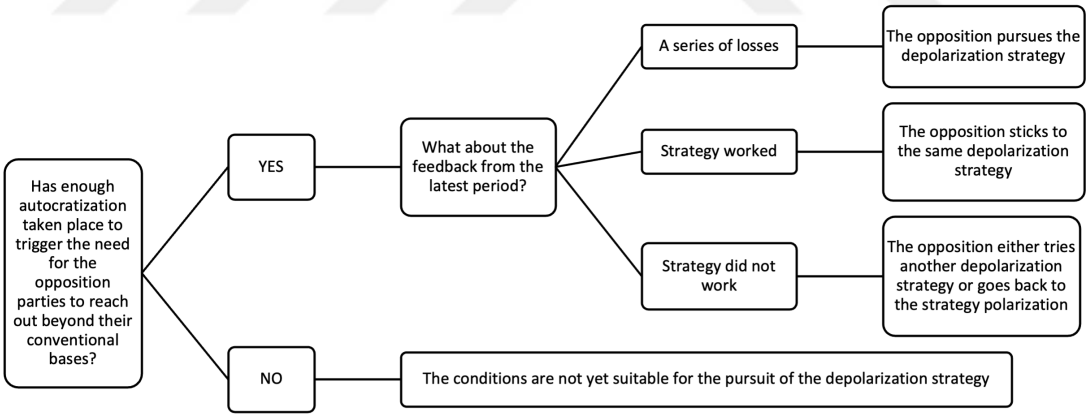

Figure 2 A theory of the pursuit of the depolarization strategy by political opposition in autocratizing contexts

1.3 Main contribution and plan of the dissertation

This approach has two main contributions to the existing literature. First, it reveals the connection between the type of autocratization and the dynamics of strategy

development and implementation by the political opposition in an autocratizing context. This dissertation particularly scrutinizes two prominent cases of populist autocratization, Turkey and Hungary, both of which are considered to be contemporary examples of electoral authoritarianism. Thereby, it also makes clear in the next sections and chapters that the path that particular cases take to electoral authoritarianism matters to understand the dynamics of strategy development and implementation by the political opposition and that these dynamics do not have to be analogous in all kinds of electoral autocracies. Second, unlike most of the extant literature, this dissertation does not confine itself only to the question of cooperation but simultaneously focuses on cooperation and depolarization as two main strategic pillars by indicating the role that social-political fault lines seriously instrumentalized by populist autocrats during the course of autocratization play in the dynamics of strategy development and implementation by the political opposition.

This chapter proceeds with the review of the extant literature regarding electoral strategies of political oppositions in electoral authoritarian contexts and is followed by an elaboration of the theory proposed by this dissertation, research design, case selection and methodology. Chapter 2 elaborates autocratization as a concept and analytical approach, dwells on populist autocratization as a particular type and analyzes the processes of populist autocratization that Turkey and Hungary have been through under President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Orbán, respectively.

The following chapters present the empirical data. Chapter 3 and 4 process-trace the electoral strategies pursued by Turkish opposition under parliamentarism and executive presidency, respectively, against the ruling bloc led by President Erdoğan from 2007 to 2019. Chapter 5, likewise, process-traces the electoral strategies pursued by Hungarian opposition against the ruling bloc led by Prime

Minister Orbán from 2014 to 2022. These three chapters not only provide a thorough description of the electoral strategies pursued by Turkish and Hungarian opposition parties in each election within the given time frame but also demonstrate the evolution of these electoral strategies over the course of populist autocratization that both countries have gone under.

Chapter 6 presents the findings of the empirical research and analyzes the electoral strategies pursued by Turkish and Hungarian oppositions during the process of autocratization. Thereby, within the context of the theory proposed by this dissertation, the chapter aims to explain why the strategic choices of cooperation and depolarization were made by the actors of political opposition in both countries.

Finally, Chapter 7 is a concluding chapter that summarizes and discusses the significant insights and implications of the dissertation for the future of political oppositions in electoral authoritarian contexts.

1.4 The state of the field

Until recently, the research on the electoral strategies of political oppositions in autocratizing contexts seemed quite neglected. Even so, there has been some significant research dwelling on the issue with electoral autocracies increasing in number during the third wave of autocratization. Although most of the extant literature on autocratization takes incumbents as the main actor of the process, the studies that focused on the underlying differences of this ongoing wave from earlier examples of democratic breakdown (Bermeo, 2016; Tomini & Wagemann, 2017; Waldner & Lust, 2018; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) and the peculiarities of dominant type of authoritarianism that consequently emerged (Levitsky & Way,

2002; Schedler, 2013) paved the way for increasing scholarly attention to the opposition actors.

Unlike in the past democratic breakdowns during the 20th century, the cases of the third wave of autocratization did not witness the total annihilation of political opposition. On the contrary, the oppositions have continued to operate in these cases, thereby having at least the *de jure* chance of coming to power through the ballot box. As this led to an increasing acknowledgement of their agency both prior to and during autocratization, what oppositions do and do not do in these authoritarian contexts became a significant question to have a better understanding of how the process of autocratization unfolds.

The scholarly works that deal with the actions, preferences, and strategies of opposition actors in autocratizing contexts is threefold. The first set of studies adopts an outcome-oriented approach to the opposition strategies, focusing their effects on election results and regime outcomes. So, rather than concentrating on the sources of the strategies, as this dissertation does, these studies examine what strategies (do not) help the oppositions win the elections and, thereby, stop and reverse autocratization. However, these studies are still quite relevant for this dissertation, not only because they demonstrate how high the stakes are but also because the outcomes of one strategy might be directly connected with the sources of another. The scholarly works outlined here are particularly significant for this dissertation as they focus on how opposition actors resist autocratization as it unfolds. Although the works mentioned below delve deeply into the specific strategies pursued by opposition parties in long-standing, stable electoral autocracies, it remains relatively uncharted territory to scrutinize which particular strategies are available to opposition parties during ongoing autocratization processes. In this regard, this set of studies provides a

theoretical and empirical foundation for this dissertation by identifying the resisting actors, exploring the tools available to them, and examining the specific strategies they could employ with these tools.

The second set of studies, on the other hand, is concerned with the particular strategies pursued by the opposition parties under electoral authoritarianism as well as the reasons behind the strategic choices that they make. With an exclusive focus on the cooperation strategy, these studies examine under what circumstances oppositions (do not) coalesce under electoral authoritarianism, thereby offering significant insights into the main question of this dissertation. While the theories proposed by this set of studies primarily pertain to long-standing, stable electoral autocracies, they remain highly relevant for cases such as Turkey and Hungary, which have undergone a process of autocratization culminating in electoral authoritarianism. However, it is likely that these theories alone are not entirely sufficient to explain the evolution in electoral strategies pursued by the oppositions in Turkey and Hungary throughout the process of autocratization.

Finally, the third set of studies concentrates on polarization as an important part of the incumbents' strategy during the process of autocratization and outline the options of counter-polarization strategies that are available to the political oppositions. These studies generally demonstrate how polarization becomes a tool in the hands of populist autocrats and how this polarization acts as a catalyst for democratic erosion and breakdown. While both the process of autocratization and populism inherently involve political economy and class dynamics, the focus of these studies—and consequently, of this dissertation—is primarily on polarization along cultural and identity-based fault lines. However, as evidenced by a few studies at the end of this section, issues of distribution and the "class aspect" of populist

autocratization offer an alternative political axis for opposition parties resisting populist autocrats in power. Nonetheless, it remains an empirical question to what extent Turkish and Hungarian oppositions have effectively utilized this opportunity, a question this dissertation seeks to elucidate.

1.4.1 Studies focusing on the effect of opposition strategies on the regime and election outcome

While considering opposition strategies in autocratizing contexts important, this comprehensive literature study them by focusing their effect on the election results and/or the fate of the political regime. This group of studies mainly scrutinizes the elections in the electoral authoritarian contexts, where despite the utterly authoritarian setting and unlevel playing field elections continue to operate and the opposition has at least the *de jure* chance to come to power by winning them (Levitsky & Way, 2002; Schedler, 2013; Bermeo, 2016). As underlined above, this section dwells on the studies that analyze how oppositions emerge victorious from the elections despite uneven conditions and what these victories mean for regime outcomes (see Table 1).

Bunce and Wolchik (2010) makes a comparative analysis of eleven elections held in post-communist competitive authoritarian regimes from 1998 to 2008, six of which were won by the opposition while the remaining five were won by the incumbents and examines what accounts for these different electoral outcomes. Through both qualitative and quantitative analyses, where they control the effect of different factors such as regime vulnerability, the authors reaches the conclusion that what oppositions do and no not do in these contexts matter to explain different electoral outcomes. The authors also find that the only way for the opposition in such

authoritarian contexts to emerge victorious from the elections is to pursue "novel and sophisticated strategies" by forming an electoral bloc and convincing the electorate that if they support the opposition, authoritarian incumbents might actually lose the elections and be compelled to give up power.

Table 1. The dependent and independent variables presented in the reviewed studies focusing on the effect of opposition strategies on the regime and election outcome

Scholarly work	Dependent variable	Prominent explanatory variable(s)
Bunce & Wolchik (2010)	Election outcome: Whether the political opposition wins the elections	Electoral strategies pursued by the political opposition
	Regime outcome: Whether autocratization continues following the elections	Election outcome: Whether the political opposition wins the elections
Wahman (2013)	Regime outcome: Whether lasting democratization follows electoral victory by the opposition	Refuting pre-electoral opposition coalition and electoral victory by the opposition as explanatory variables
	Election outcome: Whether the political opposition is more likely to win the elections	Pre-electoral opposition coalitions
Donno (2013)	Regime outcome: Whether elections in electoral authoritarian regimes lead to democratization	- Type of the electoral authoritarianism: competitive or hegemonic - Opposition electoral coalition and international conditionality - Refuting electoral victory by the opposition as an explanatory variable
Gamboa (2017)	Regime outcome: Whether democracy further erodes under authoritarian leaders	- Strategies pursued by the political opposition: Institutional or extra-institutional - Goals of the political opposition: moderate or radical
Cleary & Öztürk (2020)	Regime outcome: Whether democratic backsliding ends up with democratic breakdown	Strategies pursued by the opposition: moderate or radical
Somer et al. (2022)	Regime outcome: Why democratic erosion is hard to reverse for opposition actors	Regime uncertainty creating various dilemmas dividing the opposition

Underlining the electoral nature of competitive authoritarian regimes, Bunce and Wolchik particularly emphasize on the potential of the opposition actors to create change. However, in order for the opposition actors to fulfil their potential, coordination per se does not suffice, as opposition actors also built electoral blocs in the cases where they lost the elections. For Bunce and Wolchik, what creates a difference is, as mentioned above, the pursuit of novel and sophisticated strategies,

through which to deactivate incumbents' strategies to stay in power and to benefit from their vulnerability.

Although they do not particularly aim to make conclusions regarding the regime outcome, Bunce and Wolchik also underline that elections are generally critical junctures, after which "the regime gap" between the countries where opposition won and those where they lost, significantly increases. Whereas in the cases where opposition lost the elections autocratization gained pace, this was not the case in the countries where the opposition won. The authors thus suggest that an electoral victory by the opposition plays a significant role for the future of the regime.

Nevertheless, other scholars challenged the idea that electoral strategies are the direct cause of regime change towards democracy. Wahman (2013), for instance, put forward that opposition victory facilitated by opposition coordination and subsequent alternation in power are not a guarantee for democratization. Analyzing 251 elections under authoritarian contexts between 1973 and 2004, Wahman shows that the argument that opposition coordination leads to democratization through elections might be misleading. Based on his analysis, Wahman argues that coordination might have a democratizing effect by facilitating electoral victory for the opposition and thus the alternation of power but contends that it does not have a significant effect on longer-term democratization beyond that. Wahman also underlines that alternation of power through incumbent defeat in elections per se does not necessarily lead to democratization in electoral authoritarian contexts. Finally, Wahman refrains from reaching a conclusion regarding the causal relationship between opposition coordination and the likelihood of electoral victory

by the opposition, which is a question explored by a set of further studies also reviewed in this section.

Donno (2013), likewise, puts forward that opposition coalitions generally increase the electoral potential of the opposition but electoral outcomes in favor of the opposition do not necessarily translate into a democratic regime change. Although her analysis shows that opposition coalitions might contribute to democratization along with some other factors in competitive, and not hegemonic electoral, authoritarian regimes, she concludes: “Alternation in power can best be understood as a by-product rather than a direct cause of democracy” (p.714).

These studies were followed by a further group of scholarly works that works rather a more direct relationship between opposition strategies and regime outcomes. They examine opposition strategies with respect to their success and failure to stop and/or reverse autocratization. Emphasizing on, in its broadest sense, the role of the opposition as an important parameter for the fate of the political regime, these works question why some oppositions strategies have helped stop and/or reverse autocratization while others have failed to do so. Thereby, most this group of studies puts forward a causal relationship between the strategies of the opposition and the course of autocratization.

Gamboa (2017), for instance, examines why under quite similar circumstances some strong leaders manage to erode of democracy while others fail to do so. Comparing the cases of Hugo Chávez’s Venezuela and Alvaro Uribe’s Colombia, Gamboa contends that while factors like economic hardship, institutional weakness and mass support for these leaders account for both countries’ democratic vulnerability, none of them explains the different regime outcomes, whereby democracy in Colombia did not experience as a deep erosion as in Venezuela. For

Gamboa, what accounts for the different courses of autocratization in these countries is the different strategic choices made by the oppositions. Defining democratic erosion as a regime change that occurs over time, Gamboa emphasizes that the opposition actors actually get several opportunities to react and that these reactions do matter for the course of the erosion. To distinguish possible reactions from the opposition, Gamboa makes two distinctions. First, she distinguishes between "radical" and "moderate" goals of the opposition. By radical goals, Gamboa mainly refers to the efforts by the opposition to remove the incumbent president before the end of his term, whereas moderate goals just aim to prevent him from accomplishing his autocratizing project. Second, Gamboa also distinguishes between two different kinds of strategies for the opposition to attain these goals: "institutional" and "extra-institutional" strategies. The former set of strategies is pursued through conventional means such as judiciary, parliament and elections, the latter relies on contentious means ranging from protests to coups d'état.

Gamboa argues that when the opposition combines moderate and not radical goals with the institutional strategies, then it is more likely to stop and reverse autocratization as in the case of Colombia. In the case of Venezuela, however, the outcome was quite the opposite mainly because the Venezuelan opposition adopted a radical goal by attempting to oust President Chávez before the end of his term by means of extra-institutional strategies such as a coup attempt, guerilla warfare, strikes and boycotts. One of the reasons why this dissertation focuses on the electoral strategies pursued by the political opposition is that such institutional strategies, as Gamboa underlines, might be conducive to substantial changes in autocratizing contexts.

Cleary and Öztürk (2020), too, emphasize on the role of the opposition in democratic breakdown, arguing that during the process of democratic backsliding mainly characterized by what Bermeo (2016) calls "executive aggrandizement", the actions of opposition matter at least as much as those of the incumbents to determine whether or not the process of democratic backsliding ends up with democratic breakdown. Adopting an approach similar to that of Gamboa (2017), the authors distinguish between what they call "radical" and "moderate" strategies of opposition and contend that the former is more likely to lead to democratic breakdown, while the latter contributes to the democratic sustainability.

A novelty in Cleary and Öztürk's approach is their emphasis on the "explicit goal" of the strategy as the main criterion to decide whether the strategy is radical or moderate. They thus challenge the idea that the distinction between the institutional or extra-institutional strategies (Cannon, 2014; Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2014) is helpful to categorize opposition strategies in terms of their consequences for democracy, holding that the former can still damage democracy if they are unconventionally pursued to remove the incumbent leader. Based on their comparative case studies of Bolivia, Ecuador, Thailand, Turkey and Venezuela, the analysis of Cleary and Öztürk reaches to the conclusion that democratic breakdown is generally a result of the radical opposition strategies, whereas moderate opposition strategies contribute to the prospects of democratic survival. Nevertheless, not making any distinction between the political, social, bureaucratic, military etc. segments of the opposition and taking them as a whole, Cleary and Öztürk mainly characterize Turkish and Venezuelan oppositions as pursuing strategies with radical goals and thus fail to scrutinize the gradual change in the strategies pursued by the political opposition in both countries.

Another scholarly work that focuses on the relationship between the strategies of political opposition and regime outcomes is Tomini et al. (2023), where the authors rightfully emphasize that the literature on autocratization has thus far been too concentrated on the regime change that the process entails, thus neglecting the resisting actors who are also active throughout the process. In this paper, the authors make a distinction between different forms of resistance to autocratization in line with the type of regime change, in which different actors take part and pursue different strategies. In liberal democracies, for instance, where the autocratizing threat targets the "liberal" character of the regimes, democratic institutions continue to be effective, and thus what the authors call institutional resisters, such as judges, members of electoral commissions, and various executive agencies, are expected to be active. Along the electoral democracy – electoral autocracy continuum, on the other hand, it is mainly the political resisters that are active, such as opposition parties, members, and groups defected from the ruling bloc, and the alliances that they form altogether. The authors argue that such opposition alliances can be successful in resisting autocratization only if they adopt an institutionalized approach and utilize official channels. For them, the opposition can resort to extra-institutional strategies only if there is no official channel that remains uncaptured by the autocratizing incumbents, and without further radicalizing their resistance. Just like Gamboa (2017), Cleary & Öztürk (2020) and Lührmann (2021), Tomini et al. also argue that the strategies pursued by the opposition parties loom large for them to prevail against the autocratizing incumbents in the elections, which is under autocratization along the electoral democracy – electoral autocracy continuum the only way to stop and possibly revert autocratization. In this regard, this work is in agreement with this dissertation, as it also argues for the need for cooperation

between opposition parties and the rise of the anti-incumbent cleavage. However, while the authors emphasize the importance of the majority mobilization by the opposition, they do not mention any need for depolarization.

Finally, Somer, McCoy and Tuncel (2022) also dwell on strategies of opposition actors in the course of democratic erosion. Although this work does not make a causal inference regarding the relationship between particular strategic choices made by the opposition and the course of the democratic erosion, the authors scrutinize why opposition actors have a hard time stopping and reversing democratic erosion despite a relatively wide array of strategic choices at their disposal. While the authors somewhat agree with the arguments of Gamboa (2017) and Cleary and Öztürk (2020) that radical opposition strategies only reinforce democratic erosion, they go one step further and try to understand why the oppositions are this prone to radical strategies. As a possible answer to this question, the authors argue that as a highly complicated process the democratic erosion creates a great deal of uncertainties and dilemmas for the opposition actors, which significantly decrease their capacity to effectively respond. The authors particularly point out that the regime uncertainty creates different perceptions regarding severity of incumbents' actions, thereby leading to strategic disharmony among the opposition actors. Focusing on the cases of Turkey and Venezuela, the authors indicate that mainly due to the mentioned uncertainties and dilemmas the oppositions in these countries wavered between what they vaguely call "normal" and "extra-ordinary" strategies, thereby not operating in a linear way. Even though they do not reach a conclusion regarding which strategic choice is more likely to lead to which regime outcome, the authors suggest that in order to be successful against autocratizing incumbents, the

oppositions need to find the right balance between the normal and extraordinary strategies.

As much elucidative as the studies focusing on the relationship between opposition strategies are regime outcome are, they offer little, if at all, insight as to why the oppositions prefer particular strategies and not others. The conclusions that Gamboa (2017) and Cleary and Öztürk (2020), for instance, reached regarding the effect of opposition's strategic choices on the course of autocratization are quite eye-opening. Nevertheless, they are not as much illuminative as to why opposition actors choose to act radically rather than moderately in some case and not others. The lack of attention to the reasons behind the choices makes these arguments very actor-centric, whereby the choices are taken to be voluntaristic, thereby neglecting the circumstances under which the actors might be compelled to make these choices.

Apparently attempting to fill this gap, Somer et al. (2022) suggest that opposition actors, divided into two groups as cautioners and alarmists, resort to what they call normal and extra-ordinary strategies in line with their perceptions of threat to the regime. This also accounts for the non-linear evolution of oppositions' strategic choices over the course of autocratization, whereby opposition actors learn from past mistakes. The authors also claim that what prevents a proper unified and collective action among the opposition actors is the dilemmas arising from the confusion and disagreements, namely the regime uncertainty. Nevertheless, there are also other factors that complicate and even obstruct opposition coordination, which Somer et al. apparently fail to address, such as intra-opposition fault lines that are continuously activated and instrumentalized usually by regime manipulation in the course of autocratization.

Relying on the assumption that the actions of opposition matter for the fate of autocratization and the prospects of democratization in authoritarian contexts, the studies reviewed above deal with the opposition strategies in authoritarian contexts in terms of their electoral, and subsequently, regime-related outcomes. Nevertheless, with the exception of Somer et al. (2022), they explain little, if at all, about which strategy is more likely to be pursued in which context and why that is in the first place. Having said that, in fact, this literature makes the question under what conditions the oppositions choose which strategies even more important. This draws attention to a related literature that focuses on, in its broadest sense, the cooperation strategies of the oppositions in electoral authoritarian contexts. The next section dwells on that very literature.

1.4.2 Studies that focus on the cooperation strategies pursued by the political opposition in electoral authoritarian contexts

The literature on the cooperation strategies pursued by the political opposition in electoral authoritarian contexts puts electoral coordination of political opposition in the center of their analyses. These studies try to understand when and why opposition parties coordinate, cooperate, coalesce with each other during the elections in authoritarian contexts (see Table 2).

Van de Walle (2006), for instance, deals with the relationship between opposition cohesion and electoral victory by the opposition. Challenging the conventional wisdom that understand electoral outcomes in electoral authoritarian contexts as consequences of oppositions' capability to cooperate, van de Walle suggests that opposition cooperation might be a consequence of increasing prospects of government change rather than a cause of it. Describing the elections in

authoritarian contexts as a "tipping game", whereby with the appearance of clear signs of electoral defeat prominent figures of the ruling bloc defect and join the opposition. As the likelihood of an electoral victory is perceived to be high, van de Walle maintains, opposition actors decide to coalesce despite all possible risks.

Table 2. The dependent and independent variables presented in the reviewed studies focusing on the cooperation strategies pursued by the political opposition in electoral authoritarian contexts

Scholarly work	Dependent variable	Prominent explanatory variable(s)
Van de Walle (2006)	Cooperation by political opposition: When opposition parties cooperate	Prospects of government change: When alternation of power is perceived to be likely by the actors of political opposition
Gandhi & Reuter (2008)	Cooperation by political opposition: When opposition parties cooperate	Prospects of government change: When alternation of power is perceived to be likely by the actors of political opposition
Wahman (2011)	Cooperation by political opposition: Why opposition parties form coalitions	- Poor economic performance by the ruling bloc and relative liberalization before the elections - Policy-based distinction between the government and the opposition
Gandhi & Reuter (2013)	Cooperation by political opposition: Why opposition parties form pre-electoral coalitions	- Constant presence of a major opposition party - Repression by the ruling bloc - Refuting economic performance of the government as an explanatory variable
Beardsworth (2016)	Sustainability of cooperation by political opposition	The characteristics of the voter bases of the political opposition: Whether the cooperating opposition parties have complementing or overlapping support bases
Başkan et al. (2022)	Cooperation by political opposition: Why opposition parties cooperate	Policy divide between the ruling bloc and opposition parties
Ong (2022)	Cooperation by political opposition: Why opposition parties form pre-electoral alliances	- Vulnerability of the ruling bloc - Perception of mutual dependence
Jiménez (2023)	Formality of the cooperation by political opposition	The level of repression by the incumbent regime

Following van de Walle, Gandhi and Reuter (2008) also contends that coordination has considerable costs for the opposition actors and that they would be ready to pay these costs only if they consider electoral victory and subsequent regime change to be probable. The authors suggest that regime change might be both endogenous and exogenous to the opposition behavior. It is endogenous because in some cases electoral victory might not be possible without cooperation. However, it

is also exogenous because even if the opposition emerges victorious, no regime change is possible without the incumbents yielding power. Thus, analyzing the results of 428 elections in all post-war authoritarian contexts, the authors maintain that the more the prospects for regime change increase due to such exogenous factors, the more probable it gets for the opposition to make pre-electoral cooperation despite all possible costs. The results of their analysis also indicate that when the regime change becomes definite in the eyes of the opposition actors, the likelihood of cooperation decreases as they would become increasingly less eager under those circumstances to pay the costs of the cooperation, i.e., ideological compromise and post-electoral obligation to share power.

Similarly, Wahman (2011) examines why opposition parties form coalitions to contest elections in competitive authoritarian contexts. His analysis of 111 elections in 55 countries between 1989 and 2004 reaches two conclusions: First, partly confirming the claim of van de Walle (2006), Wahman finds that probability of alternation of power perceived by the opposition actors looking at the factors of poor economic performance by the ruling bloc and a period of liberalization before the elections, is positively correlated with the likelihood of opposition cooperation. Second, he also finds out that the wider the policy-based distinction between the ruling party and the opposition parties is, the more probable it gets for the opposition to coalesce. These two conclusions are in line with the author's suggestion that an opposition party engages in a pre-electoral coalition, only if it thinks that the coalition would help it get into the office and apply its policy platform. While the perceptions on the prospects of regime transition is already studied in the literature, the policy aspect makes Wahman's (2011) study relatively novel.

Following Wahman (2011), Gandhi and Reuter (2013) deal with the question the incentives for pre-electoral cooperation in authoritarian contexts in an attempt to understand why political parties form pre-electoral coalitions. Scrutinizing whether political parties have the same motives to join pre-electoral coalitions in autocracies as in democracies, the authors find that no factor that motivates political parties to cooperate in democratic elections does so in authoritarian contexts. The empirical analysis of 413 multiparty elections between 1946-2006 shows that a major opposition party's constant presence increases the likelihood of cooperation in authoritarian contexts. The authors also find out a significant correlation between higher government repression and the likelihood of pre-electoral opposition cooperation but refrain from suggesting a causal relationship due to the problem of endogeneity. Finally, the analysis does not detect any significant correlation between opposition cooperation and economic performance of the ruling bloc.

The studies that have so far been reviewed in this section mainly deal with post-war authoritarian regimes. They mostly offer large-N analyses to understand strategic behavior of the opposition in pre-electoral coalition building and provide important insights into what (de-)motivates actors of the political opposition to cooperate with each other before elections in authoritarian regimes. However, these studies do not make a qualitative distinction between diverse authoritarian contexts, i.e., competitive, and hegemonic electoral authoritarian regimes, under which there might be differing incentives and obstacles for particular cooperation strategies to be pursued by the political opposition.

In both van de Walle (2006) and Gandhi and Reuter (2008), for instance, the main assumption is that the increase in the prospects of regime transition hinges on defections from the ruling bloc. Defection, in these studies, is not considered as a

rare phenomenon, since the authors mainly examine long-standing authoritarian regimes, in which neither the party system, nor the elites, nor the electorate are strictly polarized. On the contrary, the authors maintain, there is a greater fluidity in the relationships across parties, elites and the voters in such regimes, and the balance of power between them can easily be shifted. Nevertheless, as is elaborated below, in almost every autocratizing regime within the context of the third wave of autocratization, in which the regime change towards autocracy is a result of backsliding or erosion from some kind of a democracy, polarization is a primary tool used by the incumbents to preserve their support base and thus further autocratize the regime. Consequently, defection becomes more costly in such contexts, where neither the electorate nor the elites are fluid. In fact, that is the very reason why, as this dissertation argues, actors of the political opposition operating in electoral authoritarian contexts need to think strategically on counter-polarization as much as cooperation.

This is one of the reasons why it is important to also look at small-N comparative analyses in order to better understand the strategic behavior of the opposition ahead of the elections. Zooming in on the cases that they scrutinize, small-N studies not only discern their peculiarities but also demonstrate the connections between the strategies pursued by the opposition in subsequent elections, thereby enabling to process-trace the changes along the way as well as the reasons behind them.

Beardsworth's (2016) examination of the cooperation attempt of the Ugandan opposition ahead of the 2016 elections, for instance, is one such study. Beardsworth shows that the opposition actors realized after the 2011 elections that none of them was strong enough to be a sole challenger to the ruling bloc at the national level and

that they desperately needed to join forces with each other to regain confidence of the electorate and take on the incumbents in the elections. In this awareness, the opposition wanted to act early and organized their first meeting to discuss their possible cooperation for the 2016 elections three years before. In June 2015, the opposition officially launched the Democratic Alliance (TDA) consisting of seven opposition parties and two pressure groups. The entire process was not without problems, but the things started to get increasingly problematic, as the alliance was trying to select its joint presidential candidate. There was already a great deal of intra-alliance competition for the support of the same voter groups and with the disagreement between the largest opposition party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), and the alliance's selection committee was the final straw. While the FDC wanted its long-time leader Kizza Besigye to be the alliance's joint candidate, the seven of the nine opposition groups within the alliance were in favor of nominating former Prime Minister John Patrick Amama Mbabazi. Beardsworth puts forward that the rationale behind the choice of the seven smaller opposition groups was to prevent the FDC to capitalize on the alliance and absorb them. Having an independent candidate like Mbabazi would certainly keep the balance of power within the alliance in the favor of these smaller groups. However, they were also worried about the electability of Besigye, as he had already been defeated twice in the presidential races in 2006 and 2011. As it became clear for the FDC that their long-time leader would be selected as the joint nominee by the TDA, it withdrew from the alliance and subsequently the TDA collapsed.

Focusing on the entire process of pre-electoral debates and negotiations among the opposition actors, Beardsworth (2016) finds that despite all possible benefits of alliance building, the failure of the opposition actors to reconcile their

conflicting interests would further fuel the intra-opposition competition, particularly when all the opposition groups appeal to the more or less same electorate. She thus concludes that opposition alliances might be significantly more successful, if the participant opposition actors have complementing support bases and do not need to compete for the same group of voters.

Another study that focuses on the coordination experience of the opposition in a single election is Başkan, Gümrükçü and Canyaş's (2022) analysis of the Turkish opposition's Nation Alliance (NA) that was formed ahead of the 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections. Scrutinizing the profiles and programs of the political parties that comprise the ruling People's Alliance (PA) and the opposition NA, the authors find that while the parties of the ruling bloc were ideologically close to one another, the opposition parties were ideologically distant, but the formed the alliance anyway for the sake of winning the elections by depriving the ruling bloc of its majority. In other words, parties comprising the opposition NA came together despite all their differences and concentrated on the only uniting issue, which was increasing authoritarianism in the country under President Erdoğan's ruling bloc. The authors' findings can be taken to provide a proof for the claim of Wahman (2011), whereby he argued that when oppositions have a significantly distinct policy agenda from that of the incumbents, they are more likely to cooperate. The case of Turkish opposition ahead of the 2018 elections, according to the authors, show that the deep policy divide between the opposition and the authoritarian ruling bloc was much deeper than those between the opposition parties and that they could thus set them aside and join forces under the NA.

Both Breadsworth (2016) and Başkan et al. (2022) offer significant insights into what (de-)motivates the opposition actors to form coalitions and sustain

cooperation. Even so, they do so by focusing on a single election in a single case. Extending the research into a number of elections in different cases to make within- and cross-case comparative analyses, however, might be of help to better understand the dynamics of opposition (non)cooperation, as it would allow to examine whether the asserted factors recur in different instances and contexts and to what extent they form a pattern.

A study that is worth mentioning at this point is Jiménez's (2023) evaluation of the 20-year experience of the Venezuelan opposition for the period 1999-2018. Using process-tracing and within-case analysis, Jiménez attempts to understand when and how Venezuelan opposition decide to cooperate and seeks to account for the within-case variation over time. Focusing on regime repression as an independent variable, she periodizes the Chávez and Maduro eras into three subperiods based on the level of repression and the regime type. The first period (1999-2005) is characterized by low repression and democratic backsliding. In this period, the strategy outcome is informal coordination. The second period (2006-2015) is marked by intermediate repression and competitive authoritarianism, whereby the strategy outcome is formal cooperation. And, finally, Jiménez describes the third period (2016-2018) with high repression and (full-fledged) authoritarianism, in which the strategy outcome is informal and clandestine coordination.

With her qualitative examination of the long experience of the Venezuelan opposition, Jiménez (2023) brings a new dimension to the relationship between autocratic repression and opposition behavior. As mentioned above, Gandhi and Reuter (2013) find that there is a significant correlation between government harassment and opposition coordination without suggesting a causal direction due to the endogeneity problem. However, with her analysis Jiménez underlines that after a

certain point increasing repression might spoil formal opposition coordination by disharmonizing the opposition actors, which she argues leads to the informalization of opposition cooperation. Thereby, Jiménez also provides an account for why cooperation by the Venezuelan opposition started to decline after they secured two-thirds majority in the 2015 parliamentary elections. While it would not be against the conventional wisdom to expect cracks in any political coalition following continual electoral defeats, it might seem relatively surprising to observe major disagreements within the opposition after such an outstanding electoral victory. Herein, Jiménez argues that under increasing regime repression in the post-2015 period, the cooperation of the Venezuelan opposition became significantly more informal and clandestine.

As much as the focus on the autocratic repression makes sense to uncover the dynamics of opposition (non)cooperation, Jiménez's account of the protracted experience of the Venezuelan opposition is concentrated on the formality of the cooperation rather than its existence. Therefore, the external validity of this theory beyond the Venezuelan case still needs to be further researched. Because, as far as the cases of Turkey and Hungary are concerned, autocratic repression at its peak has not yet been observed to lead to the informalization of opposition cooperation. Rather, major cracks in opposition cooperation recently emerged as a result of the defeats in the 2022 and the 2023 General Elections in Hungary and Turkey, respectively.

To understand the within- and cross-vase variation in opposition strategic behavior, Ong (2022) offers a quite elucidative study. Emphasizing on the impact of opposition coordination on the election and regime outcome as well as the challenges that the process of alliance building has, Ong scrutinizes what determines the

decisions of the opposition actors regarding cooperation. Contending that the extant explanations overlook the differences between opposition actors' perceptions of incumbent vulnerability and intra-opposition interdependence, Ong puts forward that in addition to regime vulnerability, perception of mutual dependence is also an important factor that affects opposition actors' decisions regarding cooperation.

In order to control his hypotheses, Ong makes two sets of cross-case comparisons: The first comparison elaborates on opposition pre-electoral cooperation in South Korea and the Philippines in the late 1980s, whereas the second one is based on a comparative historical analysis of (non)cooperative strategic behavior of the oppositions in Malaysia and Singapore for the period 1965-2020. Having analyzed a total of 24 elections in these four countries, Ong reached the following conclusion: In order for the opposition actors to make pre-electoral alliances, first, they all should perceive the incumbent regime sufficiently vulnerable to lose the elections. In order for these perceptions to have reasonable grounds, symptoms like defections from the regime, economic crisis and mass demonstrations should happen fast and in a relatively short period of time. Second, irrespective of how vulnerable the regime is perceived by them, the opposition actors should perceive themselves as being mutually dependent to defeat the regime in the elections. For this to happen, Ong argues, the actors in the opposition should have sufficient data as to their respective potentials and also regarding whether their support bases would be open to strategic voting in case of cooperation.

The incorporation of mutual dependency as an independent variable into the study of opposition cooperation in electoral authoritarian contexts seems to be an important contribution to the literature. However, neither Ong nor any other study reviewed in this section adequately deals with the social-political fault lines dividing

the oppositions and the larger societies as a prominent hurdle to clear for opposition cooperation despite the rather big role that it plays in the general electoral process or suggests an account for how they can be managed. Therefore, the accounts in the extant literature and the explanatory variables that they suggest apparently fail to catch the relationship between the way that the gradual process of populist autocratization unfolds and what kinds of strategies opposition parties need to develop under such autocratizing circumstances.

1.4.3 Studies that focus on polarization and counter-polarization strategies to be pursued by the political opposition in electoral authoritarian contexts

As the previous section shows, the literature on the electoral strategies to be pursued by political opposition in electoral authoritarian regimes is utterly dominated by the question of cooperation, dwelling on under what conditions the actors of the political opposition strategize (not) to cooperate. However, as previously underlined, this dissertation argues in the cases of autocratization through democratic backsliding, which has become particularly fashionable in the third wave of autocratization, whereby polarization is frequently used as a political weapon by the autocratizing incumbents to keep the majority support that they enjoy, political oppositions absolutely need to develop counter-polarization strategies so that their cooperation strategies would work to mobilize a majority in their support. Against this backdrop, this section deals with the relationship between polarization and autocratization as well as the strategic options available to the opposition for countering polarization.

The studies reviewed under this section can be categorized into two groups of studies: The first group of studies is concerned with how polarization, when it reaches a certain level, might actually fuel autocratization. McCoy, Rahman, and

Somer (2018), for instance, show that when as a result of its political instrumentalization, polarization becomes so severe that it creates to mutually distrusting and antipathizing camps, it can seriously threaten democracy. The authors identify a causal chain linking polarization to autocratization, whereby mutually antagonistic camps increasingly perceive each other as "an enemy to be vanquished" (p.19), thereby considering undemocratic actions against each other. This particularly allows the incumbents to easily resort to democracy-eroding actions in order to stay in power and minimize threats. Analyzing the cases of Venezuela, Hungary, Turkey and United States, the authors show how erosion of democracy go hand in hand with polarization, which is generally initiated by the incumbents and followed by opposition backlash, thereby creating an action-reaction recycle.

In another study, Somer, and McCoy (2019) underline that actors fostering polarization do not start with a blank slate but rather build on what the authors call "formative rifts", the long-lasting unresolved cleavages that have deep historical roots. Polarizing actors typically stimulate these rifts to mobilize their supporters in a way that would provoke an "us vs. them" way of thinking about the other. The authors emphasize that political entrepreneurs use this kind of polarization as part of a macro-political strategy to strengthen supporters and undermine opponents.

Svolik (2019) reflects on the polarization – autocratization relationship from a different angle. Emphasizing that autocratizing incumbents use polarization as a political tool to mobilize a majority in their support, Svolik suggest that under the conditions of such a polarization this very majority tends to continue supporting the incumbents come what may, thereby tolerating their autocratic actions. Based on his experiment survey, Svolik finds that democracy increasingly erodes as polarization deepens because it undermines the capability of the voters to defy autocratization. In

a very similar fashion, Arbatli and Rosenberg (2021) argue that polarization fuels democratic erosion by decreasing the costs of incumbents' manipulative practices, particularly during electoral period, such as increasing repression against dissidents, intimidation of opposition and voter suppression. Analyzing the cases of Turkey and Hungary, the authors show that increasing polarization makes people in different camps more eager or at least acquiescent to accept executive aggrandizement, (Şaşmaz et al., 2022) and repressive and intimidating actions against the other camp.

A similar argument was also put forward by some large-N empirical analyses. Somer, McCoy, and Luke (2021), for instance, indicate that polarization is significantly linked with the decline in democratic quality. Similarly, Orhan (2022) contends that affective polarization, which refers to a serious division between mutually distrusting and disliking groups, is a key element that accounts for people's support for undemocratic politicians. For the more people are affectively polarized, the less likely it becomes for them not to act along party lines and support the other party's candidate. Accordingly, the voters who are affectively attached to the incumbents, for instance, would not be expected to give up their support even if the incumbents undermine the democratic principles. Moreover, through a comparative empirical analysis of more than 170 elections in 53 countries, Orhan indicates a significant correlation between democratic backsliding and affective polarization, which is not the case for ideological polarization. For Orhan, this is by no means unexpected, as his dataset is mostly composed of third wave democracies, in which party systems are institutionalized enough to define the main divisions in the societies along ideological lines.

Finally, Schedler (2023) makes a comprehensive evaluation of the extant literature on political polarization and comes up with a conceptual reconstruction of

it. He argues that when polarization, ideological or affective, comes to fuel political intolerance between parties, it turns into what he calls an extraordinary conflict. Due to this intolerance, the contention turn from "rule-bound agonism between adversaries" into "unbound antagonism among enemies." This is how, the argument goes, parties reciprocally give up their democratic recognition and start to consider one another as an existential threat for democracy. Schedler concludes: "When political contenders come to see each other as enemies of democracy, democracy stares into the abyss."

Showing how polarizing can be an effective strategic tool in the hands of the autocratizing incumbents, the scholarly works hitherto reviewed under this section clearly demonstrates that the political oppositions that intend to take on them need to develop a particular strategy to specifically counter this incumbent strategy. So, the second group of studies reviewed below is concerned with those strategies to be pursued by the political oppositions to overcome polarization as part of their contestation of the autocratizing incumbents.

As most of the studies reviewed above show, autocratizing incumbents often stimulate existing cleavages that simultaneously divide both the opposition and the larger society to produce a single dominant fault line (McCoy et al., 2018), and thereby fueling an "us" vs. "them" division, in order to mobilize a majority and maintain its support. The majority support allows the incumbents not only to keep governing but also to take autocratizing steps, such as amending the constitution, dismantling horizontal accountability mechanisms, restructuring the institutions, to ensure that they stay in power as long as they wish. The pursuit of such polarizing strategies by the incumbents and the consequent emergence of two affective camps (Orhan, 2022) in fact aim to consolidate the ruling bloc at the elite and popular

levels. However, despite the incumbents' relentless efforts to keep the opposition fragmented, mainly by activating the fault lines between different actors in the opposition camp, the continual pursuit of this strategy might paradoxically have a consolidating effect on the opposition actors by incentivizing them to come closer to one another and even join forces. By deciding to cease to stay conventionally fragmented, the opposition adds new dimensions to the single dominant cleavage imposed by the incumbents, which is evident, for instance, in the emergence of the "democracy – authoritarianism" cleavage (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020; Metin & Ramaciotti Morales, 2022) or the "populist cleavage" (Aytaç & Elçi, 2019; Çelik & Balta, 2020).

Nevertheless, as much transformative potential as these new dimensions have, the oppositions can capitalize on them and transform the existing fault lines imposed by the autocratizing incumbents in a way to mobilize a majority in their support, only if they manage to effectively pursue game-changer strategies.

A study that deals with such strategies to be pursued by the opposition actors in autocratizing contexts is Somer, McCoy, and Luke (2021), where the chief contention is that a pro-democracy opposition absolutely need to pursue counter-polarization strategies in order to stop and reverse what they call "pernicious polarization" as a part of their broader strategies against the autocratizing incumbents. Distinguishing between "reactive" and "proactive" counter-polarization strategies that have respectively "preservative" and "generative" goals, the authors argue that the former strategies might be dysfunctional as they either fuel the dominant fault line imposed by the incumbents or be ineffective to cope with it, while the latter strategies would be more effective as they successfully contain and reduce polarization created by the incumbents or redefine it along a new axis.

Elsewhere, McCoy and Somer (2021) similarly argue that in order for their counter-polarization strategies to be successful the opposition parties should acknowledge their shortfalls, avoid formative rifts, and offer a new perspective for the entire society including the support base of the polarizing incumbents.

In sum, these studies that focus on the pernicious effects of polarization on democracy and what can be done against it clearly put forward that the broader strategies of the pro-democracy oppositions vis-à-vis the autocratizing incumbents, who instrumentalize polarization as a strategy, ought to incorporate counter-polarization strategies with de-polarizing and re-polarizing components. Otherwise, the pro-democratic opposition in authoritarian contexts would be unable to neutralize an important weapon in the hands of the autocratizing incumbents.

Unlike the studies focusing on the cooperation strategy, the extant literature on the counter-polarization strategies to be pursued by political opposition in autocratizing contexts is clearly dominated by rather theoretical works with a few, if any, studies that engage in empirical research. Therefore, one of the contributions of this dissertation to the extant literature is to provide some data regarding how political oppositions counter the polarization strategy pursued by the populist autocrats in power that was collected through empirical research in Turkey and Hungary, and to examine to what extent they confirm the existing theoretical premises.

1.5 Theorizing electoral strategies of opposition parties in electoral autocracies

Unlike the previous waves, in which the process of autocratization unfolded as an abrupt regime chance usually triggered by events like military coups, the third wave of autocratization is utterly dominated by the cases, in which democratic institutions

are gradually dismantled under the watch of elected politicians (Mounk, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Particularly, in the cases like Turkey and Hungary, where despite all kinds of possible defects there was some kind of a democratic regime prior to autocratization, sudden and total annihilation of all democratic institutions is no longer a preferred course of action by autocratizing incumbents. They consider the elections, for instance, as an important institution for a democratic appearance from which to draw legitimacy.

When populist would-be autocrats manage to come power, usually in the wake of a series of serious crises (Müller, 2016), they either already have the support of the absolute majority, like Viktor Orbán did when he came to power in 2010, or have the means to mobilize it in the years to come, as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did when his AKP first came to power in 2002. The continual support of the absolute majority is vital for them because it is through this support that they manage to carry out the necessary institutional changes to be able to hold onto power, thereby building a more repressive and arbitrary, namely a more authoritarian regime. On the other hand, the maintenance of this support under a democratic disguise is possible only by means of elections. Since democratic elections would never serve such a purpose, autocratizing incumbents ultimately carry out the gradual dismantling of the fair electoral process, along with all other democratic institutions, thereby creating an extremely uneven playing field, whereby they get serious structural advantages against the actors of political opposition.

Nevertheless, unless the regime becomes a fully closed autocracy with no real electoral competition, elections continue to be races that can be, at least in theory, won by the opposition in spite of the entire unlevel playing field significantly skewed in favor of the incumbents. For this reason, besides making sure that the institutional

arrangements in place provide them with crucial advantages, the autocratizing incumbents pursue some other strategies that help them perpetually prevail in the elections. Populism, for instance, is one such strategy, through which autocratizing incumbents develop discourses to divide the society into “us” and “them” camps (Müller, 2016) to further consolidate their hold on power. While anti-elite and anti-establishment politics might suffice to realize such an “Us vs them” division in some contexts, it requires a more sophisticated polarization strategy to do it in societies that are already divided by multiple deep-rooted social-political fault lines (Somer et al., 2021). By means of such a polarization strategy, populist autocrats in power activate, deepen, and even reroute these fault lines, creating a respective “other” along every one of them, in such a way that would strengthen and reproduce their populist “Us vs them” division. So, they make sure that while “we” is always the majority, “they” is constantly fragmented and in minority.

In sum, although the main mechanism allowing the populist autocrats to hold firmly onto power seems to be the institutional framework that they designed for this particular end, populist polarization and the instrumentalization of social-political fault lines remain to be their principal electoral strategy, through which they preserve and consolidate the absolute majority in their support and keep the minority composed of diverse opposition actors fragmented. As long as they have the support of the absolute majority to rely on, these populist autocrats strengthen their grip on power, keeping on gradually autocratizing the political regime by violating political rights and civil liberties, dismantling horizontal accountability mechanisms, and manipulating the electoral process (Cassani & Tomini, 2019).

Against this backdrop, what should characterize the electoral strategy to be pursued by political opposition in autocratizing contexts? First and foremost, this

dissertation is primarily concerned with the opposition parties that genuinely contest the elections with the goal of coming to power. Since opposition parties do not have any authority over the institutional framework, whereby the electoral cooperation between them and the autocratizing incumbents take place, they have no choice but to accept the utterly uneven playing field, if they are determined to contest the autocratizing incumbents by means of elections. For this reason, while developing an electoral strategy that would help them prevail against the autocratizing incumbents, the opposition parties should rather concentrate on how to neutralize the above-mentioned populist polarization strategy. Such an electoral strategy would have two basic goals to consider: First, it should help opposition parties get rid of their fragmentation and form a bloc that has the capacity to act in concert. By doing so, the opposition parties would neutralize the strategy pursued by the autocratizing incumbents to keep the opposition fragmented and build a bloc that is powerful enough to take on the ruling bloc. Second, it should help the opposition bloc go beyond their conventional support bases and appeal to new voter groups so that it could get out of the minority position and mobilize a majority in its support. The simultaneous attainment of these goals requires that the opposition parties develop and pursue a two-pillar electoral strategy: cooperation and depolarization.

1.5.1 Understanding the dynamics and challenges of cooperation and depolarization

As explained above, this dissertation considers cooperation and depolarization as constituting the two main pillars of an electoral strategy to be pursued by opposition parties in a country that has undergone a gradual process of populist autocratization such as Turkey and Hungary. As both strategies respectively respond to the actions that the incumbents take over the course of autocratization, they are the two

dependent variables that this dissertation seeks to scrutinize and account for (see Table 3).

To begin with, within the theoretical framework of this dissertation, cooperation does not include any kind of cooperation between any opposition parties. While there is a rather wide array of types of electoral cooperation, ranging from nominating joint candidates to running common lists, from coordinating candidates in different constituencies to declaring a post-election government plan, its scope is narrowed down by two basic criteria associated with the exceptional conditions imposed by the process of populist autocratization: First, this dissertation focuses on electoral cooperation that is made during the pre-electoral period. Although post-election cooperation between opposition parties, too, might have significant consequences in an autocratizing context for the fate of the political regime, it has usually more to do with the election results than the scope conditions imposed by autocratization. Second, this dissertation focuses on electoral cooperation between actors of political opposition with distinct support bases and from different ideological backgrounds that are separated from each other by deep-rooted social-political fault lines. As political parties coming from the same ideological background that are not divided by such fault lines might reunite and split for a variety of reasons that have not necessarily to do with the process of populist autocratization, their electoral cooperation is not as exceptional and thus does not particularly fall under the area of focus of this dissertation.

Table 3. Goals and indicators of the strategies of cooperation and depolarization

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Strategic goals</th><th colspan="2">Indicators</th></tr>
<tr><td>Cooperation strategy</td><td>- To get rid of the fragmentation of the opposition
- To form a powerful bloc to take on the incumbents</td><td colspan="2">- Electoral cooperation made during the pre-electoral period
- Electoral cooperation between two or more opposition parties separated from each other by social-political fault lines</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Depolarization strategy</td><td rowspan="3">- To deconsolidate the majority in support of the ruling bloc
- To appeal to new voter groups beyond the opposition's conventional support bases
- To mobilize a majority in the support of the opposition bloc</td><td colspan="2">- Leaving the discourse polarizing along the lines imposed by the incumbents
- Adoption of a new discourse to appeal to new voters</td></tr>
<tr><td>Passive depolarization</td><td>Active depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>- Refraining from polarization without challenging the existing axes of polarization or introducing new ones
- Transferring new figures from other parties</td><td>- Active challenging of existing axes of polarization by focusing on cross-cutting ties
- Introducing new axes of politics</td></tr>
</table>

Even though, over the course of autocratization, cooperation might increasingly become an imperative for the opposition parties to have the slightest chance of electoral victory against the ruling bloc, it is not an ordinary strategy to be pursued mainly due to the challenges that it implicates. First and foremost, electoral cooperation between political parties that are already divided by deep-rooted social-political fault lines would inevitably entail certain compromises. These compromises, though indispensable and reciprocal, might be quite costly to make because of the respective sensibilities of the party organizations and their bases, and might even pose the risk of defections. On the other hand, because the system might compel the actors of political opposition to engage in some kind of a cooperation with each other, the decision-makers within the opposition parties could always be blamed by their fellow party members to have failed to negotiate and achieve a favorable option of cooperation as well. Therefore, the entirety of inter-party electoral cooperation, from the initial negotiations all the way to the aftermath of the elections, is quite a

delicate process with lots of hurdles and dilemmas, particularly considering the wide toolkit available to the populist autocrats in power to reactivate the fault lines between the opposition parties and to play them off against each other.

When it comes to depolarization, as underlined above, the main goal for the opposition parties is to counter and undermine the polarization strategy pursued by the populist autocrats in power and, thereby, to reach out to new voter groups and mobilize an alternative majority in their support. What opposition parties are usually set out to achieve through depolarization is to stop and reverse polarization along the lines imposed by the autocratizing incumbents, which would allow them to reach out beyond their conventional bases. In order to attain the goal of mobilizing an alternative majority in their support, however, the opposition parties might need to go a step further and resort to polarization along alternative lines that they define as part of their anti-autocratization strategies. Therefore, within the context of this dissertation, the strategy of depolarization do not exclude repolarization as long as it is carried out along alternative axes. Nevertheless, the development of alternative axes might not always be as helpful as needed to decrease polarization along the lines imposed by the autocratizing incumbents. As Martin and Nai (2024) emphasize and this dissertation suggests for the case of Turkey, negative discourses targeting President Erdoğan and his family, which were developed as an alternative to the identity-based polarizing rhetoric predominantly used by the opposition during the 2000s, have unintendedly boosted affective polarization.

When the opposition parties comprehend that they need to pursue a depolarization strategy in order to attain these goals, they abandon and refrain from the discourses that reproduce and reactive the axes of politics imposed by the populist autocrats in power while pursuing their polarization strategy. From this point

forward, there are two strategic alternatives for the opposition parties willing to pursue the strategy of depolarization. First, they might prefer what is called the strategy of passive depolarization (see Somer et al., 2021) in that they confine themselves to refraining from polarizing discourse and politics without actively challenging the existing axes of polarization imposed by the populist autocrats in power. The idea behind the strategic choice of passive depolarization is the belief that certain symbolic steps that might be considered depolarizing at the elite level, such as transfer of some figures with different political/ideological background from the other side of the fault lines, would allow the opposition parties to attain the goals of depolarization at the voter level. The strategic alternative to passive depolarization is what is called the strategy of active depolarization, whereby the opposition parties not only refrain from reproducing the existing axes of polarization but also actively challenge them by emphasizing cross-cutting ties and introducing new axes (Ibid.). So, as Somer et al. (2021) underline, whilst the strategic choice of passive depolarization aims to go back to the status-quo before the start of populist autocratization from a preservative perspective, the strategy of active polarization has a generative approach in that it allows opposition parties to offer a new vision for the future.

Despite its quite legitimate goals that would probably be supported by the party organizations and their bases, such as opening up to new voter bases and increasing the support for the party, the strategy of depolarization entails serious challenges. Given the atmosphere of serious polarization in the countries that have undergone a process of populist autocratization, the adoption of discourses by an opposition party to appeal to the base of the ruling bloc would surely cause some uneasiness among certain groups of its conventional base. If not dealt with delicately,

this uneasiness might become widespread, create the feeling of no longer being properly represented, and risk demobilization and unresolvable rifts within the party. Moreover, even if all these risks are somehow taken and the strategy of depolarization is pursued at all costs, the task of creating voter defection from the ruling bloc is a long, hard journey, particularly under the ongoing circumstances of serious polarization by the ruling bloc. Therefore, the strategy of depolarization might increasingly be perceived as being not worth the trouble within the party well before it starts bearing fruit.

Although they are the two principal pillars of the electoral strategy to be pursued by political opposition in autocratizing contexts, strategies of cooperation and depolarization are not necessarily pursued for each other's sake. Neither do they have to be simultaneously pursued. In fact, there might even be a tradeoff between the two strategies. In order for the opposition parties, which are fundamentally separated from each other by deep-rooted social-political fault lines and, under normal, more democratic circumstances, would never consider cooperating with each other, to actually join forces, they might need a certain polarization between themselves and the autocratizing incumbents. Yet, that does not necessarily mean that these two strategies are mutually exclusive either. As emphasized above, the strategy of depolarization mainly aims to neutralize the axes imposed by the autocratization incumbents and, thus, is not fundamentally against repolarization along alternative lines. Therefore, through the definition of alternative axes of politics, the strategies of cooperation and depolarization can actually complement and mutually reinforce each other.

In any case, as compelling as it is over the course of autocratization, pursuing these strategies are neither a natural outcome of the process nor an easy task given all

the risks and challenges that they entail. The following section seeks to explain when, how and why actors of political opposition do and do not make the strategic choice of cooperation and depolarization.

1.5.2 Explaining the strategies of cooperation and depolarization

Within the context of this dissertation, cooperation and depolarization are presented as exceptional strategies that are particularly developed and pursued by opposition parties as a means to fight and prevail against the populist autocrats in power. However, as underlined above, they are not a natural consequence of the process but, on the very contrary, entail serious challenges and risks that make them particularly difficult to pursue. So, how do the opposition parties in autocratizing contexts come to understand that they need to pursue the strategies of cooperation and depolarization? Even more importantly, how do they come to clear all the hurdles along the way?

As thoroughly reviewed in the previous sections, the extant literature exploring the logic behind the strategic choices made by opposition parties in autocratizing contexts is predominantly concentrated on the question of cooperation. Among these works, the ones that make large-N analyses by scrutinizing a big number of authoritarian regimes point out regime vulnerability as the prominent variable to account for the opposition parties' decisions on whether or not to cooperate (van de Walle, 2006; Gandhi & Reuter, 2008; Wahman, 2011). Even though these works offer quite important insights and incumbent vulnerability remains a significant parameter to understand the dynamics of opposition cooperation, they inherently fail to discern some significant nuances between different types of electoral autocracies (see Chapter 2), which are quite relevant to

the process of strategy development and implementation by political opposition. For instance, in their works where they focus on post-Cold War electoral autocracies, both van de Walle (2006) and Gandhi and Reuter (2008) argue that the electoral cooperation among opposition parties becomes more likely with the increasing perception of the regime vulnerability, which is usually a result of growing defections from the ruling bloc. According to the authors, defections are not particularly difficult in these electoral authoritarian regimes, most of which used to be rather closed autocracies during the Cold War because they have neither a serious polarization at the elite and voter level nor an institutionalized party system. For countries like Turkey and Hungary, on the other hand, which underwent a rather gradual transition from democracy into electoral authoritarianism, there is a completely different story. These countries had quite institutionalized party structures and their autocratization went hand in hand with severe polarization, in which case defections from the autocratic ruling bloc cannot be expected to easily take place as envisaged by van de Walle, and Gandhi and Reuter. For this reason, the form of autocratization and the path to electoral authoritarianism (see Chapter 2) do affect the dynamics of strategy development by the political opposition in general and their electoral cooperation in particular.

When it comes to the studies focusing on contemporary cases of electoral authoritarianism with small-N analyses, we observe that various factors are brought up to account for the within- and/or cross-case variations with regard to electoral cooperation by political opposition. Breadsworth (2016), for instance, puts forward the existence of separate voter bases for different opposition parties as a facilitating factor of electoral cooperation. Jiménez (2023), on the other hand, argued that the level of repression by the autocratizing incumbents is determinant of how formal the

cooperation is between the opposition parties. Finally, Ong (2022) contends that in addition to that of regime vulnerability, opposition parties' perception of mutual dependence is also a factor that affects the likelihood of their electoral cooperation. Even though all these variables offer valuable insights into the dynamics of opposition cooperation in their respective cases, their frameworks do not adequately explain how strategic choices are made by actors of political opposition in populist authoritarian contexts. None of these studies substantially focus on deep-rooted social-political fault lines dividing the larger societies and the oppositions as a structural obstacle for cooperation and other electoral strategies to be pursued by opposition parties, thereby failing to acknowledge the restrictive effects of the gradual process of populist autocratization over strategy development and implementation by political opposition. On the other hand, offering a broader framework of electoral strategies to be pursued by opposition parties under populist autocratization, which is not confined to cooperation but also incorporates depolarization, this dissertation recognizes and presents all the challenges facing the opposition parties when they strategize under these circumstances, and provides an explanation of how they overcome these challenges and eventually manage to pursue the strategies of cooperation and depolarization.

1.5.2.1 Political learning and the evolution of the electoral strategies in the course of autocratization

Under minimum democratic conditions, opposition parties might pursue various strategies with the purpose of prevailing against the incumbent in the elections. However, if the incumbent to contest by the opposition in the elections is the perpetrator of a relentless process of autocratization, gradually turning the country

into an electoral autocracy, the ordinary electoral strategies that used to work for opposition parties back in the democratic days cannot be expected to do so anymore. Although, looking retrospectively, this is quite a reasonable evaluation to make after having experienced a great deal of autocratization, actors of political opposition were hardly aware of this at the onset of the process. Since, in line with the patterns observed in the third wave (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019), the process of autocratization itself unfolds quite gradually and sneakily under the watch of elected governments, it creates lots of uncertainties for the opposition (Somer et al., 2022), thereby preventing them from giving a reflexive reaction. As a result, while autocratization is underway, it takes some time for the actors of political opposition to start deciphering its mechanism, which is usually long enough for them to find themselves in an uneven playing field.

While having to operate under an ambiguous process of autocratization, the actors of political opposition engage in a continual political learning, through which they constantly review their failures and successes along the way, and modify their tactics and strategies accordingly (Bermeo, 1992). Particularly, the failures that are manifest in major election losses become increasingly costly over the course of autocratization for the actors of political opposition and thus often force them to reevaluate their electoral strategies as well as the guidelines that they used to develop and implement them. Meanwhile, the actors of political opposition might soon decipher that the autocratizing incumbents aim to keep the opposition in minority and fragmented in various ways. However, finding the right strategies to prevent the incumbents from attaining their goals usually takes longer. Consequently, in a possibly long series of trials and errors, the actors of political opposition accumulate a great deal of experience and become increasingly more informed as to what kind of

strategies they need to develop and pursue in order to effectively contest the autocratizing incumbents in the elections.

In sum, what happens during the course of autocratization and how it happens directly affect into which direction the process of political learning evolves and, by implication, which electoral strategies actors of political opposition learn to pursue. Whether what they happen to learn throughout this process is to pursue the strategies of cooperation and depolarization hinges on three factors: (1) the institutional setting, (2) the transformative impact of populist autocratization on the deep-rooted social-political fault lines dividing the opposition as well as the larger society, and (3) the feedback from the latest elections. These factors not only lead the actors of political oppositions to conclude that cooperation and depolarization are actually the strategies that they need to pursue to increase their chances of electoral victory against the populist autocrats in power, but also help them overcome the challenges associated with both strategies (see Table 4).

1.5.2.2 Incentives provided by electoral institutions

Electoral institutions are significant because they do not only determine how elections in a particular context are carried out, but they are also likely to affect other institutions and non-institutional factors in a political context, where elections are consequential (Negretto, 2015). Interparty cooperation is one of these factors and the presence of incentives provided by the electoral institutions is apparently the primary precondition for the opposition parties to make the strategic choice of pre-electoral cooperation in autocratizing contexts. Such institutions are those that either force the actors of political opposition to cooperate or make cooperation clearly advantageous for them such as majoritarian election systems, electoral thresholds etc. Without the

significant incentives that these electoral institutions provide for cooperation, it is highly unlikely for the opposition parties that are divided by deep-rooted social-political fault lines to take all the risks of making the compromises that the strategy of cooperation entails. However, no matter how significant their incentives might be, the presence of such electoral institutions does not solely guarantee that the actors of political opposition would absolutely adopt cooperation as an electoral strategy. Differently put, the presence of incentives provided by electoral institutions is necessary but not sufficient for the pursuit of the strategy of cooperation by opposition parties separated by intra-opposition fault lines in autocratizing contexts.

Quite commonly, it is not only the actors of political opposition themselves but also the autocratizing incumbents, whose strategic and tactical actions affect whether or not otherwise fragmented opposition parties strategically cooperate. The populist autocrats in power usually hold a wide range of instruments to manipulate the actors of political opposition and channel them into a particular direction. Reforming electoral institutions through their parliamentary majorities is one such instrument that many populist autocrats in power often use during the process of autocratization. By introducing new electoral institutions, whereby the opposition parties need to deepen their cooperation in order to enjoy some advantages that they could have enjoyed without having to do so under the old institutions, the populist autocrats in power are often willing to enforce the actors in political opposition to take the risks of cooperation and pay the consequences. On the other hand, however, forcible, and manipulative actions of the autocratizing incumbents might also paradoxically facilitate cooperation for the actors of political opposition. By arguing that they are simply compelled to play the game with rules set by the incumbents and go for cooperation, the decisionmakers of the opposition parties might try to suppress

the intraparty opposition to cooperation and minimize the associated risks of defection and demobilization.

Table 4. Factors explaining the pursuit of the strategies of cooperation and depolarization

	Dependent variables	
	The strategy of cooperation	The strategy of depolarization
Obstacles	- Intra-opposition fault lines	- The fault line between the bases of the opposition and the incumbents arising from the incumbents' polarization strategy
Challenges	- The risk of defection from the party - The risk of demobilization in party organization and base	- The risk of defection from the party - The risk of demobilization in party organization and base
Explanatory variables	- Incentives provided by electoral institutions - Transformative impact of populist autocratization on intra-opposition fault lines - Feedback from the latest election	- Transformation of the opposition's approach to the fault line dividing the bases of the incumbent and the opposition throughout populist autocratization - Feedback from the latest election

In any case, no matter if it is forcibly or willingly pursued, institutions have a significant impact over whether or not the actors of political opposition take the risks associated with the strategy of cooperation. Although their presence does not solely ensure cooperation, their absence makes cooperation virtually impossible.

1.5.2.3 Transformative impact of populist autocratization on the opposition's approach to the fault lines

Throughout the process of autocratization, the populist autocrats in power make use of the deep-rooted social-political fault lines that divide the oppositions as well as the larger societies and pursue the strategy of polarization in order to (1) keep the intra-opposition fault lines active and make sure that the opposition stays fragmented, and (2) create an anti-opposition fault line as the embodiment of the "Us" vs. "Them" cleavage and thereby make sure that the majority is on its side.

As underlined in the previous sections, at a certain point of the open-ended process of political learning that they engaged in, the actors of the political opposition might come to the conclusion that they are in need of strategies of cooperation and/or depolarization in order to finally neutralize the mechanism put in place by populist autocrats in power to keep the opposition losing. However, as long as the fault lines between the incumbents and the various actors of political opposition remain as designed by the populist autocrats in power, the strategies of cooperation and depolarization can hardly be pursued. Nonetheless, the side effects of populist autocratization realize a game-changing transformation (1) in the intra-opposition fault lines and (2) in the general approach to the fault line between the bases of opposition and those of the incumbents, thereby helping the actors of political opposition clear the hurdles for the strategies cooperation and depolarization respectively.

First, increasing repression and arbitrariness against different sections of the opposition over the course of autocratization might eventually lead to the development of an empathetic and dialogical relationship among them (Nugent, 2020). Although the fault lines that divide them are usually so deep-rooted that they cannot easily be done away with, the shocks triggered by the autocratic regime change and increasingly higher stakes for all actors of opposition usually result in a process, whereby the anti-incumbent fault line is widely perceived to be overwhelmingly deeper and more dominant than the intra-opposition fault lines. This gradual transformation of how the intra-opposition fault lines are perceived by the actors of political opposition throughout the process of populist autocratization is quite a game-changer in that it helps opposition parties overcome the primary obstacle for the strategy of cooperation (see Figure 3).

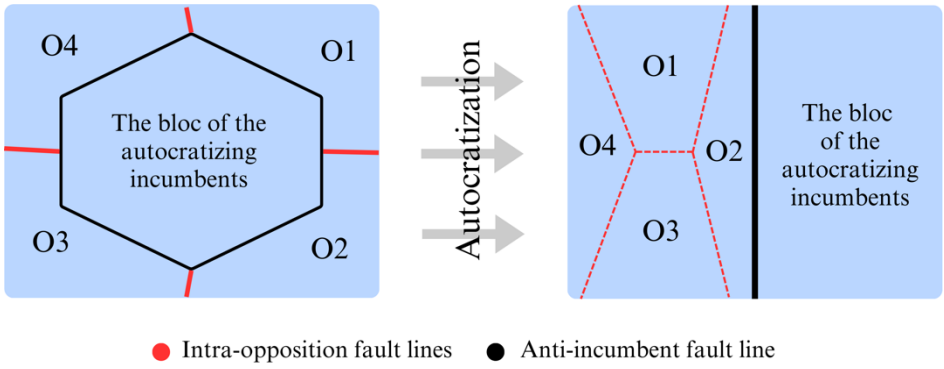

Figure 3 Transformation of the fault lines over the course of autocratization and an illustration of the strategy of cooperation (O1, O2, O3, and O4 represent diverse actors of political opposition)

The transformation, whereby the anti-incumbent fault line is perceived to be dominant enough to outweigh the intra-opposition fault lines by the actors of political opposition, takes place gradually and extends over the course of autocratization. Since it is a matter of change in perception and thus would probably vary between actors and the fault lines, one cannot objectively say how long the process autocratization needs to last for this transformation to occur. In other words, the transformation of different fault lines might take different times for different actors. In any case, however, the transformation is most of all to be recognized in the changing discourses of the actors.

Nevertheless, even if they are outbalanced by the anti-incumbent fault line as a result of their transformation, intra-opposition fault lines continue to exist and thus remain constantly open to the manipulative interventions by the autocratizing incumbents. Thanks to the process of autocratization, the incumbents have the necessary instruments in their hands to effectively reactivate the intra-opposition fault lines and would not refrain from doing so in order to keep the opposition parties from pursuing the cooperation strategy and make sure that they remain fragmented.

Although the actors of political opposition might somewhat manage to develop some immunity to such interventions, a probable reactivation of the intra-opposition fault lines might pour the cooperation efforts by the actors of political opposition down the drain and even result in further fragmentation of the opposition. In that case, even if the opposition parties could somehow save the cooperation, it would become harder to sustain it as the reactivation of the fault lines would certainly increase the risks of defection and demobilization from the party. Therefore, the intra-opposition fault lines should be very carefully and delicately managed in order for the actors of political opposition to implement the strategy of cooperation properly and effectively.

Second, another transformation that might come as a result of the opposition actors having started to decipher the polarization strategy pursued by the populist autocrats in power takes place in the oppositions' approach to the anti-incumbent fault line. The polarization strategy that the autocratizing incumbents pursue by keeping the fault lines constantly active inevitably result in a serious and, possibly, an unprecedented social rift. The anti-incumbent fault line, which, as explained earlier in this section, is getting increasingly deeper over the course of autocratization exacerbate this rift even more. In fact, without working out this unprecedentedly deep fault line, the actors of political opposition cannot put a spoke in the wheel that keeps them on the losing side and guarantees the incumbents the majority support. So, all these factors including the increasing costs of losing for opposition parties in an autocratizing regime triggers them to perceive the need for reaching out beyond their conventional constituencies by means of a depolarizing strategy, which is to be pursued by shifting the anti-incumbent fault line in order to expand the potential bases to appeal to (see Figure 4). As a result, the need for appealing to new bases

leads to a change in opposition's approach to the anti-incumbent fault line, allowing it to overcome the primary obstacle to the pursuit of the strategy of depolarization.

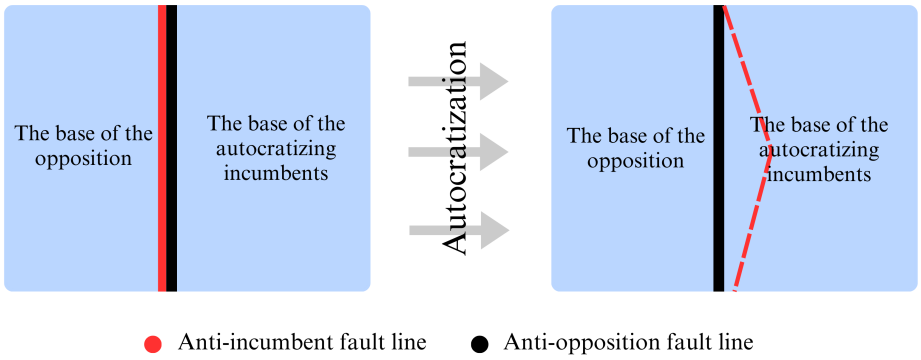

Figure 4 An illustration of the strategic attempt at depolarization, whereby the opposition seeks to shift the anti-incumbent fault line to reach out beyond its conventional base

As is the case with that of the intra-opposition fault lines, this transformation does not take place in a clear time frame either and might similarly be undermined by the actions of both the incumbents and other actors of the opposition that would deepen the anti-opposition and anti-incumbent fault lines respectively. A possible exacerbation of these fault lines that separate the bases of the incumbents and the opposition from each other might increase the risks of defection and demobilization and put the maintenance of the depolarization strategy in jeopardy.

To sum up, these fault lines-related transformations that take place during the process of populist autocratization turn cooperation and depolarization into viable strategies that are more likely for the actors of political opposition to pursue by helping them overcome the associated challenges and obstacles. Besides, critical decisions like the pursuit of the strategies of cooperation and depolarization are always a result of a constant struggle between actors with different opinions on the matter and its stable pursuit hinges on whether those in its favor prevail in the struggle.

Despite being a common variable for both strategies, the transformative impact of populist autocratization does not necessarily lead to a congruent and simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and depolarization. On the one hand it can often be the case that these strategies can be complementary and mutually-reinforcing. Particularly, the strategy of depolarization can facilitate the strategy of cooperation by softening up the cleavages and helping the cooperating opposition jointly mobilize a majority in its support. On the other hand, it is also possible that these strategies might occasionally undermine each other. Particularly, the exacerbation of the anti-incumbent fault line, which facilitates the strategy of cooperation, might complicate the strategy of depolarization as it would probably deepen the rift between the bases of the opposition and the incumbents. As a result, the dynamic between these two strategies can be much more complicated than it seems.

1.5.2.4 Feedback from the latest elections

Even if, all the hitherto mentioned conditions – incentivizing electoral institutions and transformed intra-opposition fault lines for cooperation, and a transformed approach to the fault line dividing the bases of the opposition and the incumbents for depolarization – are met, the ultimate decision on the pursuit of both strategies hinges on the final common variable of an affirmative feedback from the latest elections.

In fact, if the maintenance of a political strategic choice is in question, the process of feedback reception usually extends over a relatively long period of time. In the case of a comprehensive change in electoral strategies, for instance, it would normally take more than a single election to observe whether or not the new strategy has worked. However, the maintenance of electoral strategies like cooperation and

depolarization in autocratizing contexts that entail rather tough compromises, is possible if only if affirmative feedback is received in every election, in which they are pursued. Therefore, the emphasis in this dissertation is on the feedback from the latest election.

While evaluating the feedback that they receive, the actors might not confine themselves to a single parameter, such as the election results, but probably consider various parameters in line with their expectations. There are at least three kinds of feedback that the actors can receive from the latest elections: The first option refers to the scenario, where the strategy in question – cooperation and/or depolarization – is developed and pursued for the first time. In that case, if the feedback from recent elections is a series of losses, provided that other conditions have been met, the strategy in question is highly likely to be adopted and pursued. The second and third options, on the other hand, refer to the scenario, where the strategy in question has been pursued at least once. If the strategy is deemed to have worked by the actors, then they should be expected to stick to the strategy. If the actor(s) deem(s) the strategy not to have worked, then they should be expected to either develop a new cooperation and/or depolarization strategy or totally give up the strategy in question.

1.6 Methodology and research design: Comparing the cases of Turkey and Hungary

This dissertation primarily analyzes the cases of Turkish and Hungarian oppositions and increases the number of observational units by comparing several time periods, i.e., elections, within cases. The main goal of the dissertation is to explain in what circumstances actors of political opposition make the strategic choice of cooperation and depolarization – the dependent variables of the dissertation. In order to attain this

goal, an inductive research strategy is pursued to quest for relevant independent variables (Anckar, 2008).

The selection of the cases of Turkey and Hungary, as two of the most prominent examples of the recent third wave of autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019) with all the significant contextual differences between them regarding history, culture, regional background, democratic past, size etc., provides the opportunity make a most different system design (MDSD), whereby the two cases have in common the phenomenon to be explained and the presumed explanatory factors (Skocpol & Somers, 1980). In other words, by using the method of similarity, the similar strategic choices made by the Turkish and Hungarian oppositions over the course of autocratization are explained through a mechanism that both cases have in common (Mill, 1961).

The MDSD and the use of the method of similarity actually facilitated the elimination of alternative explanatory variables in this research, as Mahoney (2000) also underlines. On the other hand, this research based on the comparison of two quite different cases indicates the significance of the incentives provided by the electoral institutions, the transformative impact of populist autocratization and the feedback from the latest elections as explanatory variables to understand why actors of political opposition choose to cooperate and depolarize over the course of autocratization.

Nevertheless, neither Mill's method of similarity nor the MDSD would be solely sufficient to reveal the causal mechanism, within which the dependent and independent variables interact. Therefore, this dissertation analyzes the causal processes of strategy development and implementation by Turkish and Hungarian oppositions over the course of autocratization by mainly using the method of process

tracing (Mahoney, 2000; George & Bennett, 2005). By dividing the periods in question into systematic parts, which are mainly elections in this dissertation, process tracing enables the close scrutiny of the dynamics that account for the change in electoral strategy from one election to the next in order to uncover the interaction between the dependent and independent variables through within-case analysis (Beach, 2017).

This illustration of the trajectories of strategy development and implementation by Turkish and Hungarian oppositions through a longitudinal comparative historical analysis in a small-N research design (Collier, 1993) enables to make both a within-case and a cross-case analysis. While the former examines different episodes in connection to another, thereby revealing the causal mechanisms within which the dependent variables interact with the independent variables, the latter helps generalize the derived theory beyond the respective cases scrutinized in this dissertation. In this regard, this dissertation aims to offer a novel explanation of the development of electoral strategies by political oppositions in electoral authoritarian contexts through a set of new independent variables.

As underlined above, elections and referendums are the main observational units in this dissertation. Focusing on electoral periods to investigate the strategies of opposition parties makes sense, as the electoral strategies are usually designed for and thus crystalize during these times. For the case of Turkey, five general elections (2007, 2011, 2015(1), 2015(2), 2018), two presidential elections (2014, 2018), two local elections (2014, 2019) and two referendums (2010, 2017) were analyzed, while for the case of Hungary the dissertation examined three general elections (2014, 2018, 2022) and one local election (2019). Table 5 maps out the empirical

observations of strategies of cooperation and depolarization pursued by the actors of political opposition in Turkey and Hungary over the course of autocratization.

Table 5. Empirical observations of the strategies of cooperation and depolarization pursued by the actors of political opposition in Turkey and Hungary over the course of autocratization

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">The case of Turkey</th><th colspan="3">The case of Hungary</th></tr>
<tr><th>Elections</th><th>Cooperation</th><th>Depolarization</th><th>Elections</th><th>Cooperation</th><th>Depolarization</th></tr>
<tr><td>2007G</td><td>No cooperation</td><td>No depolarization</td><td rowspan="2">2014G</td><td rowspan="2">No cooperation</td><td rowspan="3">Passive depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>2010R
2011G</td><td>No cooperation</td><td rowspan="3">Passive depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>2014L</td><td>No cooperation</td><td rowspan="2">2018G</td><td rowspan="2">No cooperation</td></tr>
<tr><td>2014P</td><td>Cooperation</td><td rowspan="4">Active depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>2015G</td><td>No cooperation</td><td rowspan="2">2019L</td><td rowspan="2">Cooperation</td></tr>
<tr><td>2017R</td><td>No cooperation</td><td rowspan="3">Active depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>2018GP</td><td>Cooperation</td><td rowspan="2">2022G</td><td rowspan="2">Cooperation</td></tr>
<tr><td>2019L</td><td>Cooperation</td></tr>
</table>

The strategic outcomes mapped out in Table 5 were matched with elections in Turkey and Hungary in line with the operationalization of cooperation and depolarization as strategic choices. Accordingly, the “No cooperation” label, for instance, does not mean that no electoral cooperation at all was observed in that particular election. Instead, it refers to the instances, where no electoral cooperation was made between actors of political opposition that are separated from each other by deep-rooted social-political fault lines that make it, as underlined above, particularly challenging for the opposition parties to engage in cooperation.

Although there are multiple fault lines dividing the Turkish and Hungarian societies that are also effective on the political stands taken by different sections of these societies, within the context of this dissertation a set of two prominent fault lines was picked for each country; ones that divide the oppositions in such a way that makes it particularly difficult for them to cooperate with each other. For Turkish

opposition, the first fault line is the Turkish v. Kurdish fault line, and the second fault line is the secular v. conservative fault line. As for Hungarian opposition, the first fault line is the so-called "Left-Right" fault line (Vegetti, 2019), which reflects a cultural rather than an economic divide (Enyedi, 2006). Therefore, in this dissertation this fault line is called instead the nationalist/socially conservative v. cosmopolitan/socially progressive fault line. The second fault line dividing the Hungarian opposition is between the "old" actors who took part in the socialist-led governments in the period 2002-2010, in which a series of political-economic crises created a "perfect storm" that brought the Fidesz-KDNP alliance under Viktor Orbán back to power in 2010, and the "new" actors who either emerged in the 2010s or built their politics as a reaction to the old ruling elite after 2010. Even though, unlike others, this particular fault line is not identity-based or historically rooted, it became one of the main cleavages affecting the relationship between the actors of political opposition after 2010 in Hungary mainly because Orbán's ruling bloc constantly used the crises of the 2002-2010 period as a reference point while building and institutionalizing their authoritarian regime. For this reason, this dissertation considers the cleavage between the old and the new actors as a deep-rooted intra-opposition fault line and thus a hurdle to be cleared to realize cooperation.

Table 6 illustrates the positions of Turkish and Hungarian opposition parties vis-à-vis each other in line with the two respective intra-opposition fault lines relevant for each case. Even though illustrating these positions in a table inevitably ascribes absolute positions to the parties, the table is not meant to indicate the absolute positions that these parties take, which might very well be subject to change over such a long and gradual process of autocratization. Rather, bearing in mind that there are fine distinctions even between the opposition parties classified into the

same cell, the table aims to indicate the relevant fault lines dividing the opposition parties and give a general idea of how these parties position themselves vis-à-vis each other.

Table 6. The positions of Turkish and Hungarian opposition parties vis-à-vis each other in line with the relevant intra-opposition fault lines

The case of Turkey			The case of Hungary		
	Turkish	Kurdish		Old	New
Left	CHP	HDP	Left	MSZP DK	LMP Momentum
Right	IYIP SP		Right		Jobbik

Moreover, while the Turkish-Kurdish fault line in the case of Turkey and the old-new fault line in Hungary are relatively self-explanatory, the left-right fault line is rather ambiguous. In both cases, it actually revolves around specific social and cultural cleavages rather than traditional economic divisions. While in Turkey, the left-right fault line mostly denotes the secular-conservative cleavage (Çarkoğlu & Hinich, 2006; Çarkoğlu, 2007; Kalaycıoğlu, 2009; Yağcı, 2022; KONDA, 2018), in Hungary, it is more about the cosmopolitan-nationalist and progressive-conservative cleavages (FES, 2019). However, despite the multiple meanings and cleavages it denotes, the left-right division is functional in indicating the actual fault lines that separate the opposition parties from each other. In the case of Turkey, for instance, the use of the secular-religious cleavage would have resulted in the classification of CHP and IYIP in the same category. This approach would neglect the significant differences between these political parties, which have a history marked by serious animosity, as well as differing positions on issues such as nationalism, the Kurdish problem, and others. Therefore, as ambiguous as it might seem, the left-right fault

line remains functional as it helps to understand multiple other cleavages, which it denotes in tandem with each other.

The individual chapters devoted to the respective cases of Turkish and Hungarian oppositions, Chapters 3, 4 and 5, involve the description of the cooperation and depolarization strategies pursued by the actors of political opposition in each election. These chapters also process-trace all the developments between two elections and incorporate them to the analysis.

The sections related to the cooperation strategy describes and analyzes all the cooperative interactions between different actors and groups in the political opposition and their outcomes within the context of that given election or referendum, while the sections related to depolarization strategy focus on the discursive preferences adopted by the actors of political opposition ahead of the respective elections. The descriptive parts also include the strategies pursued by the incumbents because the questions of when and why opposition actors take particular actions and prefer particular electoral strategies over the course of autocratization cannot be properly addressed without any regard to what the autocratizing incumbents do. In fact, defining autocratization as a regime change towards autocracy (Cassani & Tomini, 2019) and considering this regime change as a process, whereby the outcomes are predominantly determined by relevant actors (Mainwaring & Pérez-Liñán, 2014; Waldner & Lust, 2018), namely both incumbents and the opposition, and their constant interaction (Cleary & Öztürk, 2020), actions, preferences and strategies of the opposition can only be properly analyzed when scrutinized in tandem with those of the incumbents. Therefore, the description and analysis of the depolarization strategies pursued by the actors of political opposition

are based on how the discursive strategies of the incumbents and opposition parties interact with each other.

This dissertation uses data gathered from three main resources. First, an extensive newspaper survey was done for both cases. For each election or referendum, the media survey covered a period of three to six months and scanned all relevant news on daily basis. For the case of Turkey, the daily *Cumhuriyet* was picked for the survey, as this daily paper is commonly considered to be a paper close to the opposition in Turkey, which has remained hitherto unchanged despite certain fluctuation in its ideological orientation along the way. What was important for the survey is that it is done with a paper, which consistently covers the actions and discourses of the opposition parties. Out of the scanning of the daily *Cumhuriyet* of more than 900 days a total of 1286 relevant news reports were listed. For the case of Hungary, the online news platforms Index.hu and Telex.hu were picked for media survey, as they were two of the few remaining media platforms that managed to remain independent from the government. Out of the daily-based scanning of these new outlets of more than 600 days a total of 534 relevant news reports were listed. Besides, a great deal of other newspapers and online news pages were also utilized for both cases. The media survey for the case of Turkey was done in Turkish, whereas for the case of Hungary the collected data in Hungarian was translated into English by Google Translate. Also, certain primary sources, such as party declarations, protocols and other relevant documents like speeches and parliamentary discussions were used.

The second data source is elite interviews that were conducted during the field research in both Turkey and Hungary with opposition politicians, academics, journalists, and civil society activists. Particularly, 16 elite interviews that were

conducted right after the 2002 General Elections in Hungary were of a great help to understand the peculiarities of the strategies pursued by the opposition parties then when compared to past elections. The interviews in Turkey were conducted in Turkish, whereas those in Hungary were conducted in English.

The third source is all the secondary sources and scholarly works including books and articles on the process of autocratization and opposition strategies in authoritarian contexts.

CHAPTER 2

AUTOCRATIZATION IN TURKEY AND HUNGARY

2.1 The concept of autocratization and its diverse forms

Autocratization, in its broadest sense, refers to a regime change towards autocracy (Cassani & Tomini, 2019). While regime changes towards democracy have conventionally been studied under the umbrella concept of democratization in the literature of comparative political science, with the developments of particularly past two decades indicating the existence of "reverse waves" brought regime changes opposite to democratization under scrutiny. Nevertheless, the increasing number of studies on this matter also revealed that there is no scholarly agreement on how to call and conceptualize these processes of regime change opposite to democratization.

In order to emphasize that a regime change opposite to democratization is characterized by a move away from democracy, various scholarly approaches prefer to use the concepts of "democratic backsliding" (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner & Lust, 2018), "democratic death" (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), democratic erosion (Somer et al., 2022), "democratic decline" (Freedom House). All these concepts are used to point out to the deterioration of democracy in various aspects.

The use of concepts that draw attention to the deterioration of democracy in a given context somewhat implies that the context going through the regime change used to be (or maybe still is) democratic. Therefore, a concept such as democratic backsliding is quite relevant for the cases of Turkey and Hungary, which, as will be elaborated below in this chapter, have been through a process of autocratization by sliding back from some kind of a democracy. Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons why autocratization was preferred as an underlying concept in this

dissertation: First, while also implying that the regime change in question includes a move away from democracy, the concept of autocratization takes a conceptually clear approach to underline that the ultimate destination of this kind of a regime change is in fact autocracy. Second, unlike the alternative concepts mentioned above, the concept of autocratization also encompasses the regime change towards autocracy, in which the point of departure is not necessarily democracy Cassani & Tomini, 2019). So, as an analytical approach, autocratization also included the ongoing processes of regime change experienced by countries, such as Turkey and Hungary, which are commonly no longer considered as democracies.

Nevertheless, autocratization, that is, the modification of political institutions towards autocracy does not unfold in a single form. In order to reveal different forms of regime change towards autocracy, Cassani and Tomini (2019) classifies political regimes along a democracy – autocracy line, namely as liberal democracy, defective democracy, electoral autocracy, and closed autocracy, and reveals what kind of institutional change occurs in case of a regime change from a less autocratic to a more autocratic regime type. Obviously, the institutional change, which takes place when a liberal democracy turns into a defective democracy, is not comparable to that which takes place when a defective democracy loses its democratic credentials and turns into an electoral autocracy. Therefore, in order to distinguish between these political regimes and the institutional changes observed in different phases of autocratization, the authors identify three institutional dimensions of regime variance between democracies and autocracies: executive limitation, public contestation, and participation. Table 7 indicates different forms of autocratization and the institutional change that they bring about.

Table 7. Cassani and Tomini's (2019) classification of different forms of autocratization and the institutional change that they bring about

Form of autocratization	Relevant dismantled institution	The outcome of dismantling
From liberal democracy to defective democracy	Executive limitation: Protection of individual and civil freedoms against ruler's abuses. Separation of powers, check and balances and horizontal accountability are required.	The executive is no more effectively constrained (Merkel, 2004). Civil and individual freedoms weaken.
From defective democracy to electoral autocracy	Public contestation: The possibility to publicly oppose and criticize the conduct of the government and to compete for replacing it. Free, fair, and frequent elections as well as the freedom of expression, organization and press are required.	Multi-party elections are still held but contestation is restricted through a combination of formal and informal limitations to political rights and violations of election integrity (Schedler, 2006).
From electoral autocracy to closed autocracy	Participation: Citizens' possibility to choose who rules and to have a say in politics. Universal suffrage and multi-party, multi-candidate elections are required.	People are no more allowed to choose who governs. Façade elections are often the case.

2.2 Populist autocratization in the 21st century

As of the mid-1970s, a new wave of democratization began around the world. The "third wave" of democratic transitions, as called by Huntington (1991), started in Spain and Portugal in the 1970s, continued in some countries in Latin America and Asia-Pacific in the 1980s and finally in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. The end of the Cold War was widely considered as a defeat for autocracies around the world, which led to the expectation that the wave of democratization would continue in the 1990s. However, not long after one started to observe that the third wave of democratization was not leading to democratic consolidation but rather to an increase in the number of electoral, or competitive, authoritarian regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2002). The idea behind the transition from the conventional forms of dictatorial regimes of the 20th century – one-man, one-party, or military – to electoral authoritarianism was to reinforce their legitimacy through periodic elections

(Schedler, 2002). Hence, contrary to all expectations, the 1990s did not mark the continuation of the third wave of democratization.

While incorporation of periodic elections into the institutional settings of autocracies created a common path to electoral authoritarianism, eventually making it the most common form of autocratic rule (Schedler, 2006), this was apparently not the only path. Over the past 30 years, a new wave of autocratization manifested itself, which was apparently different from the previous waves (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). This new wave is mostly characterized by processes of autocratization through gradual democratic decline, as manifested in various cases such as Turkey, Hungary, Venezuela, India etc., and indicates a new path into electoral authoritarianism, which is significantly different from the former path in at least two ways: First, it unfolds gradually and under elected governments (Ibid., Waldner & Lust, 2018; Bermeo, 2016). Second, because most of the cases of this new wave of autocratization were formerly (more) democratic, neither elections nor drawing legitimacy from them is novel to these regimes. Therefore, in order to build a hegemony over the elections, mobilize and preserve the majority support, and keep the opposition constantly divided and in minority, autocratizing incumbents often resort to the populist strategy of polarization based on a "us vs. them" division of the society (McCoy et al., 2018). Although it remains up for debate both at the theoretical and empirical level whether every polarizing incumbent, under whose watch certain autocratization has taken place, can be considered to be a populist, it is rather generally accepted that with its stimulus to polarization (Canovan, 2002; Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016) and its alternative approach to the very concept of democracy, where the elections are ascribed to a unique and even sacral role (Sözen, 2019b), populism is one of the primary driving forces for the processes of

autocratization that unfold through democratic backsliding and culminate in electoral authoritarianism. Therefore, within the context of this dissertation, this type of autocratization is called “populist autocratization”.

Because it unfolds through backsliding from a democracy of some sort, the regimes that have been through populist autocratization might be considered to provide a more competitive electoral atmosphere in nature. In fact, existence of a relatively democratic past with experiences of peaceful transfer of power might make a difference when it comes to the meaning of elections, legitimacy, and the chances of the opposition. Nevertheless, the process of autocratization not only makes the regime significantly more repressive and arbitrary (Cassani & Tomini, 2019) but also imposes an uneven playing field, usually through a systematical violation of political rights and civil liberties, whereby the elections are designed for the victory of the autocratizing incumbents (Levitsky & Way, 2002). Moreover, in most of the cases of populist autocratization including Turkey and Hungary, the political opposition has often played a role in both autocratization and polarization (Somer et al., 2021), which makes things significantly more difficult for the political opposition as far as the electoral strategies are concerned.

In what follows, a brief account of populist autocratization in Turkey and Hungary under President (formerly Prime Minister) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, respectively, is provided.

2.3 Populist autocratization in Turkey

Turkey has never been a full-fledged liberal democracy. However, decades after its first free and fair multi-party democratic elections in 1950, the dominant view among the scholars of Turkey was be that apart from brief and temporary breaks of (semi-

)military rule (1960, 1971, 1980) Turkey was an example of a relatively stable democracy (see Figure 5), and that as a country trying to further institutionalize and consolidate its democracy Turkey was a model for other Muslim-majority countries to emulate (Somer, 2016).

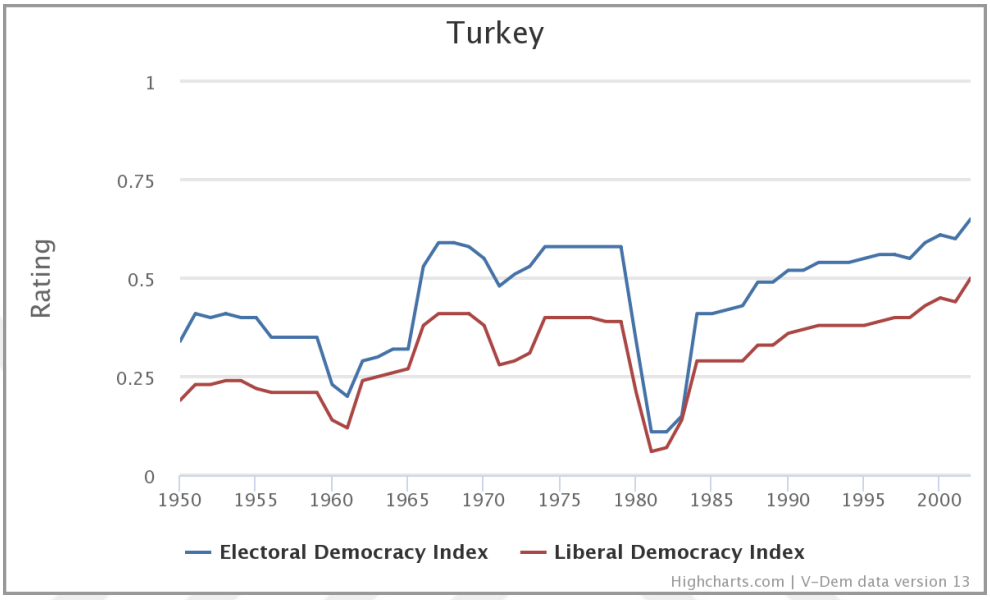

Figure 5 Turkey's electoral democracy and liberal democracy index for the period 1950-2002 (Coppedge et al., 2022)

Even though it had previously experienced occasional periods of democratic decline under civilian rule (e.g., late 1950s), the instances of democratic breakdown during the republican era were predominantly related to occasional military interventions in 1960, 1971 and 1980 and the subsequent military rules, the longest of which lasted three years from 1980 to 1983. Although Turkish military did not intend to stay in power for longer periods and decided to give power back to civilians each time, every intervention helped military increase and consolidate its influence on Turkish political life (Karaosmanoğlu, 2012). Meanwhile, the multi-party elections that had made its debut in 1950 continued to be substantially free and fair until the mid-2010s. Hence, although military's role certainly had a restrictive effect

on the civilian governments, it did not particularly undermine the electorally democratic aspect of Turkish politics. Therefore, the scholars of democratization mostly classified Turkey as a "tutelary democracy" (Taş, 2015; Akkoyunlu, 2017; Çalışkan, 2018), a sort of defective democracy (Merkel, 2004), until the early 2010s.

After the AKP had come to power in 2002, there was a kind of optimism among the scholars of Turkey that the actions of this party to crop the "tutelary" aspect of Turkish democracy would eventually help for country's democratic consolidation. On the contrary, however, particularly after 2010, a new process of autocratization gained momentum, which was remarkably different from the earlier instances of autocratization that Turkey had been through during the 20th century. As a prominent case of the third wave of autocratization, the democratic decline under AKP was distinguished in that it unfolded as a gradual process under a democratically elected government. In other words, it was a case of democratic backsliding by means of executive aggrandizement (Bermeo, 2016). Consequently, as Sözen points (2020b) out, what many analysts initially considered as leading to further democratization actually ended up as a regime transition from a form of defective democracy to a form of electoral autocracy (see Figure 6), whereby elections are no longer free and fair, right and freedoms and systematically violated and the playing field became significantly skewed in favor of the ruling bloc (Somer, 2016; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Çalışkan, 2018; Yılmaz & Turner, 2019).

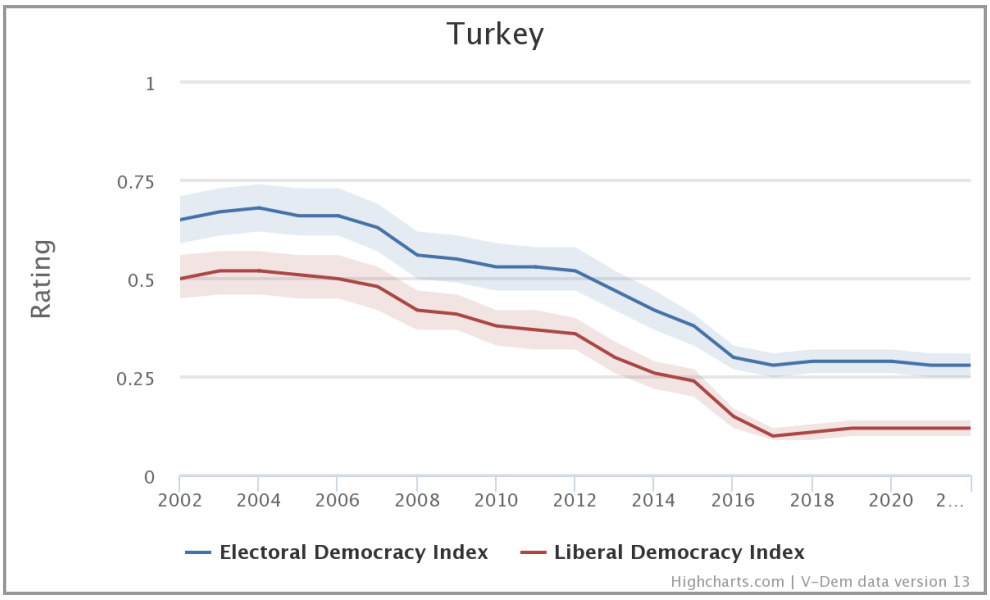

Figure 6 Turkey's electoral democracy and liberal democracy index under AKP in power for the period 2002-2022 (Coppedge et al., 2022)

2.3.1 The exit from tutelary democracy in Turkey

The AKP came to power within a political context characterized by a serious economic crisis and fragmented party system. Despite the fact that its parliamentary majority gave the AKP and its leader Prime Minister Erdoğan a certain power in the political realm, the power of the secularist establishment in the state institutions did not give it much of a room for maneuver, particularly when it comes to issues deemed sensitive by the secularist establishment, such as state – society – religion relations and the role of military in Turkish politics. Therefore, in the 2002 – 2006 period the AKP Government mostly concentrated on handling the economic crisis and making reforms for Turkey's EU membership bid.

The EU reforms, however, allowed the government to indirectly introduce some reforms that would undermine military's superiority over elected civilians, including the increase of civilian members of the National Security Council (MGK), decrease in the frequency of MGK's meetings, downgrade of its decisions to

recommendations for the government, the removal of the seats reserved for military officers from the boards of some state agencies such as Higher Council of Radio and Television (RTÜK) and the Council of Higher Education, and finally, the abolition of the EMASYA Protocol, which had used to be instrumentalized by the military to justify its interventions in social incidents without having to consult civilian officials (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016).

Nevertheless, the ending tenure of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer in 2007 brought the AKP Government up against the secularist establishment, which considered the office of presidency as the guardian of Turkish secularism and thus did not want anyone from AKP leadership to assume this office. On April 27, 2007, the military issued what would later be called "e-memorandum", warning the government about the choice of a presidential candidate who is "truly" allegiant to the values of the republic. The AKP Government responded with a firm stand and nominated Abdullah Gül, the second most prominent member of Prime Minister Erdoğan's cabinet, for the presidential elections in the parliament. However, through a contested ruling of the Constitutional Court, Gül's election was prevented despite the required majority of the AKP's parliamentary group. As a result, the government declared snap elections for July 2007.

After the AKP got a stronger mandate in the 2007 General Elections, it started to take a significantly more defiant stance against the secular establishment. Through a populist and polarizing strategy, the AKP built its politics predominantly on a "Us vs. them" division, constantly reactivating the fault lines that divide not only the larger society but also the opposition. Particularly, the secular – conservative fault line proved to be quite functional for the AKP's "Us vs. them" politics. Allying itself with the Gülen Movement, the AKP Government helped initiate two big trials against

senior members of Turkish military, Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, which resulted in jail terms for hundreds of active and retired military officers, including the former Chief of General Staff İlker Başbuğ. Meanwhile, the judiciary sued a closure case against the AKP in 2008, accusing it to become the center of anti-secularist political activities. Although the case did not result in it closure, the case helped the AKP come to the conclusion that unless the secularist establishment is eliminated it would never be able to totally rule the roast. Finally, the AKP's majority passed a constitutional amendment package in 2010 through the parliament, which was then ratified by 58 percent of the total vote in a referendum held on September 12, 2010. Through these amendments to the constitution, the AKP – Gülenist alliance was able to pack the higher judicial bodies, eliminating the secularist judges and prosecutors and making room for Gülenists (Arat, 2019). Therefore, by the early 2010s the secularist establishment was already deprived of the power that it had once enjoyed in various state institutions.

Although the elimination of the tutelage exerted by the secularist establishment, particularly the military, was widely believed to contribute to its democratization, Turkey's exit from the tutelary democracy did not lead to a process that would improve country's state in political rights, civil liberties, or rule of law. On the contrary, the lifting of the secularist tutelage was carried out through severely polarizing and undemocratic actions, such as political trials initiated by Gülenist judges and prosecutors with fabricated evidence. Furthermore, as it was replaced by Gülenists and AKP loyalists rather than independent democratic institutions, the secularist establishment's elimination led to the removal of the only limitation over the executive power of the AKP Government, thereby causing a severe damage to the separation of powers and the prospects for democratization.

2.3.2 The transition into electoral authoritarianism in Turkey

As underlined above, as opposed to the expectations, the exit from tutelary democracy did not lead to a process, whereby the defects of Turkish democracy could be fixed. On the contrary, by the early 2010s almost all critical state institutions were dominated by AKP loyalists and Gülenists, who also managed to mostly neutralize the horizontal accountability mechanisms as well as other limitations on the executive. Therefore, the lifting of the military tutelage not only failed to help fix the defects of democracy but also created a convenient atmosphere for further autocratization.

As a matter of fact, after AKP's third consecutive electoral victory in 2011, autocratization started to become more apparent. Especially, the Gezi Protests and its aftermath marked the beginning of an era, in which violations of civil liberties conspicuously augmented. While the intolerance of the government towards dissent and protest crystallized, its oppression against free press and freedom of expression significantly increased (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). In an attempt to build a network of pro-government media, the AKP Government used public resources and mobilized the businesspeople close to itself. Meanwhile, there was also a growing the repression of the critical media outlets mostly through tax fines or other kinds of penalties issued by the RTÜK. Also, the number of imprisoned journalists significantly increased. During the golden age of the AKP – Gülenist partnership, tens of journalists that were utterly critical of the big trials of Ergenekon and Sledgehammer served jail times. After a conflict had erupted between them, media outlets and journalists affiliated with Gülenists suffered the same fate. Moreover, the legal actions by the government to tighten its control over internet and social media as well as the huge increase in number of defamation cases against President

Erdoğan indicate the severity of the violation of freedom of expression. The populist polarizing strategy pursued by the AKP Government during that period created a mutual distrust and dislike between the pro-AKP and anti-AKP sections of the society, thereby paving the way for the former's toleration of non-democratic actions against the latter (McCoy & Somer, 2021).

The capture of the state institutions by the AKP Government after the end of the tutelary democracy, the systematic violation of political rights and civil liberties and uneven access to media and resources between the government and the opposition significantly skewed the playing field in favor of the ruling AKP. All these developments created unprecedented question marks regarding the fairness of the elections. Particularly, growing violence before and after the June 2015 General Elections against the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party and failure of the AKP Government to prevent them led many to question the elections as a fair and effective contestation mechanism to take on the government (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016).

The concerns over the fairness of the elections became more widespread following the coup attempt of July 15, 2016. The fact that the 2017 Constitutional Referendum and the 2018 General Elections under the state of emergency created systematic disadvantages for the opposition. Particularly, the decree law issued during the state of emergency allowing the appointment of trustees to the municipalities in case of terror accusations allowed the AKP Government to unseat tens of HDP mayors and replace them with unelected government appointees. Moreover, Turkey's transition into executive presidency in 2017 almost completely loosened the limitations on the executive, consolidating the power of the executive president on both the legislative and the judicial branches. This institutional change

provided many *de facto* authoritarian actions before 2017 with a constitutional ground.

While all these developments were further weakening the already loosened limitations on the executive und making the contestation mechanisms less and less available to the opposition, the ruling AKP also had to continue to win elections. To that end, they relentlessly pursued the strategy of populist polarization based on a "Us vs. them" distinction by instrumentalizing the fault lines that divided not only the larger society but also the opposition. Doing so, it was able to keep the opposition divided and maintain the majority support, which helped it continue to win the elections until the 2019 Local Elections. After all, without winning these elections the AKP could have never been able to do what it actually did to autocratize the country during the 2010s. As a result of these developments, Turkey made a gradual turn into an electoral autocracy, where elections are no longer fair but are not merely facade like in closed autocracies.

2.4 Populist autocratization in Hungary

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Hungary was considered as a model country for the change that the Central and Eastern Europe was going through. As a front runner of democratic transition, the case of Hungary made the scholars think that democratic consolidation might be possible for the ex-Soviet countries in the region (Buzogány, 2017; Bogaards, 2018). As a matter of fact, with its "multiparty system, free elections, representational government, strong opposition, free media, strong and credible institutions" (Bozóki, 2011), Hungary made quite a big step in democratization and managed to stabilize its democracy (see Figure 7). Already

looking like an advanced democracy by the end of the 1990s, Hungary became a member of the European Union in 2004.

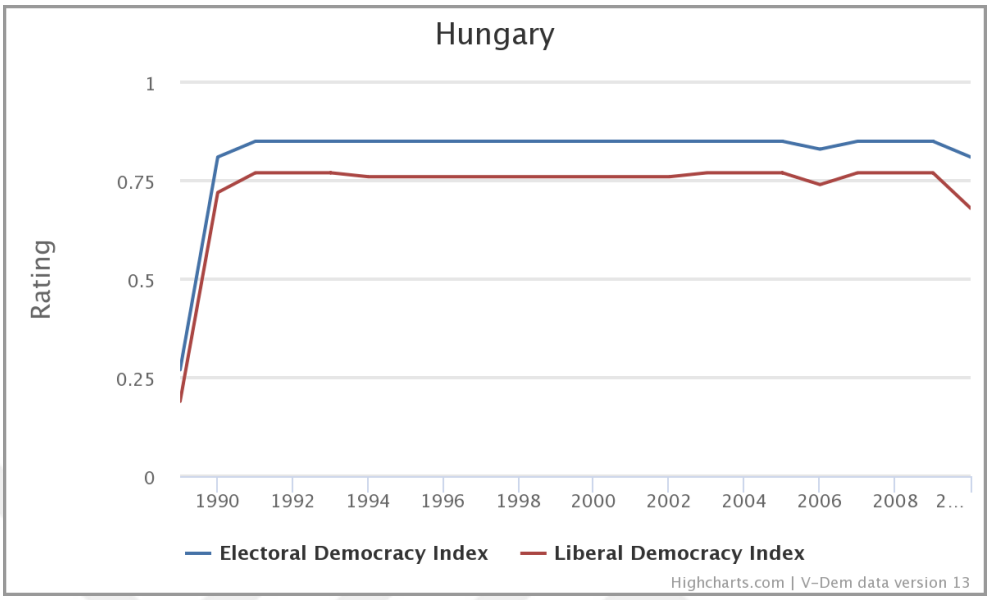

Figure 7 Hungary's electoral democracy and liberal democracy index for the period 1989-2010 (Coppedge et al., 2022)

Nevertheless, the socio-economic crisis that the country went through in the early 2000s had a game changer effect in the fate of the Hungarian democracy (Buzogány, 2017). Coming back to power after eight years in opposition with a landslide victory in 2010, Viktor Orbán's ruling bloc of Fidesz-KDNP transformed almost all state institutions including the constitution, thereby paving the way for a relentless process of autocratization (see Figure 8). In 2019, Hungary became the first EU member to be classified as "Partly Free" by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2019). In 2022 the European Parliament passed a resolution, in which it defined Hungary as an electoral autocracy (European Parliament, 2022).

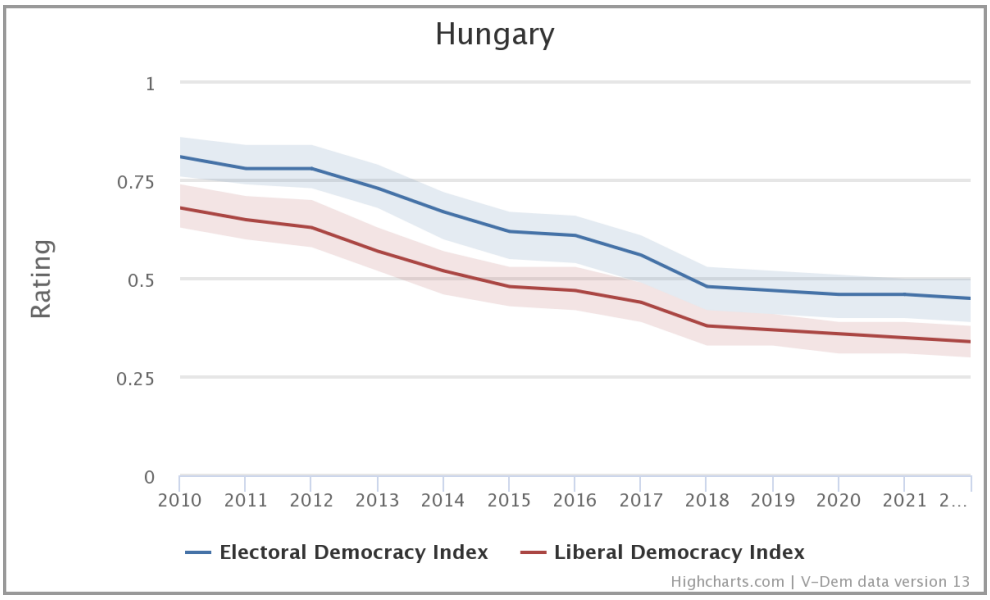

Figure 8 Hungary's electoral democracy and liberal democracy index under Fidesz-KDNP alliance in power for the period 2010-2022 (Coppedge et al., 2022)

Hungary's rather speedy slide into authoritarianism by means of institutional transformation beginning from 2010 enforced the divided and weak political opposition to develop novel strategies. While trying to adapt to the new situation, the Hungarian opposition has not only revised its approach as to how to deal with the autocratizing incumbents, but there has also been an internal transformation within the opposition.

2.4.1 The transition into defective democracy in Hungary

Before Fidesz-KDNP alliance won the elections to reclaim power in 2010, Hungary just celebrated the 20th anniversary of its transition from communism and was extensively viewed as a stable democracy with robust institutions including free and fair elections and stable party system, a thriving civil society, and free media (Levitsky & Way, 2020). Despite its youth, the Hungarian democracy was considered

to have proved its consolidation through five transitions of power between different political parties competing in the elections.

Through the 1990s and its first term in power in 1998, Fidesz, or the League of Young Democrats, and its leader Viktor Orbán had a liberal center-right stance. After a single term in power Orbán lost the elections in 2002 and 2006. During these eight years in opposition, Fidesz significantly shifted to the right, started to pursue a polarizing strategy, and campaigned on a rather nationalist and conservative platform (Csanádi et al., 2022).

Benefitting from the "perfect political storm" (Bozóki, 2015) of economic and political crises, Fidesz came back to power in the 2010 General Elections with a parliamentary supermajority. Right after reclaiming power, the ruling alliance lost no time in setting about redesigning the state institutions relying on its two-thirds majority in the parliament. The first step was to draft a brand-new constitution, which was widely criticized of weakening the checks and balances and the rule of law (Pap, 2018). The alliance also dismissed civil servants to cleanse the institutions of public administration, created new institutions such as the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH), which helped it take full control of the state-affiliated media, and National Judicial Council (OBT) and filled them with loyalists, packed the Constitutional Court, took control of the National Election Commission (NVI) and introduced a comprehensive reform that rendered the electoral system substantially majoritarian. Moreover, the ruling bloc created new electoral districts by means of gerrymandering in such a way that would effectively prevent any opposition party to have a realistic shot at claiming power in future elections.

As the entire state apparatus was being quickly redesigned, the ruling Fidesz-KDNP alliance was also busy with discrediting the opposition and presenting itself as the real representative of the Hungarian people. In order to strengthen this populist claim, the ruling bloc constructed a historical narrative to rebuild the national identity by extensively using religion and traditions and restructured all the institutions of welfare, education, and culture accordingly.

While all these changes were made, neither a popular ratification nor a proper public debate took place. The crises allegedly caused by the leftist political parties during the 2000s and the subsequent landslide victory of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance in the 2010 General Elections were effectively used by the ruling bloc to justify these changes and delegitimize the opposition. Meanwhile, these unilateral moves and the populist and polarizing discourse of the ruling bloc continued to polarize the Hungarian society. Consequently, before the end of its first term in power the Fidesz-KDNP alliance under Prime Minister Orbán already managed to dismantle all the institutions and mechanisms that were to check its executive authority and made sure that the remaining ones were restructured to be controlled by government loyalists. These moves were sufficient to swiftly turn the 20-year-old Hungarian democracy into a defective democracy with almost no limitations on the executive power.

2.4.2 The transition into electoral authoritarianism in Hungary

Hungary's institutional transition into defective democracy took place rather quickly. Those institutional changes would indeed be quite consequential for the coming years and, arguably, decades. This was during the 2014 General Elections in the clearest way possible during the 2014 General Elections. Even though the ruling Fidesz-KDNP alliance got nearly eight percent less of the total votes, which was

approximately equal to 500 thousand votes, it could preserve its two-thirds parliamentary majority thanks to the new majoritarian election system and gerrymandering. The preservation of the parliamentary supermajority by the ruling bloc under Viktor Orbán, in fact, played an important role for the continuation of the quick autocratization in Hungary.

As underlined above, Hungary completed its transition into defective democracy with no executive limitations by 2014, which mostly took place through institutional transformation. The actions taken by the unlimited executive led by Prime Minister Orbán from 2014 onwards accelerated the process of autocratization (Ágh, 2022), which caused the continuation of gradual dismantling of contestation mechanisms, thereby skewing the playing field in favor of the autocratizing incumbents. Levitsky and Way (2020) draw attention to three factors in their account for the emergence of the unlevel playing field in Hungary turning the country into an electoral autocracy of the competitive kind: First, they emphasize the effect on the state capture by the ruling bloc of Orbán in further stages of autocratization following the transition into defective democracy. The fact that Fidesz loyalists were "entrenched in every corner of the state" (Bánkuti et al., 2012) for years had a greater effect on the course of autocratization than just dismantling the executive limitations and skewed the playing field in favor of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance (Bojar et al., 2022).

Second, the authors make a particular emphasis on the redesign of the entire electoral system by the ruling bloc. Particularly, as the 2014 General Elections clearly indicated, the boundary delimitation of the electoral districts and the abolition of the runoff in those districts proved to be a structural disadvantage undermining the opposition's chances of a real contestation.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the transformation of the media landscape is widely acknowledged to have played a crucial role in the Hungary's swift autocratization. The institutional changes introduced in Prime Minister Orbán's first term in power allowed the ruling bloc to have a full control of the state-affiliated media as well as the regulatory agencies overseeing the private media outlets. This was already supposed to mean a significant increase in government's grip on the media landscape. However, beginning from its second term in power, the ruling bloc started to take actions to extend its grip on media towards the private sector by allowing its oligarchs to take control of the Hungary's most reputable media outlets. Through direct and indirect interference of the Orbán Government, media outlets such as *Magyar Nemzet*, *Népszabadsag* and *Index.hu* were either forced to close or taken over by a pro-government group (Rupnik, 2022). Such an extensive transformation in the Hungarian media landscape has greatly restricted opposition's access to the media, particularly in the times of elections, thereby turning the democratic-looking competition into an utterly unfair one, of which the 2022 General Elections provides a perfect example. Péter Márki-Zay, the joint candidate for prime minister of the opposition bloc, was given only five minutes in the public television to present his platform in the whole campaigning period, whereas the entire state-affiliated and private pro-government media outlets endlessly made a Fidesz propaganda (Scheppele, 2022).

Beyond the media realm, the transition to what is called "crony capitalism", whereby public resources are distributed in a partisan way and government cronies are systematically favored, in the management of economy and, particularly, public procurement and redistribution mechanisms, is argued to greatly contribute to the process of autocratization and the maintenance of this non-democratic regime in

Hungary (Csanádi et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the populist polarizing strategy, based on an "Us vs. them" distinction, adopted by the Orbán Government, particularly on the questions of refugees, patriotism, European Union, and the NGOs considerably helped it continually enjoy the popular support while autocratizing the country (Rupnik, 2022).

Table 8. The regime transitions experienced by Turkey and Hungary over the course of autocratization

		Turkey	Hungary
Transition into defective democracy	When?	2004 – 2013	2010 – 2014
	What?	Transition from one kind of defective (tutelary) democracy to another with executive limitations dismantled	Transition from liberal democracy to defective democracy with executive limitations dismantled
	How?	- 2004 constitutional amendments limiting the military's influence on the executive - Strengthening of the AKP in the 2007 General Elections - Election of Abdullah Gül in 2007 Presidential Elections - Ergenekon and Sledgehammer trials - 2010 constitutional amendments breaking the domination of the secular establishment in the judiciary - Gezi Protests in 2013	- The adoption of the new constitution - Packing of the Constitutional Court - Dismantling and restructuring of the state institutions: Budget Council, National Judicial Office, State Audit Office, Public Prosecutor's Office, National Bank, National Electoral Commission, National Media and Infocommunications Authority - New majoritarian electoral system
Transition into electoral autocracy	When?	2014 – present	2014 – present
	What?	Transition from defective democracy to electoral autocracy with the playing field skewed in favor of the incumbent	Transition from defective democracy to electoral autocracy with the playing field skewed in favor of the incumbent
	How?	- AKP vs. Gülenists conflict - Two elections in 2015 and rising terrorism - July 15, 2016, coup attempt and subsequent state of emergency - The 2017 Referendum and transition into executive presidency - Appointment of trustees to HDP municipalities - Transformation of the media landscape - Crony capitalism	- Continual unfairness caused by the majoritarian election system and gerrymandering - The domination of the Fidesz-KDNP over all state apparatus - The ruling bloc's continual parliamentary supermajority - Transformation of the media landscape - Refugee crisis - Crony capitalism

As a result, the swift institutional transformation in the period 2010-2012 that quickly turned Hungary into a defective democracy, conspicuously paved the way for further autocratization. The steady single-party government of Prime Minister Orbán

with a parliamentary supermajority operating under the institutions that it had either dismantled or restructured gradually caused a significant skew of the playing field in favor of itself. Greatly undermining the fair chances of contestation by the political opposition, all these events turned Hungary into an electoral autocracy in the late 2010s.

CHAPTER 3

THE CASE OF TURKEY UNDER PARLIAMENTARISM (2007-2017)

This chapter process-traces the electoral strategies pursued by the Turkish opposition from 2007 up until 2017, when the constitutional amendments that turned Turkey into an executive presidency were ratified by popular vote. During this period, a total of four general elections (2007, 2011, 2015(1), 2015(2)), one presidential election (2014), one local election (2014) and two referendums (2010, 2017) were examined, whereby cooperation and depolarization strategies pursued by the political opposition are described.

3.1 The 2007 General Elections

3.1.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

The 2007 General Elections were the first general elections that AKP participated in as the ruling party. The elections were originally scheduled in November 2007. However, as the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TBMM) failed to elect the president, the government called early elections for July 22, 2007. As the main reason for the early elections, the failure of the election of the president clearly became the main political topic to be debated during the election campaign.

The term of President Ahmet Necdet Sezer was to end on May 16, 2007, and the election of the next president by the TBMM was one of the most debated political topics as of the beginning of the year. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), which came to power in 2002, had the required parliamentary majority to eventually[3]

[3] As per the constitution of the day, the first two rounds of the presidential elections in the TBMM required that a candidate get at least 367 votes, the two third of the total number of MPs. However, in the third round this number decreases to 276, the simple majority. As the AKP had 354 seats in the TBMM, its candidate could easily be elected in the third round.

elect its candidate as president without having to reach a consensus with the opposition.

The main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was fiercely against the election of an AKP-imposed candidate, and particularly its leader and the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, arguing that he did not believe in the constitution ("Başbakan özür," 2007). The Democratic Left Party (DSP), an extra-parliamentary opposition party that had been the senior partner of the ruling coalition before the 2002 General Elections, was of the same opinion and clearly objected to a possible candidacy of Prime Minister Erdoğan ("Çankaya'ya çıkamazsın," 2007).

The objection to the possible candidacy of Prime Minister Erdoğan was not only voiced by the political opposition. More than 300 non-governmental organizations (NGO) publicly supported a series of rallies organized under the leadership of Atatürkist Thought Association (ADD) that was later to be called and known as "Republican Rallies", where hundreds of thousands gathered to protest against AKP's attempt to unilaterally elect the president. The organizers of the rallies believed that the president had to be a firm believer of the republican values ("Gerilim uzlaşmayla," 2007), which they obviously thought neither Prime Minister Erdoğan nor an AKP imposed candidate was. Therefore, the rallies continued to be organized after the declaration that AKP's nominee was not Prime Minister Erdoğan but Deputy Minister Abdullah Gül. The main message of the rallies was that the AKP had been in preparation of a counter-revolution against the republican values and secularism, and the takeover of the presidency would be a milestone in that bid ("Halktan büyük uyarı," 2007).

Meanwhile, a constitutional theory was propounded by some ex-members of the judiciary and constitutional lawyers, in which it is argued that the quorum

required for the first round of the presidential elections to be carried out in the TBMM could not be lower than the minimum number of votes, 367, required for the election of a candidate in the first round. Differently put, the AKP-led parliament was not to officially fulfil the first and later rounds of the presidential elections, unless at least 367 members of parliament (MP) were present. The AKP had only 354 MPs and, according to this theory, it would not be able to get their candidate elected only with its MPs present even though it had much more MPs than it was required for the election of its candidate in the third round. The problem was that it would be impossible to carry out the third round without the official completion of the first and second rounds. The representatives of the AKP fiercely opposed to this theory, emphasizing on the constitutional provision on the parliamentary quorum that it thought left no room for further interpretation, whereas the representatives of the CHP defended the theory of 367 saying that there might be exceptional quorums for particular parliamentary sessions ("AKP'yi korku sardı," 2007).

Although the failure of the election of the president led to the early elections, the elections had already been scheduled to happen in November 2007. Therefore, the political debate around the elections started as of late 2006. Since the AKP could come out as the single party in power with 34,3 percent vote in 2002 General Elections mainly because of divided nature of the party system, whereby none of the parties except AKP and CHP managed to cross the 10 percent electoral threshold, there was a big pressure on the center-left and center-right political parties to join forces against the AKP in the elections. In the center-left, the CHP was called on to cooperate with two extra-parliamentary parties, the Democratic Left Party (DSP) and the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP) ("İnönü'den birlik," 2007). In the center-

right, two prominent parties of the 1990s, the Motherland Party (ANAP)[4] and the True Path Party (DYP) were encouraged to unify in order to form a powerful right-wing actor, the lack of which had always been considered as a reason for AKP's rise in the 2000s. With the declaration of early elections in early May, the issue of unification in the center-left and center-right became one of the hot topics that were debated during the electoral period.

At the end, it was not Prime Minister Erdoğan but Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, who came out as the candidate of the ruling AKP. Two days before the first round of presidential elections in the TBMM, Prime Minister Erdoğan announced Gül's candidacy. Although the main opposition CHP and its leader Deniz Baykal attempted to take all the credit for Erdoğan's decision not to nominate himself for president ("Dayatmayı önledik," 2007), the opposition did not welcome Gül's candidacy either, emphasizing mainly on the risks that it would pose to the republican regime ("MHP Lideri Bahçeli: Türkiye buna, 2007; "CHP: Destek yok," 2007; "DSP Lideri Sezer: Demokrasi," 2007; "Halkı Hiçe Saydılar," 2007). After the announcement of Gül's candidacy, the main opposition CHP proclaimed that it would not attend the first round of the presidential elections and that it would appeal to the Constitutional Court for the annulment of the first round, if the session was attended by less than 367 MPs ("CHP: Destek yok," 2007).

With the decision of the DYP and the ANAP not to attend, the parliamentary session, in which the first round of the presidential elections took place, was attended by less than 367 MPs on April 27, 2007. As expected, the CHP appealed to the Constitutional Court and demanded the annulment of the first round. Later on the

[4] Under the leadership of Erkan Mumcu, who had served as minister in the first AKP government and resigned in February 2005, ANAP managed to form the third parliamentary group in 2005 after the participation of MPs who left the AKP and the CHP.

same day, a statement was released on the website of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, later called as the "e-memorandum", in which the military, without mentioning any name, warned the government over debates sparked by the presidential elections and plainly put that it was its mission to defend secularism. The statement had a clear implication that it regarded Gül's candidacy not in line with secularism and thus it was a clear ultimatum against the ruling AKP. The government gave a kind but firm reaction, emphasizing that the General Staff answers to the Prime Minister ("Hükümet genelkurmay," 2007), whereas the opposition and prominent civil society actors regarded the situation as a crisis and invited the government to deescalate it by calling early elections ("Muhalefet acil seçim," 2007).

A day after the release of the "e-memorandum", on April 29, 2007, the second Republican Rally took place in Istanbul. The rally attended by hundreds of thousands was considered a "civilian memorandum" ("Halktan büyük uyarı," 2007), whereby the opposition circles started thinking that there was a remarkable popular support for the anti-AKP political actions and discourses of the military and the opposition. Nevertheless, Gül rejected to withdraw his candidacy and insisted that the decision of the Constitutional Court had to be waited for ("Adaylıktan çekilmiyorum," 2007). Meanwhile, the leader of the main opposition CHP Deniz Baykal took a step further and said that it would create "a dangerous conflict" if the Constitutional Court did not accept the application of the CHP to annul the first round of the presidential elections at the TBMM. Baykal continued:

> It is the first time that constitutional institutions spoke up about their concerns. If the Constitutional Court rules that the president cannot be elected without at least 367 MPs present at the TBMM, it will create a temporary relief. The process of presidential elections will be over and early general elections will be declared. However, an early election is not the solution itself. The solution is the replacement of the hegemony that dragged the country into the crisis. The rallies are the key that will solve the problem. In the rallies of April 14 and 29, the people proclaimed their will to protect the

> republic and these rallies created a new ground for politics. The rallies both drew attention to the danger and indicated the solution. The solution is the unification of all political forces that recognize this danger. We have very well understood that it is our mission to bring together all the forces that are willing to protect the republic under a single umbrella. It is not issue of a unity of all political forces in the left of center but, beyond that, all the forces in the political spectrum that believe in Atatürk's principles and the unity of the republic ("Meydan çareyi söyledi," 2007).

On May 1, 2007, the Constitutional Court announced that it ruled in favor of the annulment of the first round of the presidential elections at the TBMM on the grounds that the required quorum was not present. The government reacted by calling early elections and proposed constitutional amendments envisaging the election of the president by popular vote.

3.1.2 Description of the opposition strategy

As the main cause of the early general elections, the issue of presidential election was the main political fault line among the ruling AKP and the opposition parties during the campaign. Despite significant attempts by several political parties to join forces, the opposition was not monolithic in this election. There were at least four groups within the opposition camp: The center-left bloc of the CHP and the DSP, the center-right bloc of the DYP (later the Democratic Party, DP) and the ANAP, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP). Although each of these actors' strategies will be dwelled on in this section, the main focus will be on the strategies of the main opposition CHP as the largest opposition group.

3.1.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

The idea that the main factor behind the achievements of Islamist parties in Turkey is the failure of mainstream political parties to join forces can be traced back to the 1990s. As a matter of fact, the competition and conflict among both center-right (mainly between the DYP and the ANAP) and center-left parties (mainly between the SHP, the DSP, and the CHP) created a highly suitable political atmosphere for an Islamist breakthrough, whereby the Welfare Party (RP) became the largest political force in the country after the 1995 general elections with only 21,4 percent of the total vote.

In 2002 general elections, the newly founded AKP could come out as the largest political force in Turkey with 34,3 percent of the votes and took control of the 66 percent of the seats in the TBMM because all the political parties except for the AKP and the CHP, which altogether got over 46 percent of the votes, were left out of the parliament due to their failure to cross the 10 percent electoral threshold. So it was, again, the fragmentation of the party system that granted the AKP the opportunity to be the sole party in power. Therefore, the failure of political parties both in the center-left and the center-right to join forces was always perceived to be the main factor that paved the way for the rise of the AKP as well as its predecessors (Dündar, 2023).

As aforementioned, the idea that opposition parties should somehow cooperate against the AKP had already been propounded in opposition circles, as the elections were approaching (“Halktan büyük uyarı,” 2007). With AKP’s decision to call early elections on May 1, 2007, the idea became a project that center-right and center-left opposition parties had to realize rather urgently.

Main opposition CHP's leader Deniz Baykal's aforementioned statements that the opposition cooperation should not be based on left-right binary and all the political forces in the opposition should unite were not supported by Mehmet Ağar, the leader of the DYP, who said that for him politics was based on pluralism ("DYP lideri yargıya," 2007). With Baykal's project of making CHP an umbrella of the entire opposition stillborn, tough negotiations started both in the center-left and the center-right camps.

On May 3, 2007, CHP leader Deniz Baykal called on the DSP to join the CHP ("Baykal'dan birleşme çağrısı," 2007). For Baykal, the umbrella organization had to be the CHP undoubtedly due to its history and popular support, whereas for the DSP it was clearly a hard decision to shut down the party and join the CHP ("Sezer Baykal'dan randevu," 2007). In the previous elections the CHP came second with 19,4 percent of the votes, whereas the DSP got only 1,22 percent. However, the history between the CHP and the DSP made it harder to forget the past and open a new page, especially when the things had to be settled quite urgently. During the negotiations between the parties, Baykal seemed to have all the leverage including the high pressure from the society and the notably short time frame. Although Zeki Sezer, the leader of the DSP, expressed his dissatisfaction several times in the course of the negotiations ("Aceleye getirmeyelim," 2007), at the end he had no choice but to say yes to a loose election cooperation with the CHP, whereby 24 DSP members were nominated in the CHP lists.

In center-right camp things were even more complicated because what the DYP and the ANAP were negotiating was not a mere election cooperation but rather total unification under the banner of a brand-new political party, the Democratic Party (DP). This had a huge symbolic significance, as both parties considered the

Democratic Party of the 1950s as their common ancestor. On May 5, 2007, leaders of both party, Mehmet Ağar and Erkan Mumcu, signed a protocol that includes the details of the unification. However, on June 2, 2007, both leaders criticized one another, and the unification failed. Mumcu told the press that Ağar had not kept the promises that he had made ("Birlik planı çöktü," 2007). Consequently, the ANAP withdrew from the elections, while the DYP that changed its name to DP moved forward. However, the failure of unification created a huge disappointment on the project of building a powerful political party in the center-right and many influential political figures that would have been the faces of the DP refused to take part. At the end, the party had even hard time finding candidates in certain constituencies ("Merkez sağ darmadağın," 2007).

The problem with both projects of cooperation is that due to the declaration of early elections they had to be realized on such a short notice. This restricted the inter-party cooperation into personal negotiations carried out by the leaders, which resulted in a pragmatic and loose electoral alliance in the center-left and simply failed in the center-right.

The DYP changed its name to Democratic Party and the ANAP withdrew from the elections. Consequently, the DP appeared to have ended up as the sole alternative in the center-right. However, the failure of unification prevented the creation of the synergy expected that would politically turn the scale. As a matter of fact, the DP made rather a weak campaign, criticizing both the AKP and the CHP in an attempt to present itself as a preferable alternative.

Compared with the center-right, the attempts of cooperation in the center-left can be deemed successful, as the CHP and the DSP managed to agree on an arrangement. Unlike the DP, they were able to come up with a narrative, which could

be perceived as a reason for their cooperation and underpin their electoral strategy. Nevertheless, since the only cooperation ahead of the 2007 General Elections was made between the opposition parties that were of the same political tradition and not separated by deep-rooted social-political fault lines, it does not fall into the scope of cooperation within the context of this dissertation.

3.1.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

The early elections on July 22 were called as a result of TBMM's failure to elect the president. Although it has the required majority to eventually get its candidate Abdullah Gül elected, the AKP was not allowed to do so by means of a highly contested ruling of the Constitutional Court. Consequently, the ruling AKP called early elections and the issue of the presidential elections became the main matter of debate during the election campaign.

According to the ruling of the Constitutional Court, the candidate of the ruling AKP, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, could not be elected due to the nonfulfillment of a constitutional procedure. Nevertheless, for the main opposition CHP the problem was more than a procedural deficiency. As explained in length above, the CHP was utterly against the candidacy of Prime Minister Erdoğan from the very beginning on the grounds that he did not believe in the secular republic ("Erdoğan'dan müjde bekliyorum," 2007). However, the nomination of Gül was not welcome by the opposition either for similar reasons. On Gül's candidacy, the leader of the CHP Deniz Baykal said:

> If consensus-seeking had been the case, we would have been agreed to a candidate from the AKP. But it was not the case and now a candidate is being imposed. We do not accept it ("CHP: Destek yok," 2007).

On another occasion, he also said:

> Unfortunately, we have been right. Their approach to the republican values does not reassure the people, nor the constitutional institutions. The Prime Minister appointed a candidate from the inner core, the triumvirate of the AKP (Meydan çareyi," 2007).

In order to prevent the AKP from being able to unilaterally elect its candidate as president, the CHP followed "the theory of 367" and appealed to the Constitutional Court. Meanwhile, the "e-memorandum" of the military against the ruling AKP was not criticized by the CHP. For the CHP, the attempt of the AKP to take control of the presidency was a big problem and, thus, it was quite normal that the constitutional institutions voiced their concerns (Ibid.)

Meanwhile, the organization of the "Republican Rallies" around Turkey brought about a remarkable political wave against the AKP. When it finally turned out that the political stalemate around the presidential elections was to be resolved by means of early elections, CHP leader Baykal clearly saw a window of opportunity in this political wave and attempted to make use of it. Whereas earlier Baykal had preferred to take a relatively distant approach to the rallies[5], later he embraced them ("Baykal: Miting muhteşem" 2007) as the demonstration of the popular will ("Millet tehlikeyi gördü," 2007), of which he utterly presented his party, the CHP, as the political representative:

> The rallies are the key that will solve the problem. In the rallies of April 14 and 29, the people proclaimed their will to protect the republic and these rallies created a new ground for politics. The rallies both drew attention to the danger and indicated the solution. The solution is the unification of all political forces that recognize this danger. We have very well understood that it is our mission to bring together all the forces that are willing to protect the republic under a single umbrella. It is not issue of a unity of all political forces in the left of center but, beyond that, all the forces in the political spectrum that believe in Atatürk's principles and the unity of the republic ("Meydan çareyi," 2007).

[5] Baykal says: "Our members came up with the demand of a rally against Erdoğan's possible candidacy. We find this very normal, however we have not yet made a decision. We are following the developments and we have a hope. We hope that such a rally will not be necessary" ("Herkes sesini," 2007).

In short, the CHP preferred to transfer its strategy of defining the AKP as a serious threat for the regime, which it had pursued during the presidential elections, into the election campaign ("Baykal: AKP rejimin," 2007). During the presidential elections in the TBMM, this strategy had worked because it was the Constitutional Court that had the final say. However, building the entire election campaign upon the strategy of protecting the republic from the threat of AKP was still a risky decision for the CHP. It was apparently the crowds in the Republican Rallies that made Baykal think that such a strategy would have an appeal in the eyes of the electorate ("Meydan çareyi," 2007).

3.1.3 Concluding remarks

The fact that the 2007 General Elections were called as early elections after the deadlocked presidential election at the TBMM made it quite clear what the elections would mainly be about. The secularist establishment within the judiciary prevented the AKP Government that held the required parliamentary majority from electing its nominee the new president; the military took an active role in the process through the e-memorandum and by tenaciously not attending the electoral session at the TBMM the CHP-led opposition became an actor of the secularist anti-AKP coalition.

Nevertheless, even though the elections were a result of the deadlocked presidential elections, the campaign trail could well become a political platform, whereby the 5-year political performance of the AKP Government were to be taken into question and the opposition were to offer a better government. However, that was clearly not the main premise of the opposition's strategy.

First and foremost, the cooperation plan of the opposition failed. CHP leader Deniz Baykal initially sought to build a broad-based secularist front under his leadership against the AKP Government by bringing together both the center-left and the center-right political parties, which was however rejected right away by the leaders of the center-right DYP and the ANAP. It was not quite surprising that these parties rejected Baykal's proposal, because they had always been against the exclusionary politics of the CHP based on the one and only goal to protect the republican values from the AKP. In other words, Baykal wanted his party to be the center of the anti-AKP coalition without bringing his party to the center.

Consequently, the cooperation strategies were pursued separately by the center-right and center-left parties. With the center-left cooperation of the CHP and the DSP focusing almost merely on the protection of the republican values from the AKP and the center-right cooperation of the DYP and the ANAP having failed after personal arguments between two leaders, no political center that could be a real alternative to the AKP could be formed.

Even though the 2007 General Elections were the first political contest, in which the opposition took on the AKP as the ruling party, and the process of autocratization did not yet unfold, the cooperation strategy of the opposition was built on past experiences. The need for cooperation by unification in both center-left and center-right was a result of learning from past experiences of the 1990s and the 2002 General Elections. As underlined above, the fragmented state of the center-right and center-left allowed the AKP and its Islamist predecessors to gain prominence at both local and national politics. Particularly in the 2002 General Elections, the entire fragmented center-right failed to cross the 10 percent electoral threshold, thereby gifting the AKP a supermajority in the parliament with only 34 percent of the vote.

When it comes to how the cooperation strategy was operationalized, it is observed that the center-left CHP and DSP preferred running a joint list under the CHP logo, whereas the center-right DYP and ANAP attempted at party merger. Considering the fact that the electoral law by no means offered an enabling environment for election cooperation in more flexible ways, the parties did not have many options through which to actualize cooperation. In this regard, the failure of the party merger by the center-right was somewhat because it was evidently a more complicated process.

The Republican Rallies, in fact, did create a huge political platform and the CHP, as its self-declared representative, clearly sought to transfer the synergy of this platform to its election campaign. However, focusing merely on protecting the republic from the danger of AKP rendered the campaign of the CHP completely reactive and negative.

Moreover, the particular political axis that the CHP strategically preferred with this reactive tone and negative campaign was exactly the one that the AKP and Prime Minister Erdoğan more than once proved to be good at. In his campaign, Erdoğan was always eager to bring the CHP up against the people ("Eleştiri okları Baykal'a," 2007) and the foci of CHP's campaign made it even easier for Erdoğan to label it as "the representatives of elites and not the people" ("CHP seçkinlerin," 2007). Particularly, CHP's blockage of the presidential elections at the TBMM and its skepticism on AKP's proposal for a popularly elected president were often brought up by Erdoğan as proofs for CHP's disrespect for the popular will and democracy (Ibid.). Prime Minister Erdoğan did not abstain from criticizing other actors that played a role in the process either. For instance, he openly targeted President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, who used all the time that he had to examine the

proposed package of the constitutional amendments and vetoed it, and the Constitutional Court that gave the contested ruling of 367 ("Gerilimden oy," 2007). Undoubtedly, the occasion of the election campaign created a big opportunity for Erdoğan to use a populist discourse, whereby he could easily appeal to the people and complain them about the CHP and the institutions that had been making things harder for him.

To sum up, the CHP-led opposition deliberately strategized to build their political platform on the one and only goal to protect the republic from the AKP, supposing that they had the support of both the secularist establishment in the judiciary and the military, and the people, who had expressed their views in the Republican Rallies. However, with this strategic choice the opposition failed to produce a political axis that would prevent the AKP from easily creating a majority for itself, as the political platform based on the protection of the republic was increasingly alienated from the issues concerning the larger society and was thus far from being a functional tool to deprive the AKP from its majority. In fact, the AKP emerged again as the largest party from the elections with 46,58 percent of the votes, thereby winning an outright majority in the parliament.

3.2 The 2010 Constitutional Referendum and the 2011 General Elections

3.2.1 Background and main issues ahead of the referendum and the elections

When the AKP first came to power in 2002 as a conservative democratic party, as the party officially calls itself (AKP, 2015), Prime Minister Erdoğan made it clear that the AKP had broken away from its predecessors in terms of political ideology and that regardless of their past he and other founders of the party had abandoned political Islam ("Erdoğan vekillerini," 2003). However, the opponents of the AKP in

the secularist establishment and the society continued to suspect whether the AKP was through a genuine change that made it truly different from its predecessors (Somer, 2007, p.1272). Hence, in its first term in power the AKP apparently took care to avoid antagonizing its secularist adversaries (Arat, 2019, p.3) and focused mainly on issues like economic growth and Turkey's EU accession.

Nevertheless, the controversy over the presidential elections in 2007 marks the end of this relative moderation. The implicit anti-AKP alliance of the military, the high courts, opposition parties and secularist civil society, which strived for preventing the ruling AKP from having its presidential candidate, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, elected, reactivated the secular-conservative fault line in Turkish politics, thereby making the subsequent early elections in July 2007 a turning point for the strategies of both the ruling AKP and the opposition parties.

As elaborated in the previous section, the 2007 General Elections took place in an atmosphere of polarization along the secular-conservative fault line and this was substantially the preference of the opposition parties, particularly the CHP. Regardless of to what extent this polarization played a role in AKP's landslide victory[6], whereby it increased its votes from 34 to 47 percent, the results were clearly reassuring for the self-confidence of the AKP to come up with its own agenda at the expense of worrying its secularist adversaries. As a matter of fact, in early 2008 the ruling AKP got the support of the MHP and sought to amend the constitution to lift the headscarf ban on university students. The amendment was passed through the TBMM and approved by President Gül. However, upon the appeal of the main opposition CHP, the Constitutional Court annulled the amendment and declared it unconstitutional.

[6] Çarkoğlu (2008) argues that it was more the favorable economic conditions than the ideological predispositions that played a role in AKP's landslide victory.

Shortly after its attempt to lift the headscarf ban, Chief Public Prosecutor filed a suit against the AKP for undermining secularism and demanded its closure as well as ban from politics for AKP's most prominent figures including Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and President Abdullah Gül. Although not enough Constitutional Court members ruled in favor of party's closure, the AKP was found guilty of its anti-secular activities and imposed a financial fine.

The failure of the ruling AKP to lift the headscarf ban and the closure case indicated that the secularist establishment had still the power to delimit the scope of politics for the ruling party, despite its huge electoral achievement, whereby it managed to get the support of almost the half of Turkish electorate. This was the point, where the AKP considered the issue as a matter of "existential insecurity" (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016, p.512) and was convinced that it would have to go on the offensive to get out from under the restrictions of the secularist establishment (Arat, 2019, p.5).

The purpose of the AKP's offensive was to weaken the secularist establishment in the military and the judiciary. To that end, the AKP joined forces with the Gülen Community, which had been also a target of the very same establishment. The AKP supported the Gülenists within the state bureaucracy from the very beginning and helped them obtain high-ranking positions in the judiciary, the military, and the police. Concentrated on their common goal to purge the state bureaucracy of secularists, the AKP-Gülen coalition proceeded in two steps (Ibid, p.6): First, they opened two pivotal cases, Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, which were based on alleged plots to undermine and ultimately overthrow the AKP Government. Both trials were built upon forged documents and fabricated evidence and in the end more than 600 of the accused, including opposition politicians, high-

ranking officers, academics, and journalists, were convicted (Doğan & Rodrik, 2010).

The second step that the AKP-Gülen coalition took was to prepare a package of constitutional amendments to fundamentally reconfigure the higher judicial bodies, namely the Constitutional Court (AYM) and the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) so as to increase the influence of the government in the composition of these bodies. The amendment package included a total of 27 articles, a vast majority of which had a democratizing substance such as extension of collective bargaining rights and positive discrimination for women, introduction of the institution of ombudsman and individual application to the Constitutional Court and so on (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012, p.5). However, despite making up only a fairly small portion of the whole package, the amendments proposed for judicial reform would be enough to allow the ruling AKP to restructure the high courts, which had been its powerful adversaries for quite a long time. The package was passed through the TBMM with the support of the AKP's parliamentary majority and approved by President Gül. As the AKP did not have a two thirds majority in the parliament, the amendments needed to be ratified by the popular vote to come into force as stipulated in the constitution. So, the package was taken to referendum, which was set for September 12, 2010.

Taken all together, there was an explicit change in the strategy of the AKP after the 2007 General Elections. Going on the offensive, as I called it above, the ruling AKP made use of the judiciary to weaken the secularist military and take control of the high courts and other state institutions. This change in the AKP's strategy had two important consequences: First, the conflict between the secularist establishment and the AKP that started with the controversy over the presidential

race and became more severe after AKP's landslide electoral victory in 2007 significantly deepened the secular-conservative divide in the society. Unlike during its first term in power, the AKP did not hesitate to resort to identity politics, whereby it instrumentalized and, in some cases, even deliberately exacerbated this divide for its own political interests. This was particularly evident in the Prime Minister Erdoğan's campaigns for the 2010 Constitutional Referendum and the 2011 General Elections (Çarkoğlu, 2012, p.519).

Second, all these actions that the AKP took to prevent the secularist establishment from curbing its power marked the beginning of a gradual change in the qualities of the political regime in Turkey. Although the dismantling of the power and the autonomy of the secularist establishment within the military and the judiciary was applauded and supported by a group of liberal intellectuals as democratizing, this process left the ruling AKP almost completely unchecked, thereby accelerating the democratic decline, which can be taken as the first step of a long and relentless process of autocratization that has lasted ever since (Sözen, 2020a, p.25).

AKP's ostensibly democratizing moves were not limited to its attempts to weaken the secularist establishment by means of restructuring the military and judiciary. In 2009, the AKP Government started what was commonly called as "the Kurdish opening" to end terrorist activities of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and solve the Kurdish issue. Although the public knew only about the decision of the government to initiate what they called the "democratic opening" and the subsequent decision of the PKK to declare a unilateral ceasefire, it was first partially and then wholly leaked in 2011 that the process was a result of the talks that the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) conducted with the PKK in Oslo and its imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan in İmralı İsland. In November 2009, Prime Minister Erdoğan

publicly denied any talks between his government and the PKK but in the meantime declared that the "National Unity and Fraternity Project" was an objective that his government would achieve through the process democratic opening ("Geri adım atmayacağız," 2009). The project was severely criticized by the opposition parties, the CHP and the MHP, which argued that negotiating with the terrorist organization was illegal and illegitimate ("AKP-PKK işbirliği," 2009). So, the project muddled along with one step forward two steps back. In early 2010 the government took some unilateral steps to extend rights for the Kurds such as allowance of use of Kurdish language in public space ("Karanlık oda," 2010). Nevertheless, after the arrests of the PKK militants who had given themselves in voluntarily after Öcalan's call ("Zorla pişmanlık," 2010), the BDP declared the end of the process ("BDP'li Yıldız," 2010) and, consequently, the armed conflict between the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and the PKK resumed.

Meanwhile, another significant change took place in the opposition camp. As a result of a video tape scandal, the long-time leader of the CHP Deniz Baykal resigned and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, one of the deputy leaders of the party's parliamentary group, was elected the new chairman of the CHP in May 2010. With Kılıçdaroğlu's chairmanship, a new era started for both the CHP and the opposition in general, which coincided with the third term, or as Erdoğan puts it, the "master's era", of the AKP as the single party in power.

By the time Kılıçdaroğlu was elected the new leader of the CHP, the date of the 2010 Constitutional Referendum had already been set. So, right after his election Kılıçdaroğlu found himself in a position to start and lead the opposition's "No" campaign, which was his debut as the main opposition leader. Only nine months

later, the CHP would have to be up for the first general election experience under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu.

Apart from two interruptions that lasted a total of 2-year time, Deniz Baykal had been the leader of the CHP since 1992. Considering the fact that the CHP is a party, where changes in the leadership do not occur rather frequently, there was a huge expectation that Kılıçdaroğlu would breathe a new life into the CHP that had already lost four elections to the ruling AKP. As will be elaborated below, Kılıçdaroğlu actually tried to do so in its campaigns for the 2010 Constitutional Referendum and the 2011 General Elections by means of new strategies, whereby the CHP under his leadership prioritized focusing on socio-economic issues of the country and developing policy solutions and building bridges with certain social groups such as conservatives and Kurds, all of which had been hitherto neglected by the CHP.

3.2.2 Description of the opposition strategy

Thanks also to the change in the leadership, the CHP was in many ways the prominent opposition actor with its new strategy under the new chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. When compared with that for the 2007 General Elections, the new strategy that the CHP pursued in 2010 and 2011 was clearly more sophisticated. The new strategy was mainly threefold: First, with an overt self-criticism the CHP tried to reach out to social groups that it had long neglected such as conservatives and Kurds, pay attention to their problems, and develop policy solutions prior to and during its campaign.

Second, having preferred to diversify its foci, the CHP ceased to restrict its campaign to the republican values and started to focus more on welfare, economy,

and social policy with an attempt to appeal to the entire society and undermine the identity politics performed by the AKP.

Finally, unlike in the 2007 General Elections, where the main oppositional premise of the CHP was the necessity of protecting the republic from the AKP's ideology, the new leader of the party Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu conspicuously shifted the focus to AKP's mismanagement and malpractice, whereby the main target of his discourse was Prime Minister Erdoğan himself, as the embodiment of all policies, preferences, and actions of the AKP Government.

Despite of the prominence of Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP, the opposition was monolithic during neither of the votes, where other opposition parties, namely the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), the successor of the DTP, also campaigned.

The nationalist MHP conducted a quite aggressive anti-AKP campaign for the referendum. Despite having campaigned against the amendment package, the MHP did not collaborate with the CHP to build a united "No" campaign and focused particularly on its objection to what was called the "Kurdish opening" initiated by the AKP in an attempt to solve the Kurdish issue and end the PKK terrorism. Prior to the 2011 General Elections, the MHP suffered a series of video tape scandals against some of its prominent figures, who then resigned as candidates of the party, which increased the aggressive tone of the party's campaign even more.

Last but not least, the pro-Kurdish BDP that had made it to the parliament in the 2007 General Elections through its independent candidates declared a boycott for the referendum, maintaining that the most critical problems such as the 10 percent electoral threshold were not addressed by the proposed amendments (Kalaycıoğlu, 2012, p.6). When it comes to the 2011 General Elections, the BDP pursued the same

strategy as in 2007 by supporting the independent candidates of the "Labor, Democracy and Freedom Bloc". The "Kurdish opening" initiated by the AKP Government, the increasing interest of the CHP in Kurdish issue and PKK attacks prior to the elections incorporated the BDP even more to the debates that set the agenda of the parties' campaigns.

3.2.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

Apart from certain occasions for limited interparty dialogue, there was in fact no cooperation between the opposition parties ahead of the 2010 Constitutional Referendum and the 2011 General Elections.

After his election as the new chairman of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu started a process of dialogue and reconciliation with the party's historical adversaries as part of its opening to different social groups. That included the former president Süleyman Demirel, who had been the chairman of the Justice Party (AP) of the 1960s and 1970s, the formidable rival of the CHP at the time ("Kılıçdaroğlu Demirel'in," 2010). The efforts of Kılıçdaroğlu certainly aimed at presenting the CHP as a new center of politics that can be a real alternative to the AKP. However, these efforts did not evolve into some kind of an alliance or interparty cooperation.

Referenda are generally considered to be quite suitable for interparty cooperation, as they create a bipolar political atmosphere. However, this was very far from being the case ahead of the 2010 Constitutional Referendum. The main opposition CHP and the MHP made up together the "No" camp, but they conducted completely separate campaigns and virtually never engaged in any kind of cooperation. This is mainly because, although both opposition parties contested the content of the amendments, the main premises of their campaigns were pretty

different. As elaborated below, the nationalist MHP essentially built its "No" campaign on its disapproval of AKP's Kurdish opening, whilst as per its new strategy under Kılıçdaroğlu the CHP raised multiple issues such as corruption, social injustice, Kurdish issue, headscarf problem etc. during its campaign. Particularly, the attempt of the CHP to present itself as an alternative for the resolution of the Kurdish issue by proposing a general amnesty and lowering of the 10 percent electoral threshold was harshly criticized by the MHP leader Bahçeli:

> In such an atmosphere, it is a huge unawareness to mention general amnesty. Lowering the threshold is another nonsense. Because these are the two of the seven decisions taken by the Democratic Society Party in its congress. While attempting to carry out the project to get rid of the current government, one should not make a political mistake that would help them ("MHP lideri Bahçeli: CHP gaflet," 2010).

Therefore, as much as the referenda with basically two options facilitate interparty cooperation, the differences in their political priorities led the CHP and the MHP to conduct separate "No" campaigns for the 2010 Constitutional Referendum. When it comes to the campaign for the 2011 General Elections, interparty dialogue among the opposition parties against the ruling AKP continued to be quite limited. As victims of videotape scandals that were extensively used by Prime Minister Erdoğan in his campaign, the CHP and the MHP showed solidarity with one another and criticized Erdoğan ("Siyaset kasete," 2011).

Although, in fact, in neither of the votes the opposition acted in cooperation, Prime Minister Erdoğan constantly claimed during his both campaign trails that the opposition parties joined forces against his government. Particularly, in his campaign for the referendum Erdoğan used the fact that all campaigning opposition parties contested the proposed amendments as an indication for the rightfulness of the amendments as well as an implicit alliance between these parties ("Erdoğan:

İspatlamazsan müfterisin," 2010; "Erdoğan: Kandile inanıyorlar," 2010). In his campaign for the 2011 General Elections, as elaborated below, he continued to use the same discourse and continuously accused the opposition parties of being in an alliance against his ruling AKP: "In the form of an alliance, they target the AKP. The CHP, the MHP, the BDP, the terrorist organization, the Ergenekon and their media join forces and attack the AK Party" ("Dört koldan AKP'ye," 2011). He also alleged that the CHP's rallies in predominantly Kurdish-populated cities of Hakkari, Van and Diyarbakır were organized with the help of the BDP ("Kepenkler yine," 2011; "Kılıçdaroğlu sanaldır," 2011). However, neither of these parties confirmed this allegation.

In fact, it was not quite unexpected that the opposition parties did not have the intention to engage in any kind of cooperation ahead of the 2011 General Elections at least for two reasons: First, the electoral law that was in force back then prohibited the political parties to involve in official electoral alliances, whereby the only way to make an election cooperation was that the candidates of the party A participate in the elections from the lists of the party B as in the case of the CHP-DSP cooperation ahead of the 2007 General Elections. This provision totally ruled out the making of flexible and pragmatic electoral alliances. Second, the parliamentary system of government that was still in place back then allowed each actor, at least in theory, to have the chance for coming to power alone or being a coalition partner during the post-election negotiations. For these reasons, neither systemically nor politically the opposition parties felt the need for a pre-election cooperation or union of forces against the ruling AKP as early as 2011.[7]

[7] In fact, both the CHP and the MHP made it public several times that they had a real shot at defeating Erdoğan and coming to power alone. ("Dayan Yorgo," 2011; "Bahçeli'den Erdoğan'a," 2011).

3.2.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

First of all, it is important to emphasize that the main novelty of the electoral strategy of the CHP under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was its attempt to change the axis of existing political polarization. Hence, as far as the (de-)polarization strategy is concerned, CHP's new strategy was clearly different from that which the party had pursued back in the 2007 General Elections.

As thoroughly dwelled on in previous sections, the strategy of the CHP for the 2007 General elections based on the protection of the republic from the AKP's ideology had reactivated the already existing secular-conservative fault line in the society. In other words, it was mainly the opposition's preferences that provoked a political polarization along this axis. Taking up this challenge, the AKP and Prime Minister Erdoğan responded by accepting to compete with the opposition along this particular political axis and, at the end, emerged victorious from the elections.

The aftermath of the 2007 General Elections witnessed a beginning of an action-reaction recycle between the AKP Government and the secularist establishment. With an improved self-confidence thanks to its huge electoral victory, the AKP dared to amend the constitution to allow headscarfed students to attend the universities. The judiciary reacted by annulling the amendment that had been passed by the TBMM by almost a three fourths majority and opening a closure case against the AKP. Having survived these blows, the AKP changed its strategy by allying itself with the Gülenists within the state bureaucracy to go on the offensive against the secularist establishment. The Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases as well as the constitutional amendment package in 2010 were the outcomes of this new strategy.[8]

[8] In an interview with journalist Ruşen Çakır, Sadullah Ergin, the Justice Minister of the day, stated: "If we had not moved, a new closure case would have been filed against the AKP. So, we had two options. We would either submit to them or take the necessary actions in order to prevent the judiciary of the day from overstepping its limits. What would you expect a government with a 47 percent

Having won the 2007 General Elections made the AKP certain that the secular-conservative divide that had been initially provoked by the opposition was working for and not against itself. Now being on the offensive, the AKP had no reason not to utilize this divide as a part of its new offensive strategy. Therefore, while the actions of its coalition with the Gülenists to displace the secularists in the military, judiciary and the bureaucracy were already annoying the pro-secular AKP opponents within the society and thereby exacerbating the secular-conservative polarization, the AKP and particularly Prime Minister Erdoğan started to persistently use a populist discourse, whereby the very same divide is reproduced and reinforced in the form a polarization between the secularist tutelary elites and the real people represented by the AKP (Müller 2016, 3; Kalaycıoğlu 2012, 6; Sözen 2020a, 20). Following quotes of Prime Minister Erdoğan from his campaigns for the 2010 Constitutional Referendum and the 2011 General Elections clearly illustrate this:

> Who bombed the villages of Dersim with order of the President of the day? Who was he? İsmet İnönü, who was the leader of the CHP. That is, it is the CHP that bombed. That is your past; you have to first clean your past (…) If you say that you are the upper crust of this country, yes, it is true. I am happy with the farmers, villagers, workers and the retired of this country to have MPs and mayors in all of the 81 cities ("Dersim'i CHP," 2010).
>
> We want to show those, who claim that we are politicizing the judiciary but actually would like to maintain their tutelary order and thereby resist to the democratization of the judiciary what true democracy is ("Bunların milli iradeye," 2010).
>
> While a handful of people were exhausting all the resources of this country, they told the rest of people, the nation to keep out. They told: 'You cannot study, you are headscarfed, you can only be cleaners (…) you should not interfere with government. You do not understand the democracy and freedom.' They called us reactionist, ignorant, poor, villager, countryman (…) They still see us the same way. What had they said about me? They had said that I would never even make a headman. God has the power. And now, what happened? It happened, what God and the nation wanted. The nation took control of the government. Politics under tutelage ended. Democracy finally became meaningful ("AKP Başbakan," 2011).

support of the society to do? This was for us a matter of do or die. This is how the amendment package was prepared back in 2010" ("Ruşen Çakır'ın konuğu," 2020).

By means of this populist and identitarian discourse[9], the AKP aimed at polarizing the society over the questions of identity, expecting that it would help it get the support of the plurality. This is also how the AKP managed to disguise its attack on Turkey's tutelary democracy as a democratizing move, and thereby getting the support of numerous liberal intellectuals, which would eventually turn out to be the initial steps of a relentless regime change away from democracy itself (Sözen, 2020b, p.232).

Nevertheless, pursuing new strategies was not peculiar to the ruling AKP. With the chairmanship of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, there was a clear change in CHP's strategy, whereby the party abandoned its strategy for the 2007 General Elections identified with the former chair of the party Deniz Baykal by rejecting the axis of politics based on allegiance to republican values, which sharpened the polarization along the secular-conservative fault line and attempted to build a new model of politics.

The new strategy under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu had two main pillars: First, the CHP started to show up in certain parts of the country that it had long neglected and endeavored to somewhat approach to social groups that it had almost always perceived to be categorically distant towards, such as conservatives and Kurds. Ahead of the 2011 General Elections, for instance, Kılıçdaroğlu stated:

> We want you to vote for us for once. We want to cadge your vote off for once (…) I would like everyone, conservatives, and Kurds alike to vote for us. I will take care of all the concerns of the conservatives ("Ödünç oy," 2011).

[9] Populism is in fact more than being only compatible with identity politics but actually incorporates a particular form of it: "That's another way of saying that populism is always a form of identity politics (though not all versions of identity politics are populist). What follows from this understanding of populism as an exclusionary form of identity politics is that populism tends to pose a danger to democracy." (Müller, 2016, p.3).

As a matter of fact, during the campaign trail Kılıçdaroğlu paid a particular attention to visiting the cities that had long been neglected by the CHP including the conservative and predominantly Kurdish-populated cities around Turkey. In a rally organized by the CHP in Siirt, Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> We have been barely present here. We have had hard time calling us the members of the CHP among people. Now people listen to us ("CHP'nin umudu," 2011).

Similarly, Kılıçdaroğlu visited Diyarbakır and said: "… They were right. We have not come here as much as we should have. But now we change it" ("Bu sorunu ben," 2011). Kılıçdaroğlu's visit in Çankırı was particularly important, as it was the first time after 34 years that a CHP leader visited the city:

> We have not been able to get the support that we expected from Çankırı for 30 years now. We have not come; we have not asked your problems. We only asked you to vote for us. After I become Prime Minister following the elections in June 12, my first visit will be to Çankırı ("Yolsuzluk yapanı açıkla," 2011).

The approach of the CHP and its leader Kılıçdaroğlu to the Kurdish issue was particularly important in terms of party's opening to different social groups. Whereas in the 2007 General Elections the CHP viewed the issue almost entirely from the security aspect, as of 2010 Kılıçdaroğlu publicly admitted the existence of the Kurdish issue and vowed to take all necessary steps to stop violence and reinstitute peace:

> Who has been in power for the past 30 years? Who failed to stop the bloodshed for 30 years? What have they done during all these years? I promise you; we will stop the violence and the bloodshed. We will reinstitute peace, tolerance, and fraternity in this society ("Devlet intikamcı," 2010).

Ahead of the 2010 Constitutional Referendum, the CHP did not categorically denounce the attempts of the ruling AKP to start peace negotiations with the PKK, which was quite surprising given its recent approach to the Kurdish issue, and came up with its own policy proposals such as general amnesty for the resolution of the conflict ("CHP'den güneydoğu açılımı," 2010). In its campaign for the 2011 General Elections, the CHP took a step further and offered a detailed program on how to deal with the Kurdish issue.[10] Although this program might not have been found satisfactory for various reasons, it is clear that it points out to a significant breakaway from the past.

While, as aforementioned, the "Kurdish" opening of the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu was slammed by the nationalist MHP, the pro-Kurdish BDP welcomed this change in approach. The deputy leader of BDP's parliamentary group Bengi Yıldız said:

> We consider the statements of Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu regarding the fact that it is very normal for the state authorities to have a talk with Öcalan and the PKK as well as his proposal of a general amnesty as a reaction of a statesman. We believe that this is a signal of CHP's return to social democracy ("Genel af açıklamasına," 2010).

The second pillar of the new strategy of the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu was about the party's emerging focus on the area of social policy. In an attempt to revive the social democratic credentials of the CHP, Kılıçdaroğlu and his team prepared a set of comprehensive projects that aimed at strengthening the welfare state in Turkey. Particularly, the project of "family income insurance" was the first comprehensive welfare project proposed by the CHP after nearly two decades ("İnsan ve üretim odaklı," 2011). For Kılıçdaroğlu, the significance of this project was that it would

[10] In this program, the CHP promised to lift the 10 percent threshold, the conversion of the Diyarbakır Prison into a museum, the introduction of elective courses in Kurdish, full respect for the freedom of identity, the toleration of the non-violent actions of civil disobedience etc. ("Kürtler kimliğini," 2011).

institutionalize the social aids identified with the AKP governments in a way to prevent them from creating a clientelist relationship between the government and those who receive aid ("Ar damarı çatlamış," 2011). In the campaign of the CHP, these welfare projects were supported by other social policy projects with particular target groups. For instance, its projects on youth ("Gençlere özgürlük sözü," 2011), agriculture ("CHP tarımla," 2011) and subcontracted workers ("Kılıçdaroğlu: Ülke hapishane," 2011) were a significant part of party's campaign for the 2011 General Elections.

With this new strategy the CHP put forth an effort to give up its politics of reinforcing the polarization along the secular-conservative fault line, which had already proved to backfire, and de-polarize the social groups that had gradually moved away from itself over the past two decades. However, this new strategy had also clear limitations. First and foremost, a rather rapid change in the leadership and the discourse can hardly be adequate to change the image of the party with deep-rooted perceptions. Let alone the groups with prejudices against the CHP, such abrupt policy changes cannot be easily embraced even by party's authorized bodies, which may then result in confusions as to how the party approaches to a particular issue. In Kurdish issue, for instance, only five days before the freshly elected leader of the CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, proclaimed that they were not categorically against the talks between the government and Öcalan ("Kılıçdaroğlu: Erdoğan neden," 2011), the deputy leader of party's parliamentary group Muharrem İnce had accused the government of secretly negotiating with the PKK, declaring the AKP, the BDP, the PKK and Öcalan as "quadruplet souls" ("Ruh dördüzü," 2011). Such inconsistencies might have also undermined the credibility of CHP's opening, when

it tried to persuade the social groups that had long been distant to it about the genuine change that it had been through.

This mission became even more difficult as polarization was extensively instrumentalized by Prime Minister Erdoğan in his campaign. Erdoğan's use of polarization during his campaign trail was mainly twofold: First, he used identity politics and issues around country's formative rifts (Somer & McCoy, 2019) such as secular-conservative, Alevi-Sunni and Turk-Kurd cleavages to undermine the image of the opposition parties. During his campaign, he raised some quite sensitive issues in such a way so as to provoke polarization across these identities. For instance, Erdoğan brought up several times in his rallies that Kılıçdaroğlu was an Alevi and made the presumably Sunni dominated crowds in Muş, Kastamonu, Amasya, Kahramanmaraş and Afyon boo him ("Sizin inancınızı," 2012). In another occasion, he accused the CHP and Kılıçdaroğlu several times during the campaign of not having the respectful understanding of how to use *Allah*'s name (Türkiye değişimi yaşıyor," 2011) and not having "any Turkish flag" in its rallies predominantly Kurdish-populated cities like Diyarbakır and Hakkari ("Kepenkler yine," 2011). He likewise targeted Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the nationalist MHP, of not having executed the death penalty that Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK terrorist organization, had been sentenced to.[11]

In his campaign for the 2011 General Elections, Prime Minister Erdoğan also extensively used the video tape scandals that targeted the former CHP chairman Deniz Baykal and prominent figures of the MHP to undermine these opposition parties. He talked about the scandals as cases of breach of morality and even

[11] Back then the MHP was the junior partner of the ruling coalition and Bahçeli was the Deputy Prime Minister ("Biz olsak," 2011)

religious rules, and apparently used it to besmirch the reputation of the opposition leaders and parties:

> These politicians say that we intervene people's private lives. Are these affairs with their own wives? This is not a private but a general immorality. Do not fool this society. (To Bahçeli) He says that this government interferes people's privacy. If this is really private, why did you force them to resign? Kılıçdaroğlu is the chairman of a tape scandal. Otherwise, he would never be able to become the chairman. You allowed him (Baykal) to run for a parliamentary seat. Then why did not you allow that female parliamentarian to keep her seat. Is the tape only the fault of the woman? ("Kaset siyaseti," 2011).

> In the CHP the chairman quitted because of the tape scandal, which brought a new chairman. Nowadays, the MHP, too, is the victim of tape scandals. We never gave any credit to this immorality and avoided to use it as a political means. However, both the CHP and the MHP accused us instead of engaging in self-criticism. Do not denigrate and criticize yourselves. (…) When such things arise, what the leader is to do is to fire them. Above all, does this befit a prominent politician in this Muslim society? ("Erdoğan yine kasetle," 2011).

The second pillar of Prime Minister Erdoğan's polarization strategy was to equate all the opposition parties with one another and with the PKK in attempt to label them as an alliance against his ruling AKP:

> In the form of an alliance, they target the AKP. The CHP, the MHP, the BDP, the terrorist organization, the Ergenekon and their media join forces and attack the AK Party ("Dört koldan AKP'ye," 2011).

In another rally, similarly, Erdoğan said:

> The new CHP is the design of gangs. The CHP is hand in hand with the BDP in the southeast and in the west the CHP, the MHP and the BDP, they are all hand in hand, arm in arm. Beware of this project ("Kılıçdaroğlu sanaldır," 2011).

Erdoğan's polarization strategy had a clear effect on the strategy of the opposition. As a matter of fact, as Erdoğan intensified his polarizing discourse during his campaign, the initially positive campaign of the CHP increasingly became reactional and reciprocally polarizing towards the election day. This polarization was

significantly different from the one that had been performed by the CHP during the 2007 General Elections under Deniz Baykal's leadership, whereby the main premise was that the republic had to be protected from the ideology of the AKP. Back then, focusing solely on the "evils" of AKP's ideology clearly deepened the secular-conservative fault line, which the AKP would eventually discover facilitates its bid to get the support of the plurality in the elections.

The CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, shifted the focus from AKP's ideology to AKP's mismanagement and malpractice, whereby the main target was Prime Minister Erdoğan himself, as the embodiment of all policies, preferences, and actions of the AKP Government. This brought about a strong anti-Erdoğan discourse in CHP campaigns in 2010 and 2011. The way that Kılıçdaroğlu called Erdoğan in his party's rallies, "Recep Bey!" ("Mr. Recep"), was a major symbol of this humiliating anti-Erdoğan rhetoric. The more Prime Minister Erdoğan harshened its strategy of polarization, the more dominant the anti-Erdoğan discourse became in the campaign trail of Kılıçdaroğlu, which included personalized accusations such as the criticism for the paid military service of his son, claims of corruption and theft, illegal activities including involvement in the videotape plots against the CHP and the MHP, ignorance and divisiveness:

> We will gradually decrease the duration of the obligatory military service. He (Erdoğan) asks: 'Who will defend the motherland?' Why did not you think about it when your son served only 21 days in the army? Why are you bringing this up, when we promise the sons of ordinary people of this country a shorter military service? ("Çocuklar aç yatmasın," 2011).
>
> He (Erdoğan) became rich through the unearned income of politics. They have been relentlessly robbing the nation. They say that their shoes were torn when they first entered to politics. Now look at the one whose shoes used to be torn once upon a time! ("Halk zenginleşecek," 2011).
>
> Is there a room for enmity, insults in politics? He is the master of insult, enmity, and divisiveness. His name is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. How can it be possible? People are starving. They commit suicide out of poverty. He does

> not care! (…) I have never witnessed such an immorality, indecency. A decent person, let alone a politician, would never attack another person with such harsh words. He has health issues, and he needs to be treated. It is him (Erdoğan), who first listens to and watches the tapes and then makes some of them public. This government of Mr. Erdoğan is a government that benefits from and relies on illegal affairs, illegal events. Shame on you! ("Önce Erdoğan dinliyor," 2011).
>
> He shall come and face me. Let us talk only about the Social Security Institution (SSK). Can he? No, he cannot! Because he is not knowledgeable, he is ignorant. Does Mr. Prime Minister know that the SSK had its first deficit back in 1976? No, he does not. Because ignorant men do not know; they just slander ("CHP yargıya," 2011).

Although Kılıçdaroğlu's anti-Erdoğan discourse started as a reaction to Erdoğan's harsh polarizing campaigning, it was still a tactical preference made by Kılıçdaroğlu to react in a way that would cause a reactive polarization. However, this tactical preference had at least two negative consequences for the CHP: First, the reactive anti-Erdoğan discourse gradually outweighed the de-polarizing pillars of CHP's new strategy and became dominant element in the later stages of its campaign. Even though with this tactical preference the CHP did not intend to give up its depolarization strategy, the action-reaction cycle between Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu at the discursive level clearly pushed it to the background. After all, it was not quite unexpected that polemical exchanges between leaders would get more media coverage than any element of CHP's positive campaign such as its opening to conservatives and Kurds, and new social policy projects.

Second, with his depolarization strategy pushed to the background Kılıçdaroğlu's anti-Erdoğan discourse clearly reinforced rather than undermine Erdoğan's polarization strategy (Selçuk et al., 2019). As mentioned above, despite its limits the new strategy of the CHP based on depolarization had the potential of changing the axis of politics preferred and imposed by Prime Minister Erdoğan's polarization strategy. Reacting Erdoğan with reciprocal polarization not only diluted

the effect of this new strategy but also caused the intention of the CHP to change the axis of politics to end up in failure.

Considering the foci of their campaigns in 2010 and 2011, other opposition parties, the MHP and the BDP, were not very successful either in their bid to change AKP's axis of politics. In its campaigns for both the 2010 Constitutional Referendum and the 2011 General Elections, the nationalist MHP predominantly focused on its disapproval of the AKP Government's "Kurdish opening". The leader of the party, Devlet Bahçeli, unceasingly brought up during his campaigns that the AKP Government had involved in secret negotiations with the PKK and vowed that he would hold them responsible for that. For Bahçeli, this was nothing but an utter treason:

> The Prime Minister is ashamed and to get rid of this shame he attacks the MHP. (…) If you do not clarify (the negotiations) the MHP will not only clarify it but also hold you accountable for having cooperated with the terrorist organization. Why are you attacking the MHP instead of confessing how, with whom, and through which institutions you did all these negotiations and cooperation ("Günü gelince," 2010).

> What traps are you intending to lay? Whom did you promise what? Where is this submission coming from? Why are you forced? Explain the nation everything so that everybody can see you true face. If you have honor, answer these questions. Tell what negotiations you did, what promises you gave! Tell whom you sold the Republic of Turkey! Tell how you trampled on the reputation of this state! Tell if you have promised Abdullah Öcalan (the imprisoned leader of the PKK) his release ("Öcalan'ı bırakmak için," 2011).

In his "No" campaign for the 2010 Constitutional Referendum, Bahçeli also voiced his concerns regarding the independence of the judiciary in case of the approval of the proposed amendments by popular vote ("AKP yandaş yargı," 2010). However, the main emphasis of the campaign was to reveal the "real objective" behind proposed amendments, which it claimed was to make a broader change in the constitution that would "clear the way for PKK opening" (Ibid.) and respond to the

demands of the PKK and the European Union (EU) ("AKP ile PKK aynı eksende," 2010).

In his campaign for the 2011 General Elections, Bahçeli continued his accusations of treason ("İhanet dönemi," 2011; "Saltanata izin," 2011) and made a further big allegation against Erdoğan, where he claimed that the Prime Minister was involved in the video tape conspiracy against the prominent figures of the MHP, cooperating with Fethullah Gülen, the leader of Gülen Community and Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK:

> I regard Erdoğan, Gülen and Öcalan as an equilateral triangle. These three points make an equilateral triangle to realize their objectives on Turkey. This equilateral triangle is the source of the disturbances of Turkey ("Erdoğan, Gülen ve Öcalan eşkenar," 2011).

The campaigns of the pro-Kurdish BDP in 2010 and 2011 were essentially shaped by the developments regarding the "Kurdish opening" of the AKP Government. As aforementioned, the opening process muddled along and in Spring 2010 the PKK ended its unilateral ceasefire and resumed its attacks against the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK). In July 2010, the BDP declared its decision to boycott the 2010 Constitutional Referendum, arguing that the amendments do not have any democratizing content ("BDP neden boykot," 2010). Despite BDP's remarks that the decision of boycott was a result of its evaluation of the amendments package and had nothing to do with the negotiations between the government and the PKK, the BDP sent a signal more than once that it was ready to reconsider its decision of boycott if the government would take the necessary steps:

> If Erdoğan lovers the electoral threshold to five percent, our arrested friends are released and he makes it public that he is determined to solve the Kurdish issue through a new constitution, well, we could discuss it with you. Otherwise, we would never go the ballot box ("Demirtaş'tan üç şart," 2010).

So, the BDP built its campaign for the 2010 Constitutional Referendum upon its own political agenda, using its decision of boycott as a leverage in order to force the government to resume talks with the PKK and show it the influence of the party on its electorate ("Baydemir: Boykot," 2010).

During the months after the referendum the BDP continued its calls on the government to resume talks with Öcalan and the PKK. Ahead of the 2011 General Elections, the BDP decided to pursue the same strategy as in 2007, whereby it competed in the elections through its independent candidates but built a considerably larger bloc, the Labor, Democracy and Freedom Bloc, in order to be able to win enough seats for a parliamentary group ("BDP'nin hedefi," 2011).

As the BDP and the AKP were the main competitors in predominantly Kurdish-populated cities in the Southeast of Turkey, the campaign trail witnessed truly harsh exchanges between these two parties. While Prime Minister Erdoğan continuously accused the BDP to be subordinate to the PKK, BDP leader also targeted Erdoğan with a quite heavy and threatening discourse:

> While you (Erdoğan) may be a blessing for a group of AKP members around you, for us you are the head of Ergenekon, the deep state ("Erdoğan bizim için," 2011).

> He (Erdoğan) did not content himself with the 'one state, one flag', he also wants to be the 'one leader'. We do not let him rule us. Erdoğan who declares his sultanate will create a fascist dictatorship. We do not want a fascist dictatorship but a democratic republic. Let us divide the country into 20-25 regions and let each region govern itself. Otherwise, let me warn you, there will be a Turkey of two regions: An authoritarian state in the West and an autonomous Kurdistan here ("Ülke 25 bölgeli," 2011).

Considering the aggressive anti-AKP campaigns carried out by the MHP and the BDP, the efforts of the CHP and its leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu did not suffice in order for the opposition to offer an alternative axis of politics to that which was preferred and imposed by Prime Minister Erdoğan. Unlike in 2007, the opposition

was not the initiator of polarization in 2011. However, the overall acceptance of the opposition to confront Erdoğan over the polarizing axis that he himself initiated was clearly one of the factors that facilitated Erdoğan's bid to keep the support that he needed to stay in power.

3.2.3 Concluding remarks

Despite some significant attempts for a proactive breakthrough, essentially by the CHP under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the strategies pursued by the opposition parties for the 2010 Constitutional Referendum and the 2011 General Elections can generally be taken to be quite reactive. To understand why that is, it is key to first analyze the actions and reactions between the incumbent AKP and the opposition as well as the larger strategic framework, within which they occur.

As described above, after the 2007 General Elections the incumbent AKP under Prime Minister Erdoğan started to pursue the strategy of identity politics, whereby it used Turkey's formative rifts – secular-conservative, Turk-Kurd, Alevi-Sunni cleavages – to polarize the society in such a way that would help it drive a wedge between the actors of an already divided opposition and, thereby, get the support of the plurality. By using polarization as a means to reach its political ends, the incumbent AKP fought each opposition party in a different front and managed to wedge them into their respective identity poles.

During the 2007-2010 period, when the AKP started and accelerated its campaign against the secularist establishment by means of a populist discourse, the secular-conservative fault line was becoming increasingly deepened to the detriment of the opposition, and particularly the main opposition CHP. In 2010, when Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu became the leader of the CHP, the party seemed aware that the axis

politics that it had previously created was working against itself and that it had to be changed (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023). As a result of this learning process, the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu put in huge efforts to change it but as elaborated above, these had significant limitations, the most important one being that the change in leadership was merely not enough and a rather long time was required for the internalization of new approaches that were upending some of the conventional policies of the party, i.e., regarding the Kurdish issue and headscarf issue.

Although the transformation that the CHP was through under Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu was conspicuous, it failed to achieve its objective of offering an alternative axis of politics to that imposed by the incumbents in 2010 and 2011. As argued above, the main reason for that was the tactical use of an aggressive anti-Erdoğan discourse that became quite dominant on the later stages of CHP's campaigns in 2010 and 2011 as a reaction to Erdoğan's polarizing discourse. Although unlike the one in 2007 this anti-Erdoğan discourse was based on his alleged misgovernment rather than the ideology and the identity of the AKP, it helped Prime Minister Erdoğan continue identifying the CHP as part of the secularist establishment and thereby presenting it as an existential threat and consolidate its base at a time when there was not an economic crisis. Therefore, having overshadowed the openings of the CHP, the use of this aggressive anti-Erdoğan discourse as a reactive tactic ended up reinforcing the polarization provoked by Prime Minister Erdoğan and thus undermined the party's strategy of depolarization and offering a new axis of politics.

Even though the use of this aggressive anti-Erdoğan discourse as a reactive tactic by the CHP was not intended for overshadowing its strategy of opening to

different groups of the society, it was a deliberate act to respond to two main needs: First, as previously underlined, the need to react to Erdoğan's aggressive discourse and, second, the need to satisfy its own base that had already been getting increasingly furious at the AKP Government.

The incumbent AKP also used the Turk-Kurd cleavage to passivize and further divide the opposition. Though for diametrically opposite reasons, the Kurdish opening carried out by the AKP Government made both the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish BDP conduct totally reactive campaigns in 2010 and 2011. Whereas the MHP built both its campaigns almost entirely on its objection to the opening process, the BDP was usually unsatisfied with the actions taken by the AKP during the process and used the campaigns as leverage to pressure the government. However, as opposed to the expectations of both opposition parties, the AKP managed to benefit from this polarization, using the opening to increase its appeal to the Kurds and the reactions of the BDP to prove the nationalist-conservative groups of the society that it was still tough to PKK terrorism. This gave Prime Minister Erdoğan a large maneuvering space, whereby he could use a securitizing and sometimes even nationalistic discourse regarding the Kurdish issue and had a great appeal for the Kurds at the same time. Meanwhile, the attempts of the CHP made its own "Kurdish opening" caused a rift between the CHP and the MHP without creating a considerable proximity between the CHP and BDP that found CHP's proposals utterly inadequate.

By means of its use of the formative rifts and polarizing discourse, the incumbent AKP managed to bring different opposition parties up against each other, thereby preventing them from building a bloc against it. Therefore, considering the intra-opposition fault lines and the parliamentary system as an institutional disabling

factor, it is not surprising whatsoever that the opposition did not have a cooperation strategy ahead of the 2010 Referendum and the 2011 General Elections.

3.3 The 2014 Local Elections

3.3.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

2014 Local Elections took place on March 29, 2014. Despite the elections being held as scheduled on time, the pre-electoral period was not characterized by ordinary circumstances, whereby issues of local governments such as problems of cities, projects and proposed solutions are supposed to dominate the campaign trail. It was mainly because the elections took place under the shadow of two important events that deeply influenced the Turkish political landscape and would continue shaping it for years to come: The Gezi Park Protests and the crack in the coalition of the AKP and the Gulenists.

In fact, the aftermath of the 2011 General Elections witnessed a period of relative reconciliation. Unlike in his campaign trail, Prime Minister Erdoğan's famous election night "balcony speech" included some calming and reconciliatory messages:

> Like in the past, the new AKP Government, too, will be the government of all 74 million citizens and not only those who voted for the AKP (…) The lifestyle, faith and values of each citizen are entrusted to us. As we will consider the lifestyle, faith and values of those who have not voted for us as our own honor and dignity, no one shall have any doubt and worry (…) Our nation has not only granted us the authority to govern but it has also assigned us the duty of making a new constitution through consensus and negotiation (…) So we will not close our doors and if they accept we are ready to go to the main opposition, other opposition parties, extra-parliamentary parties, NGOs, media, all academics and all others who have a say to make altogether a civilian, participatory and liberal constitution ("Başbakan'dan üçüncü," 2011).

The calls of Prime Minister Erdoğan for the making of a new constitution through consensus and negotiation were not left unreciprocated and all opposition parties that made it to the parliament, the main opposition CHP, the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish BDP accepted the invitation to send members to the "TBMM Constitutional Reconciliation Committee". The committee presided by the Speaker of the TBMM, Cemil Çiçek, and with equal number of members from each of the four political parties that had a group in the parliament, held its first meeting on October 19, 2011. The committee agreed on making its decisions by unanimity and completing its work by the end of 2012. However, after having finalized the chapter on basic rights, where all of four parties could reach a consensus, the committee's work came to a deadlock mainly due to disagreements between the parties on the system of government (Taylan, 2016, p.10). The ruling AKP proposed to turn the system of government into a presidential one (Mumcu, 2013), which all the opposition parties firmly rejected. Consequently, the negotiations were terminated in November 2013 and committee's works remained inconclusive.

It was indeed by no means surprising that the works of the Constitutional Reconciliation Committee failed to get any result because as opposed to what Prime Minister Erdoğan promised in his election night balcony speech, consensus did not become a defining characteristic of post-election Turkish politics and, instead, tension and polarization continued to prevail. After all, with military, media and high courts almost entirely neutralized, the "master's era" of Prime Minister Erdoğan started without any independent public or civil institution left to check his party's power (Arat, 2019, p.10). So, compared with the early years of its power, the AKP was feeling clearly less the need to seek consensus in its governance. While government, in coalition with the Gülenists, had been relentlessly weakening the

secularist cadres in state institutions, some liberal intellectuals had supported it for democratizing the state (Sözen, 2020b, p.232). However, when the ruling AKP ultimately achieved the objective of neutralizing its secularist adversaries, it felt itself finally ready to leave its own mark on the state. In a public speech, the Provincial Chair of AKP's Istanbul Organization, Aziz Babuşçu, made this crystal clear:

> Those who have anyhow been our partners for 10 years will not be our partners for the next 10 years to come. Although they cannot really accept us, say the liberals, they became anyhow our partners. Yet, the era of construction is important. The era of construction will by no means be as they would like it. As the ruling party we have done a lot. However, unless written on the memory of the state, these might be erased quite easily. We must stay in power for a lot more in order to be able to write what we would like to write on the institutional memory of the state ("Babuşcu: Gelecek," 2013).

It was by no means surprising that the two pivotal trials, Ergenekon and Sledgehammer, which had been staged by the alliance between the AKP and the Gülenists were concluded at a time, when this alliance was so strong that the AKP had even the luxury of abandoning its former allies. The verdict of the Sledgehammer case was announced in September 2012 and more than 300 of the accused received prison sentences, while in the Ergenekon case the verdict announced in August 2013 convicted more than 250 people and 11 of them including the former General Chief of Staff İlker Başbuğ received aggravated life imprisonment.

The absolute exclusion of the secularist establishment from the state institutions by the AKP-Gülenist coalition by means of purge trials with obvious illegalities and constitutional amendments with the intention of court-packing was already provoking the polarization across the secular-conservative fault line. On top of that, Prime Minister Erdoğan made several contested statements that would even deepen this fault line. In May 2012, for instance, Prime Minister made it public for

the first time that he was against cesarean delivery and abortion. In his speech for the International Conference of Population and Development he said:

> I am a prime minister that is against cesarean delivery. I regard abortion as murder. There is no difference whatsoever between killing a child in mother's womb and after the birth. No difference at all. We must be united in the fight against it (…) As Turkey we are also very sensitive about children. I like children very much. In my country I want at least three children. Because I know that we need a young and dynamic population, and we thus work for it ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'ın 2012'den," 2018).

The incidents that increasingly deepened the secular-conservative fault line continued up until the Gezi Park Protests. In April 2013, world-renowned Turkish pianist and composer Fazıl Say, who had been accused by blasphemy over a series of Tweets that he had sent and retweeted, was given a 10-month jail sentence for "overtly humiliating the religious beliefs held by a section of the society" ("Fazıl Say'a Hayyam," 2013). Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdağ said about the conviction: "The Turkish nation is proud of the performance of Say's art. However, the subject of the indictment is not about his art. Cursing, humiliating and insulting others' beliefs are not suitable for an artist" ("Bekir Bozdağ'dan Fazıl," 2013). About a month later, the AKP Government hurriedly passed a law that banned the sale of alcohol between 22.00 and 06.00 ("Alkollü içkiye," 2013). The law was passed immediately after its announcement without any public consultation and despite widespread objections ("Not so good," 2013). All these developments were perceived as a direct interference of the government in the secular lifestyle, despite Prime Minister Erdoğan's vocal commitment of respect in his balcony speech after the election victory two years before.

The attempts of the AKP Government to transform the public space through disputed construction projects also led to deepening polarization. In May 2012, Prime Minister Erdoğan announced the project of a huge mosque in Çamlıca, which

"would be seen from all around Istanbul" ("Çamlıca Tepesi'ne," 2012). Excavation for the construction of the Turkey's would-be biggest mosque started in April 2013 without any public discussion despite all critiques. Similarly, the decision to name the third bridge in the Bosporus after Yavuz Sultan Selim, the ninth Ottoman Sultan who is considered by Alevis as responsible for the killing of thousands of Alevis in the 16th century, was not debated either. The decision was harshly criticized by Alevis of being a provocation for a sectarian conflict ("Alevilerden Yavuz," 2013).

The final straw that heightened the tension was the project of the AKP Government to demolish the Gezi Park, one of the very few remaining green fields at the heart of Istanbul, in order to build a replica of the Ottoman-era Taksim Military Barracks that would house a shopping mall. The Gezi Park Protests were initiated on May 28, 2013, by a group of activists that staged a sit-in at the park to oppose the project. The forcible removal of the protesters from the park by means of disproportionally violent police force turned what was rather a local protest into a as an unprecedented wave of mass demonstrations all over the country, protesting a wide range of issues from government's interference in people's private lives to the violations of fundamental rights and freedoms in Turkey. According to the official figures, around 3,6 million people participated in the protests in 80 out of 81 cities in Turkey, in which more than 5000 people were detained, more than 4500 people were injured and 10 people including a police officer were killed ("Emniyete göre," 2013).

Unlike most of the other government officials, Prime Minister Erdoğan remained defiant during the protests, describing the protestors as looters:

> Atatürk Cultural Center will hopefully be demolished. We will rebuild it as a magnificent opera and concert building. Some asked it. Yes, we will build a mosque too. I am not in a position to ask the chairman of the CHP or a few looters for permission. Our voters have already given us that authority ("Erdoğan: Birkaç çapulcunun," 2013).

Prime Minister Erdoğan also used the protests as an opportunity for further polarization. In a live interview at the airport before his official trip North Africa, which coincided with the protests, he said: “We are barely holding the 50 percent of this society at home. We are telling them to be patient and not to be deceived” (“Başbakan: Yüzde 50’yi,” 2013). The ruling AKP later organized a series of rallies called “Respect to National Will” in six cities around Turkey as a response to the protests.

The opposition, on the other hand, largely supported the protests. The leader of the main opposition CHP Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu stated that his party supported the protests and visited the protesters at the Gezi Park (“Gezi Parkı eylemine,” 2013). The CHP also institutionally supported the protests, moving its already planned rally in Kadıköy to Taksim Square (“CHP Kadıköy'den,” 2013). In a statement that supported the protesters, Kılıçdaroğlu slammed Erdoğan and said:

> If Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wants to do something good, well it is very simple: He should listen to the youth. He should listen to them not humiliate them, not slander them, not threaten them. He should draw a lesson from what the youth says. What did he say? He said he would give them a taste of their own medicine. What does it mean? Will you beat them, kill them? The youth are using the language of love and Erdoğan is using the language of violence. What do they want? They want democracy. What is called the regime, where those who demand democracy are killed? It is called dictatorship. And the leader is called a dictator” (“Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan önemli,” 2013).

When compared with that of CHP, the support of the nationalist MHP a” nd pro-Kurdish BDP for the Gezi Park Protests was somewhat hesitant. The leader of the MHP Devlet Bahçeli was initially quite skeptical about the protests. By referring to Sırrı Süreyya Önder, a prominent BDP MP who was at the park on day one to contest the demolishment of the park, Bahçeli said: “I do not support the protests led by the İmralı postman. If anyone willing to support the protests and come together with the protesters can do it after resignation” (“Vekillere Gezi gözdağı,” 2013).

However, after the demonstrations had spread nationwide, Bahçeli changed his mind and declared only a week later his support for the protests and criticized Erdoğan, saying: “The innocent sensitivity to protect the environment, the green undoubtedly deserves respect (…) I warn you Mr. Prime Minister: You should urgently give up your hostile rhetoric to consolidate your base” (“Devlet Bahçeli: Gezi,” 2013). The change in MHP’s approach to the protests was later explained by the party’s deputy provincial chair Hasan Hüseyin Sünbül:

> We have some quite bitter experiences from the 1980s (…) Even though the nationalist base, for this reason, initially approached to the protests hesitantly, it later acknowledged that it was a rightful scream and supported the protests. This approach is also very clear in all the messages that we receive from social media. Therefore, the members of the MHP do not leave the park empty (Çalışkan, 2013).

The pro-Kurdish BDP, too, was rather fluctuant on its approach to the protests. As underlined above, one of the most prominent BDP MPs of the time, Sırrı Süreyya Önder, was the main figure that drew people’s attention to the government’s construction project in the park. As a matter of fact, Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-chair of the party, declared that the protests were a reaction to government’s actions: “These demonstrations are a result of not external powers but the mentality of ignoring one half the society to satisfy the other half. It is the Prime Minister who was the tinder of the protests” (“Demirtaş: Halkın öfkesini,” 2013). However, Demirtaş said in a statement that they stayed away from the protests:

> The democratic demands put forward at the Gezi Park are such that the HDP can support. From this perspective, we supported the protests even in the parliament. After all, these demands are not totally different from those we have in the Peace Process. We, too, demand similar things. However, some had also the intention to turn the protests into a popular movement that would lead to a coup d’état. This is not a speculation as we observed this ourselves. We harshly opposed this and thus stayed away from the protests (“Selahattin Demirtaş: Gezi,” 2013).

It was widely speculated that the hesitance of the BDP regarding the Gezi Park Protests emanated from its willingness not to do anything that would damage the negotiations between the AKP Government and the PKK within the scope of the Peace Process (Özkırımlı, 2013). As a matter of fact, Demirtaş's statement at the beginning of the protests also reflects BDP's indecision:

> Nationalist groups are trying to undermine the negotiations and the Peace Process. We have to be careful about them. People's resistance to AKP's oppression in Taksim and all over Turkey is legitimate and rightful. We will not let what happened at the Gezi Park be turned into an opposition to the Peace Process. Because we are collaborating with them. Our base is by no means together with the racists and fascists in the same activity. Our base knows exactly what to do ("Demirtaş: Süreci baltalamak," 2013).

The AKP Government continued to resort to polarizing politics during and after the Gezi Protests. As was also previously the case, Prime Minister Erdoğan particularly preferred to touch on sensitive matters along the secular-conservative fault line. During the earlier stages of the protests, for instance, he answered a question regarding whether the protests had to do with restrictions on the sale of alcohol in a TV interview as follows:

> Anyone drinking alcohol is an alcoholic. This is how it is defined. What if a person, who is an alcoholic because he or she drunk alcohol takes the road and has an accident with someone who is not an alcoholic? What would then happen? Among our voters there are people who, although very rarely, drink alcohol. Never mind. They are not alcoholic anyway ("Erdoğan: İçki içen," 2013).

Months after the protests, a daily newspaper brought up a quite controversial issue and claimed that the AKP Government was in preparation for taking action to prevent male and female students from sharing the same apartments. Although, when asked, the government's spokesperson Bülent Arınç strongly denied the allegation as "completely fake news", Prime Minister Erdoğan confirmed the rumors by saying:

> I am not a person who could deny something that I myself talked about. We do not allow male and female students to stay together in public dormitories. In some places, because there are enough dormitories, there are some problems regarding the stays in apartments. There are some information coming to our security forces and our governors intervene in such cases. We never know what happens in such apartments and then the parents complain about it. As a conservative democratic government, we must do something. I know that the vast majority of parents would never allow something like this. So, we must take a decisive step in this ("Başbakan: Kızlı erkekli," 2013).

Although Prime Minister Erdoğan continued to heighten the tension along the secular-conservative fault line in the society, the power struggles on the top of the state were no longer between the AKP-Gülenists coalition and the secular establishment. With the secular establishment predominantly eliminated and no other adversary left, the alliance between the AKP and the Gülenists started to crack over power sharing (Arat, 2019, p.7).

Even though the disagreements between the two can be traced back to the early 2010s over some foreign policy issues, the first outbreak of the conflict was the so-called "MİT crisis" in February 2012. After the secret negotiations between the National Intelligence Organization (MİT) and the PKK had been revealed in 2011, a public prosecutor with "special authority" on terrorism and organized crime, who was said to be a Gülenist, subpoenaed Hakan Fidan, the chief of the MİT, to respond to the allegations regarding the relationship between the MİT and the terrorist activities of the PKK (Gürsel, 2013). Having perceived this as a political attack against himself, Prime Minister Erdoğan ordered his government to make necessary legal amendments to make Prime Minister's official permission required for investigating the members of the MİT and thereby turning away further investigations (Tol, 2014).

The MİT crisis clearly awoke the AKP Government about the severity of the Gülenist domination in the police and the judiciary.[12] The government then started to take steps to undermine the Gülenist organization within these institutions and prepared a new bill that would shut down the private preparatory schools (Gürsel, 2013). One fourth of these institutions in Turkey were owned and run by the Gülenists, who heavily relied on them for funding and recruiting (Tol, 2014).

The reaction of the Gülenists to the AKP Government was overvigorous. In December 2013, Gülenist prosecutors launched a criminal investigation involving prominent cabinet ministers of the AKP Government and their family members, who were accused of bribery, corruption, fraud, money laundering, and gold smuggling. On December 17, an operation was launched and the accused including the sons of the cabinet ministers were detained ("Üç bakan oğlu," 2013). In the second wave on December 25, the target was the Prime Minister Erdoğan himself over an illegally recorded phone call between him and his son. Gülenist prosecutors tried to subpoena Erdoğan's son, Bilal Erdoğan ("İşte Bilal'in ifade", 2013), but a police chief deflected the investigation ("Kelepçe ihanetini," 2014). Although the cabinet ministers, whose family members were allegedly involved in corruption resigned ("Üç bakan istifa," 2013), the AKP Government and Prime Minister Erdoğan did not plea of guilty, accusing the Gülenists of setting up a "parallel state" by securing high-ranking positions in the police and judiciary ("Erdoğan: İninize," 2013). The government thus did not lose any time to either dismiss or reassign police officers and prosecutors that had played a role in the investigation ("Savcı Öz ile," 2014).

[12] In an interview with journalist Ruşen Çakır, Sadullah Ergin, the Justice Minister of the day, stated this very clearly that it was not until the MİT crisis that the govenment became aware of the Gülenist aspirations to capture the state institutions, particularly the poliçe and the judiciary ("Ruşen Çakır'ın konuğu," 2020).

The opposition focused on the content of the allegations rather than how and why these allegations were made and slammed the AKP Government about each scandal that broke out up until the local elections on March 29, 2014. Opposition parties did not buy AKP's argument of "parallel state" set up by the Gülenists, contending that even if it was true, that was the government's mistake to allow it. As the pre-election period was entirely overshadowed by scandals revealed by the Gülenists, both the incumbent AKP and the opposition parties had to build their election strategies upon these scandals.

3.3.2 Description of the opposition strategy

As underlined above, the entire electoral period including the campaign trail for the 2014 Local Elections was overshadowed by the corruption scandal of December 17-25 and a series of tape scandals that followed it all the way to the election day. Unsurprisingly, these scandals had an overwhelming effect on the campaign strategies of the opposition parties as well, whereby they all utilized these disclosures to damage the AKP Government. The opposition leaders, particularly, engaged in severe polemics with Prime Minister Erdoğan during their campaigns. Unlike during the campaign for the 2011 General Elections, these polemics were not on what the opposition parties deemed misgovernment but rather on the allegations against Prime Minister Erdoğan and the members of his family.

The scandals revealed by the Gülenists as the former ally of the AKP Government during the electoral period might have been considered as a rare opportunity by the opposition parties to undermine the government. However, the overwhelming focus on the scandals during the campaigns of the opposition parties happened to overshadow any original electoral strategy and/or tactic that they would

have applied. The main opposition CHP under the leadership of Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, for instance, made strategic nominations from outside the party cadres for certain mayoral races as a strategy against AKP's polarization in order to widen its voter base. Although this strategy was a result of the propensity of the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu to pursue depolarization, the overconcentration on the scandals during its campaign was not quite contributive to CHP's bid for depolarization.

During his entire campaign, Prime Minister Erdoğan was quite defensive, particularly when compared with his previous campaign trails. He was apparently caught in crossfire by, on the one hand, Gülenists, his former allies, and the opposition on the other. While defending himself, Erdoğan did not plea guilty but claimed that all the allegations were false, and the tapes were made-up. He also went on the offensive and claimed that the Gülenists set up a "parallel state" and that the opposition parties that built their campaigns on these false accusations were controlled by the Gülenist parallel state.

3.3.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

The mayoral elections, as the highlight of local elections in Turkey, are carried out based on the first-past-the-post principle, where in a multi-party system inter-party cooperation might very well swing the balance to the detriment of the incumbent AKP. If, for instance, the CHP and the MHP had managed to nominate common candidates that would get the support of both parties' bases, they could have won the mayoral races in metropolitan municipalities like Ankara, Antalya and Balıkesir. However, the opposition parties did not engage in any alliance in the 2014 Local Elections.

There was also no opposition cooperation whatsoever, as far as the campaigns are concerned. The opposition parties did not criticize each other very much and concentrated most of their energy solely against the incumbent AKP. Nevertheless, they did not even consider joining forces in any sense during the campaign trail.

As to why opposition cooperation was not yet considered as a viable option for the opposition parties, one might mention several reasons: First of all, institutionally inter-party cooperation was *de jure* not possible as per the election law. The only option for a practical alliance was that one of the allying parties withdrew from the elections in a particular constituency and supported the candidate of its ally. This was principally complicating for inter-party cooperation. In the meantime, the first-past-the-post principle made each party believe that it had a realistic shot at winning in some of the constituencies with the right candidate, as has been the case many times in the history of local elections in Turkey.

Second, the divisions among the opposition parties were continuing to grow ahead of the 2014 Local Elections. Like during the 2011 General Elections, Kurdish issue was still at the center of these divisions. As the Peace Process with the PKK was still going on, any attempt by the pro-Kurdish BDP to engage in a political alliance that would be formed to topple the incumbent AKP would risk the Peace Process. The BDP, however, reportedly proposed cooperation to the CHP and the CHP rejected it. The CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> Yes, we got such a proposal and did not deem it suitable. We thought that it would damage us. Today the BDP cooperates with the AKP, and they do politics only by criticizing us. They do not endeavor to criticize corruption, the AKP or other parties ("HDP'nin işbirliği," 2014).

The nationalist MHP, on the other hand, was fiercely against the Peace Process and that was a central element in the party's opposition against the AKP.

Therefore, the pro-Kurdish BDP and nationalist MHP would never be in the same political arrangement, let alone any political alliance. Under these conditions, the main opposition CHP, which was still trying to transform itself to reconcile with the conservatives and the Kurds, could hardly be a unifying force, as its openings, say, towards the Kurds were criticized by the MHP and found inadequate by the BDP.

Consequently, despite the Gezi Park Protests and the huge corruption scandals that targeted and considerably weakened the AKP Government, the circumstances were still not in favor of the opposition parties making a breakthrough and using their majority against the incumbent AKP.

3.3.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

As underlined above, the coincidence of the corruption scandal with the start of the campaign trail for the 2014 Local Elections seems to have led the opposition parties to make the strategic choice of focusing solely on the scandal in their election campaigns. The main opposition CHP, the nationalist MHP and even the pro-Kurdish BDP, which was quite cautious in its moves against the AKP Government in order not to endanger the Peace Process, put a huge pressure against the government and Prime Minister Erdoğan.

As of the first day of the corruption operation, Prime Minister Erdoğan called the operation as a conspiracy plotted by the "parallel state" set up by the Gülenists and tried to persuade the opposition that this conspiracy was not any different from videotape plots against former CHP leader Deniz Baykal and prominent figures of the MHP in 2010 and 2011:

> This is not a corruption investigation. This is an overt plot against the nation. God willing this game will be given away through the ballot box. There will be no state within the state. No assassinations will be made through tongs in the new Turkey. This conspiracy is not only against the AKP but the whole

> nation. Please see that this conspiracy is not in favor but to the detriment of Turkey. Similar conspiracies were made against Baykal, Demirel and Erbakan. If we do not respond the harshest way possible, such conspiracies will continue to be plotted. This is the independence struggle for the new Turkey ("Yine komplo," 2013).

However, the opposition chose to focus on the content of the allegations rather than how and why these allegations were made. The leader of the main opposition CHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, constantly drew attention to the severity of the allegations and argued that the government used the claims of "parallel state" to overveil its crimes: "To our understanding, this is substantially a political corruption. If we reduce the issue to the conflict between the Gülen Community and the AKP, we will miss its essence" ("Siyasi ayağı güçlü," 2013). Kılıçdaroğlu also dismissed Erdoğan's claims regarding a Gülenist "gang" within the state, arguing that it was the government itself that started a gang:

> If he wants to see a gang, well he should look at his own cabinet ("Kılıçdaroğlu: 'çete," 2013).
>
> The real parallel state is the corruption organization that the government set up ("Gül harekete," 2013).
>
> They had captured the judiciary, the bureaucracy. Didn't you say that you gave them everything they wanted? I do not care about the Gülen Community or anyone. My interlocutor is who rules the country ("Sevgi seli," 2013).
>
> If you want to see a gang, you can summon your cabinet and there you see a gang. There is a parallel state working on corruption ("İradesi yolsuzlukta," 2014).
>
> We are talking about a lot of money in the shoe boxes, and he is responding with his claims of a parallel state. Who had said: 'We gave them everything they wanted'? Himself. As if he were not the Prime Minister of this country. If they set up a parallel state, it is you who allowed it and had it set up ("Sen bana kutudan," 2014).

Prime Minister Erdoğan reacted by claiming that the opposition parties and particularly the CHP was controlled by the Gülenist parallel state:

> This gang is leading the CHP by the nose. This gang (referring to the Gülenists) and the CHP are now collaborating in the big metropolitans to undermine the AKP. The CHP could not even nominate people from its own party ("AKP'ye tuzluklar," 2014).
>
> The CHP and the MHP were twins and now they have a third partner: Pennsylvania (Meaning Fethullah Gülen who has been residing in the US) and so they became a triplet. (Meaning the opposition parties) We are not anymore dealing with those led by the nose. We are dealing with the real boss here ("İşimiz asıl patronla," 2014).

Although the main opposition CHP chose the strategy of focusing on the corruption scandal and avoiding any discourse that would turn the scandal into a fight between the AKP and the CHP ("CHP'de üç ayaklı," 2013), Prime Minister Erdoğan managed to go on the offensive against the opposition, using the secular-conservative fault line between the Gülenists and opposition parties and groups that had always been overtly against the Gülenists:

> The parallel gang became the boss of the CHP, the MHP and the proponents of the Gezi. They do politics with the bait given by this gang ("Hepsinin patronu," 2014).
>
> The parallel gang that claims itself to follow Said Nursi is now arm-in-arm with the CHP that banned Nursi's books and imprisoned him during the 1940s. Said Nursi turned in his grave ("Kemikleri sızlıyor," 2014).
>
> You made your party, which you are proudly say was founded by Atatürk, the tail of Pennsylvania (referring to Fethullah Gülen) ("Terör örgütü gibi," 2014).
>
> As recently as yesterday you were saying "We are the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal". Now you became the soldiers of Pennsylvania (referring to Fethullah Gülen) ("Pilotlar da ekmek," 2014).

During his campaign Erdoğan also instrumentalized the Gezi Park Protests and brought up some unsubstantiated claims regarding the protestors, aiming at consolidating his base against the opposition parties by provoking the secular-conservative fault line. To that purpose, he propounded the claims that the protestors

had drunk alcohol in a mosque despite the denials of the *muezzin* of the mosque ("Erdoğan camiye içkiyle," 2013) and that a headscarfed woman was attacked in Kabataş without any evidence ("Kabataş'ta başörtülü," 2014). The Prime Minister even made the crowd in one of his rallies boo Berkin Elvan, a 15-year old child who was hit on the head by a teargas canister fired by a police officer in Istanbul, stayed in a coma for eight months and died in March 2014, namely during the campaign trail for the local elections:

> Several days ago, there was funeral. A child unfortunately from within the terrorist organizations, face-veiled and with a sling in his hand was exposed to teargas. How come could the police distinguish between the protestors and know how old they are? But Kılıçdaroğlu is lying again. Was he there for buying bread? Be honest! ("Berkin'i terörist ilan," 2014).

As a reaction to Erdoğan's offensive and polarizing discourse, the opposition parties harshened their criticism again the government, using an increasingly tough rhetoric against Erdoğan, whom they thought all the corruption scandal is embodied in. The leader of the main opposition Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, for instance, started to call Prime Minister Erdoğan "the prime stealer" and advised him to flee abroad unless he would resign:

> We have a prime stealer in this country not a prime minister. We are fed up with the poor mouth and the claims of coup. December 17, this is the day when it was revealed that the government robbed the state ("Başçalan Erdoğan," 2014).

> Your children became rich. Your whole family became rich. And are you still talking about a coup? If there was a coup, well it was plotted against the nation (…) The head of the bribe is the prime minister (…) Not only the four ministers but also the "prime stealer" who considers himself to be prime minister must also account before the public ("Başçalan da hesap," 2014).

> You are still talking about the coup. Who put eight safe boxes to the rooms of your ministers' children? The coup plotters? Who gifted your minister a watch worth 700 thousand TL? The coup plotters? (…) You will account for it not in the ballot box but before the court. You are the head of the gang ("Rüşvet merkezi," 2014).

> He changed the prosecutor; he changed the police officers (…) We know what you have done. You are the head of the gang. Your minister admits this. He said that he had done what you had told him to do (…) If you put your head into your pocket and see another hand, it is the hand of Recep (referring Prime Minister Erdoğan) ("Ülke kirlilikten," 2014).
>
> (Referring to the leaked tape of alleged phone conversation between Prime Minister Erdoğan and his son Bilal Erdoğan) These tapes are as real as Ağrı Mountain. You cannot carry out his premiership any longer. Either resign or flee abroad! ("Ya kaç ya istifa," 2014).
>
> A young man was jailed for 17 months because he stole 17 Lira, these stole a billion dollar and were released. I will call him (referring to Erdoğan) always the stealer until he gives up his seat. I will bring him to account. I will bring him back from where he fled and bring him to account. For the first time in the republican history, the government robbed the state ("İlk kez hükümet," 2014).
>
> For him (referring to the Prime Minister Erdoğan) a way out may be to flee to a third-world country that would not extradite him to us, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Malaysia ("Kurtuluşu kaçmak," 2014).
>
> Would you entrust your house or your shop to a robber? No, you would not. Then do not entrust the country to a robber either ("Hırsızlık bilinmesin," 2014).
>
> We have everything in this country, all kind of resources. The only thing that we miss is a clean government. Because they steal the money. You steal, your children steal, and your relatives steal. Tell us how much money you need, we shall give you that amount and get off this nation's back (…) Under a CHP government, he will already have fled abroad. I have found a suitable country for him. Sudan, the country of Omar Al-Bashir. As you know Al-Bashir killed thousands of children and youth; he robbed his country. They shall sit and chat together. They shall tell each other about their murders and how much they stole. No matter where he flees, I will bring him back to justice ("Erdoğan Sudan'a," 2014).

The leader of the nationalist MHP; Devlet Bahçeli, was not any softer than Kılıçdaroğlu in his criticism against Prime Minster Erdoğan. He called Erdoğan a traitor and compared him to invaders:

> The Prime Minister should not forget that in history no dictator could escape the justice and the ill fate (…) While his ministers were enjoying their lives thanks to bribe and corruption, the Prime Minister made benefits from public lands, made his children and entire family super rich ("Başbakan ayakkabı," 2014).

> Prime Minister Erdoğan damaged this country more than the invading armies did. The AKP Government is like a provoker that infiltrated to our national entity to take the revenge of our national independence (…) This government sunk into crime and betrayal so much that even the enemies would be surprised ("İşgal ordusundan," 2014).

Finally, the controlled tension between the AKP Government and the pro-Kurdish BDP continued ahead of the 2014 Local Elections. Particularly, in the eastern and southeastern part of Turkey the electoral competition between the AKP and the BDP prevented that tension from disappearing despite the ongoing Peace Process, whereby the BDP was playing a significant role. So, the BDP criticized the government for what was allegedly the biggest corruption scandal in the history of the republic. However, it also avoided to take any action that would damage the ongoing Peace Process:

> No matter where it goes, it should be done what is necessary. The dismissal of the high police officers on the second day of the operation is a clear intervention. What was revealed is just the tip of the iceberg (…) Their partnership (referring to the AKP and Gülenists) broke up. They have so far been sharing the rent. So, this conflict has been for the best ("Ortaklık bozuldu," 2013).

> All of them are liars. The one in Pennsylvania (referring to Fethullah Gülen) is a bigger liar than him (referring to Prime Minister Erdoğan) and he is a bigger liar than the one in Pennsylvania. May God rehabilitate them both ("Demirtaş: 'Hepsi," 2014).

Consequently, as much as the opposition parties were eager to offer a new axis of politics by focusing on corruption scandal in their campaigns, this strategy not only failed to let them attain this goal but also overshadowed the de-polarizing strategy that particularly the CHP tried to pursue by means of strategic mayoral nominations. The opposition probably regarded the scandals as a window of opportunity to demonstrate the veracity of the claims that they had hitherto made regarding the AKP Government and to blow it out (A. H. Koç, personal

communication, January 18, 2023). In particular, the CHP probably did not believe that focusing on the scandals would cause an inconsistency with its depolarization strategy (Ibid.). But it somewhat did because Prime Minister Erdoğan built his entire strategy on the claim that a huge conspiracy was plotted against his legal and elected government by the Gülenist illegal organization, and the severity of the revelations lent weight to Erdoğan's claim. As a result, the Prime Minister managed to make his supporters discuss the severity of the conspiracy rather than that of allegations. The opposition, on the other hand, took the revelations as given, preferred not to dwell on the issue of Gülenist plot and focused on attacking the government.

The identity-based polarization strategy of Prime Minister Erdoğan also played an important role. He provoked the secular-conservative fault line over the Gezi Park Protests and presented the opposition's use of the scandals in their campaigns as a proof for their collaboration with the Gülenist illegal organization. This was key in consolidating the support of his own political base because with this strategy he managed to go on the offensive, on the one hand, against the opposition by accusing them of cooperating with Gülenists who were for them an old enemy, and, on the other hand, against the Gülenists by accusing them of joining forces with the CHP that was known with its alleged victimization of the religious sections of the society in the early republican era ("Kemikleri sızlıyor," 2014). Arguing throughout the campaign that there was a cooperation between Gülenists and the CHP also strengthened Erdoğan's narrative of plot and helped him consolidate his base along a newly emerging line: external powers vs. national will. This new nationalist divide constructed by the AKP Government went well beyond the usual Turk – Kurd divide and the opposition apparently failed to address this.

For all these reasons, although the opposition somewhat managed to change the axis of politics by focusing on the serious corruption allegations, the AKP Government adapted to this new axis in ways that helped it reinforce its strategy of polarization.

3.3.3 Concluding remarks

In many ways, local elections are quite different from the general elections in Turkey. Local dynamics and the profile of candidates play an important role and first-past-the-post system may bring about game changing alliances both at the elite and electorate levels.

Winning metropolitan municipalities, such as Istanbul, Ankara and İzmir, is a primary objective for the contender political parties in local elections. Mayorships of Istanbul and Ankara were particularly important for the opposition, as both cities had been ruled by the AKP and its predecessors since 1994. For these reasons, the main opposition CHP made strategic nominations for the mayoral elections in both these cities. For Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the CHP nominated Mustafa Sarıgül, former mayor of Istanbul's central district of Şişli, who had been elected to this post three times and was known to be popular also among traditional AKP voters. For Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, the CHP took a step further and nominated Mansur Yavaş, the candidate of the nationalist MHP for the very same post in the previous local elections in 2009, who was very popular among the conservative nationalist voters in Ankara and doubled the number of votes cast for the MHP compared with the general elections in 2007. The leader of the main opposition CHP Kılıçdaroğlu thought that nominating someone like Yavaş would break the ice between the conservative nationalist voters and the CHP (A. H. Koç, personal

communication, January 18, 2023; O. K. Salıcı, personal communication, January 18, 2023).

The strategy of depolarization through strategic nomination was a continuation of the CHP's propensity to appeal to new voters. Having built on its previous experiences, the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu aimed at opening the CHP to different groups of the society, through which the party could finally demonstrate how it would rule and thereby undermine the polarization strategy of the AKP.

Nevertheless, the strategy of the CHP based on nomination was no accompanied by any kind of electoral cooperation by the opposition against the AKP. According to the election results, the vote shares of all opposition parties combined were higher than those of the AKP in many metropolitan municipalities, such as Istanbul, Ankara, Balıkesir and Antalya. Politically, too, opposition unity under single candidates could create an unprecedented synergy against the government. After all, amid the corruption scandal, losing mayoral seats in cities like Istanbul and Ankara could be the beginning of the end for the AKP. However, the opposition parties did not even consider this as an option. As elaborated above, the first-past-the-post system might be as discouraging for cooperation as it is sometimes encouraging, since it might lead each party to think that with the "right" candidate it could win the elections even with a slight plurality of the vote. Yet, beyond such legal, systemic, and institutional reasons, what made opposition cooperation much more complicated was the intra-opposition fault lines between the parties, which, as elaborated above. Differently put, the opposition parties did not yet deem it necessary to put their differences aside and join forces to form a pragmatic alliance against the AKP on the grounds that the circumstances were not yet suitable for such a move (O. K. Salıcı, personal communication, January 18, 2023), and that the regime was not

yet that autocratic (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023). From this it follows that the process of autocratization is itself a factor that ceteris paribus encourages the opposition actors to converge.

Besides, going well beyond the regular dynamics of any local elections in Turkey, the 2014 Local Elections were conducted under a very polarized political atmosphere that reached its peak after the Gezi Park Protests and under the shadow of the conflict between the AKP and the Gülenists. As underlined above, the corruption scandal was a result of a conflict within the ruling coalition and the opposition was outside this conflict. The preference of the opposition to entirely rely on the corruption scandal to attack the AKP Government in their campaign made them look like a passive actor that was trying to take advantage of a conflict between two different actors, thereby preventing them from presenting themselves as an alternative to the incumbent AKP. Meanwhile, by using Alevi-Sunni, secular-conservative and national-external fault lines over mainly the Gezi Park Protests, Prime Minister Erdoğan managed to make sure that the intra-elite conflict between his party and the Gülenists did not lead to a division at the electorate level. Erdoğan's strategy of identity-based polarization against the CHP made it too complicated for the CHP to become a viable alternative in the eyes of would-be frustrated AKP voters and the strategic choice of the CHP to rely solely on the corruption scandal in its campaign did not help either.

The argument of the CHP and its leader Kılıçdaroğlu was that even if the corruption scandal was a result of the secret activities of a parallel state, it would be again the AKP Government that was to be blamed because without their help such a state within a state could have never been formed. Although this was technically a logical argument, the CHP generally looked like it tried to take advantage of the

Gülenist attack against the AKP, which strengthened the argument of Prime Minister Erdoğan that the CHP was collaborating with the Gülenist parallel state in the eyes of the AKP's electorate. At the end, despite the CHP's attempt to change the axis of politics through its corruption-focused campaign, the incumbent AKP reacted swiftly by constructing a new polarizing narrative and managed to minimize the damage. As a matter of fact, the opposition failed to win the municipalities of Istanbul and Ankara, and lost Antalya to the AKP.

3.4 The 2014 Presidential Elections

3.4.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

In the 2014 Local Elections, the AKP got 43 percent of the votes, which was seven percent lower than in the 2011 General Elections. This can be taken to be quite a loss. However, considering the particular dynamics that come into play in the local elections, the campaign trail which was totally overshadowed by scandalous revelations against the AKP and the fact that despite all the AKP managed not to lose the mayoral seats in Istanbul and Ankara, Prime Minister Erdoğan still came out as victorious from the elections. Having triumphed in the elections, Prime Minister Erdoğan and his AKP also won the first overt battle in its conflict with the Gülenists. Despite the incessant corruption scandals that targeted him and his party, his base apparently did not abandon Prime Minister Erdoğan and by implication took his claims regarding the Gülenist parallel state into consideration.

It was under these conditions that the first presidential elections by popular vote would take place in August 2014. The candidate of the ruling AKP was an issue of public concern for quite a long time. According to the constitutional amendment that was ratified by referendum in October 2007, the president could serve for a

second term, which made it possible for President Abdullah Gül to run again. However, there was some kind of a consensus in AKP circles that if Prime Minister Erdoğan decided to run, President Gül would do nothing but get out of the way ("Erdoğan aday olursa," 2014). Although President Gül had already declared that he had not had any plan in politics after his presidential term ("Cumhurbaşkanı Gül siyaset," 2014), in case of Erdoğan's presidential candidacy Gül would have the option to return to politics as the leader of the AKP and as the new prime minister. However, this was not possible as the party congress, where the next AKP leader would be elected, was scheduled on the day before the official end of Gül's presidency. Although some prominent party representatives rejected it ("AKP'de Gül'ün önü," 2014), it was later revealed that the decision on the date of the congress had been made directly through Prime Minister Erdoğan's pressure to make sure that Gül would not be able to attend the congress and run for AKP leadership ("Gül ne yapsaydı," 2018).

In fact, Prime Minister Erdoğan's candidacy did not come as a surprise. What was more of an issue of concern was clearly what strategy the opposition would pursue for the nomination and in the campaign. After the amendment of the constitution in 2007, the president is to be elected by popular vote and not anymore by the parliament. The amendment envisaged a two-round system for the election of president, whereby unless any of the candidates has the absolute majority (50% + 1) of the votes in the first round, two candidates with the most votes proceed to a second round. For the opposition, it was clear that Prime Minister Erdoğan, who was running for president, could be defeated only if the entire opposition came together under a single candidate. So, the question was when this had to happen. There were mainly two options. Either all opposition parties would agree on a single candidate to

defeat Erdoğan in the first round or each opposition party would pick an own candidate and hope that Erdoğan does not get the absolute majority in the first round to face him in the runoff.

Under the circumstances of the day, it was virtually impossible that the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP)[13] would agree on a single candidate. So, the leaders of the CHP and the MHP, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and Devlet Bahçeli, came together and nominated Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, an academic and former secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, as their joint candidate. While there was almost no objection to İhsanoğlu's candidacy from the MHP, some prominent figures from the CHP and the party's base as well as certain civil society actors publicly challenged Kılıçdaroğlu's pick over the questions of İhsanoğlu's adherence to CHP's principles like Kemalism and secularism. As a matter of fact, 21 CHP MPs did not support the nomination of İhsanoğlu by not giving their signatures in favor of his candidacy, while six of them even attempted to collect signatures to nominate Emine Ülker Tarhan, a CHP MP and former judge who was known to be a true adherent of Kemalism and secularism, which then failed as at least 20 signatures were required for the nomination ("CHP'de imza," 2014).

İhsanoğlu's candidacy was also loudly challenged by some societal groups, particularly the Alevis, who, questioning İhsanoğlu's adherence to secularism, referred to him as having "high Islamist credentials" ("Adayımız olamaz," 2014). The chairman of the Alevi Bektaşi Federation Fevzi Gümüş said:

> The developments in the Middle East indicate the attempts to destroy the Alevis. Alevis' right to live is not respected and massacres happen in the public eye. On the one hand, there are the discriminatory and polarizing

[13] The People's Democratic Party (HDP) was founded in 2012 and acted as the fraternal party to the pro-Kurdish BPD. After the 2014 Local Elections, the two parties initiated a joint reorganization. In April 2014, the entire parliamentary group of the BDP joined the HDP.

> policies pursued by Prime Minister Erdoğan. In our country, the society becomes increasingly religious, polarized by means of dominant reactionary policies. When we look at the candidate, on whose name there is a so-called agreement, we do not see a pro-secular stance. This political discourse and action clearly worry the Alevis. It is worrisome that someone who was the secretary general of the Islamic Organization and has high Islamist credentials was proposed. İhsanoğlu will pave the way for further conservatization and he cannot be our candidate. As the Alevi community we are worried (Ibid.).

The leader of the CHP Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu defended his decision by saying: "We are elected the president of the republic not a chairman for the party. We need consensus" ("Halk tanıdıkça," 2014). On another occasion he also said: "I would love to nominate someone like Büyükerşen (referring to Yılmaz Büyükerşen, CHP's popular mayor of the central Anatolian city of Eskişehir); however, he would be the candidate of the CHP. We wanted the candidate to be Turkey's candidate" ("Aleviler sevemedi," 2014). However, there were also instances during the campaign trail, when Kılıçdaroğlu used rather a different language to say that the anti-Erdoğan voters did not have any chance but go out to vote and support İhsanoğlu ("Şakası yok," 2014).

When it comes to the pro-Kurdish HDP, the party nominated party's co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş as its presidential candidate. Under the circumstances of the Peace Process and the *de facto* ceasefire, Demirtaş could conduct an inclusionary and creative campaign and address not only Kurds and but different social groups in Turkish society. On the other hand, the choices of the HDP voters or, in broader sense, the Kurdish voters were quite important for any candidate in a possible second tour. As a matter of fact, both Erdoğan and İhsanoğlu publicly declared their desire to get the support of the Kurds. However, Demirtaş also made it clear that HDP's strategy was not based on negotiations for a possible runoff but on winning the elections ("Demirtaş pazarlık," 2014).

3.4.2 Description of the opposition strategy

As elaborated above, there were two candidates from the ranks of the opposition for the 2014 Presidential Elections: Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, the joint candidate of the CHP and the MHP and Selahattin Demirtaş, the candidate of the pro-Kurdish HDP.

In 2014, Turkey had still a parliamentary system of government, in which despite its extensive constitutional powers the presidency was rather a symbolic position. Whereas Prime Minister, who had always been in favor of a transition into an executive presidential system, proclaimed at the very beginning that he would not be like other presidents, his competitor İhsanoğlu was clearly for the maintenance of the parliamentary regime and campaigned in a way that would be suited to a symbolic presidency. Therefore, for instance, İhsanoğlu declared that he would not base his campaign on rallies, alleging the Ramadan when people are fasting during the day as an excuse ("İhsanoğlu Mübarek," 2014). Instead of rallies, İhsanoğlu's campaign preferred to organize public and closed meetings with different social groups in the cities that he visited. During his campaign, İhsanoğlu mainly touched upon general issues, such as foreign policy, democracy, human rights, and rule of law. In an attempt to conduct an inclusionary campaign, İhsanoğlu particularly focused on addressing the social groups that were initially skeptical about him, such as pro-secular groups, Kemalists, participants of the Gezi Park Protests and Kurds.

Meanwhile, the CHP and the MHP tried to extend the consensus behind İhsanoğlu's candidacy, asking other political parties for their support. During the campaign trail, the number of large and small political parties that were unified behind İhsanoğlu's candidacy increased to 14.

In his campaign trail, Prime Minister Erdoğan did not only target İhsanoğlu, as his competitor but also the opposition parties and their leaders. İhsanoğlu's

campaign preferred to avoid direct polemics with Prime Minister Erdoğan and the task of responding Erdoğan was carried out by leaders of the opposition parties that endorse him, particularly by CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu, who during the campaign used a quite fierce language against Erdoğan as he had done in two previous elections.

The candidate of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş pursued the strategy of extending its audience, making use of the expanded political realm through the *de facto* ceasefire between the Turkish Armed Forces and the PKK during the Peace Process. Utilizing the national platform provided by the presidential election campaign, Demirtaş was able to address not only the matters regarding the Kurdish issue but also issues that concern various groups such as Gezi Park protesters, Alevis, workers, women, and youth, thereby appealing to new sections of Turkish and Kurdish voters beyond its traditional base. He, for instance, proposed that the Directorate of Religious Affairs *(Diyanet)* should be abolished, that compulsory religious courses should be removed and that Alevis' Cemevis should be officially recognized as places of worship. He also publicly backed the Gezi Park Protests, which he had been criticized not to adequately support, making the crowds in his meetings applaud Berkin Elvan, who had been hit by a teargas canister during the Gezi Park Protests and died months later after falling into a coma, and his family ("Demirtaş seçilirsem," 2014).

Although Demirtaş made it clear several times that the real objective of the HDP in the 2014 Presidential Elections was to be a real contender, it was almost certain that Demirtaş would finish the elections in third place. Therefore, one of the biggest questions ahead of the first tour of the elections was whom the Kurds and particularly the Demirtaş voters would support should the first tour be inconclusive. Nevertheless, Demirtaş made the best of his campaign and managed to extend his

audience particularly by drawing attention of the opposition voters, who were somewhat dissatisfied by İhsanoğlu's candidacy.

3.4.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

For the first time since the AKP came to power in 2002, opposition parties from across the political spectrum, the main opposition CHP and the nationalist MHP, made an electoral cooperation in the 2014 Presidential Elections. In this change of strategy mainly two factors played a role: First, the opposition parties and particularly the CHP realized that the most credible strategy for the opposition to pursue against AKP's polarizing majoritarianism was a broad-based consensus. Kılıçdaroğlu's emphases on the need for a "historic consensus" on the cost of causing some raised eyebrows from CHP's conventional base indicate this ("Halk tanıdıkça," 2014). Second, the change in the electoral system for the presidential elections and the requirement of 50% + 1 vote for the election of the president as an incentive provided by the electoral institution would eventually enforce the opposition parties or their electorate to support a single candidate against Prime Minister Erdoğan. It was a strategic choice by the chairmen of the CHP and the MHP to nominate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu as their joint candidate.

The consensus reached by the CHP and MHP was later extended to include 12 small political parties but not the pro-Kurdish HDP. According to the statements of its candidate Demirtaş, this was not because of the reluctance of the HDP whatsoever:

> There was a very powerful willingness for change in every segment of the society. The AKP realized and misused it. Now they turned it to a great oppressive power. As the opposition, we have not been able to come up with something that would satisfy the desire of the society. A mere hostility towards the AKP would not do this. So, as HDP was founded to satisfy this need and as the presidential elections were approaching, we consulted the

> representatives of many social groups, the Alevi organizations, woman organizations, the Islamic groups, NGOs. With met some of them more than once and the common desire was to unite behind a joint candidate. Some of them expected the CHP to lead this but they preferred to reach an agreement with the MHP ("Demirtaş CHP Rıza," 2014).

With this statement Demirtaş also made it public that they had been ready to nominate a joint candidate with the CHP but CHP's agreement with "a nationalist, racist party" was a breaking point for them:

> After CHP's agreement with the MHP we understood that the desire for change could not be satisfied with the current position of the CHP. When we met, Kılıçdaroğlu clearly asked me whether we were in agreement with the AKP, and I told him that this was by no means the case. If we had seen a tendency to go on with us and they had proposed Türmen (referring to Rıza Türmen, a former judge of the European Court of Human Rights and a CHP MP), we would have supported as the HDP. We were quite close to the idea of doing something together with the CHP. However, we later found out that during our meeting the decision on Mr. İhsanoğlu's candidacy had already been made. (…) After that point where they decided to go on with a nationalist, racist party, yes, we parted our ways with the CHP (Ibid.).

So, according to the statements of Demirtaş, it was CHP's preference to cooperate with the MHP that prevented an all-opposition cooperation in the 2014 Presidential Elections. However, one could well argue that even if this had not been the case, the MHP would have never agreed to in any cooperation that included the HDP. On the other hand, as Kılıçdaroğlu had stated during the campaign trail ahead of the local elections earlier in 2014 ("HDP'nin işbirliği," 2014) and as Demirtaş also confirmed in his statement regarding his meeting with Kılıçdaroğlu, the executives of the CHP were in the opinion that the HDP was in cooperation with the AKP mainly due to the ongoing Peace Process between the government and the PKK. This was one of the reasons why the CHP preferred the MHP and not the HDP to cooperate for the elections. Kılıçdaroğlu's game plan was to appeal to the nationalist-conservative voters in the AKP's base and simultaneously generate the largest possible consensus

among the opposition, thereby pushing the elections to the second tour and getting the support of the HDP voters in the runoff (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023). Even if Kılıçdaroğlu had chosen the HDP over the MHP for a joint candidate, the opposition would not have been united either, in which case getting the support of the MHP voters in a possible runoff would be much more difficult as nationalist voters could easily turn to Erdoğan.

The consensus that was generated behind İhsanoğlu's candidacy by 14 opposition parties was significant. His campaign was contributed by both the CHP and partially the MHP. However, due to the lack of internal consensus within the CHP and limited contribution by the MHP, it was rather a weak campaign without a synergy that could have been created by the unprecedented, historic consensus that the CHP and the MHP were up to.

3.4.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

In 2014, the main opposition CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu already deciphered the strategy of polarizing majoritarianism of the ruling AKP and thus tried to pursue a de-polarizing strategy against it. To that end, Kılıçdaroğlu did two things: First, as underlined above, he chose the nationalist MHP over the pro-Kurdish HDP for the election cooperation in order to deprive Prime Minister Erdoğan of the opportunity to use the Turk-Kurd and Alevi-Sunni cleavages to polarize the society, divide the opposition and create a majority for his party. Second, he picked someone like Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, who had served as the first Turkish secretary-general of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation at AKP Government's proposal, as the joint candidate. Based on the assumption that with his profile and background İhsanoğlu could appeal to the conservative voters, the CHP aimed to avoid a polarizing

discussion of the role of religion (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020, p.6) and thus deprive Prime Minister Erdoğan of the chance to use secular-conservative cleavage, which he had been using masterfully for years.

By nominating İhsanoğlu, the CHP hoped to turn discontented AKP voters away from Prime Minister Erdoğan. However, without the support of the HDP voters it would be almost impossible for İhsanoğlu to win. Kılıçdaroğlu's decision to choose the MHP over the HDP was based on the assumption that getting the support of the HDP voters in the runoff through a consensus at the electorate level would be much more feasible than an official inter-party cooperation in order to keep the MHP on board.

Nevertheless, this strategy was not without its problems for at least three reasons. First, the objection of CHP's traditional base to İhsanoğlu's candidacy was apparently more than Kılıçdaroğlu had imagined. The reactions of Alevis, the attempts of some prominent CHP MPs to nominate someone else and the rumors that CHP voters would not go out to vote because of their summer holidays indicate the hard time that the traditional CHP voters had accepting their party's decision to pick someone like İhsanoğlu as its presidential candidate. In a meeting with Kılıçdaroğlu, for instance, the representatives of Alevi organizations said:

> Isn't there anyone among Alevis or leftists who are capable? We have hard time accepting this candidate. He does not respond to the expectations of our people. Why are both presidential contenders Islamists? You ask the artists, NGO representatives what kind of a president they would like to have and then you come up with a conservative candidate. This is unacceptable ("Aleviler sevemedi," 2014).

Kılıçdaroğlu responded to this reproach as follows:

> I would also love to nominate someone like Büyükerşen (referring to Yılmaz Büyükerşen, CHP's popular mayor of the central Anatolian city of Eskişehir); however, he would be the candidate of the CHP. We wanted the candidate to be Turkey's candidate" (Ibid.).

In his endorsement, Kılıçdaroğlu stated that İhsanoğlu's candidacy would generate a historic consensus and that people would support him after getting to know him. Kılıçdaroğlu also praised İhsanoğlu as a figure who can "restore and maintain peace" not only at home but also in the Middle East:

> After getting to know him, the people will like him. After all, we are not electing a party leader, we are electing a president that would represent all 76 million citizens. The consensus will go beyond the CHP and the MHP. We will ask all other parties to support Mr. İhsanoğlu. I believe that we will get their support. He will go down in history as the person who builds the greatest consensus ever among all parties except for the AKP ("Halk tanıdıkça," 2014).

> I want that the person who will be president be neutral and equidistant towards all political parties. The presidential candidate must be clean, must not have stains in his/her background. The candidate must not be sunk into corruption. İhsanoğlu is a clean and proper man. Let us elect him (…) If Turkey is ever to free itself from the swamp of the Middle East, we should elect Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu. That is why I work, and you should also work in order to leave a better Turkey to our children ("Barışı ekelim," 2014).

Nevertheless, there were instances when Kılıçdaroğlu even failed to keep his cool while reacting to the objections of his party's base. To the suggestion that Alevis might not support İhsanoğlu in the first round, Kılıçdaroğlu reacted: "You either support from the beginning on or not at all" ("Aleviler sevemedi," 2014). In another instance, Kılıçdaroğlu called out to the vacationists with rather strong words:

> I would like to call out to the vacationists. Sitting at the table and saying "I won't go out to vote" is disbelief in democracy. There may be days in the future, when they prevent you from making vacation (…) I have really hard time understanding the vacationists. If you want to make your vacation freely, if you do not want anyone to intervene your life, you will go out to vote. It is not a joke! You are going to vote for İhsanoğlu, whether you like it or not! You are going to go out to vote and vote out the dictator ("Şakası yok," 2014).

Particularly, the part where he said "… whether you like it or not!" was harshly criticized, although Kılıçdaroğlu tried make it up the next day by saying: "… I will also go out to vote, whether I like it or not" ("Fezlekeler nerede," 2014).

In order to establish a reputation in the eyes of the CHP's traditional base and other social sections that approached him rather skeptically, İhsanoğlu made a big effort trying to appeal to these groups. He started his campaign from Anıtkabir, the mausoleum of Atatürk, gave his first message from there and declared that he would be "a follower and practitioner of the republican values", praising the founder of the republic ("İlk mesaj Anıtkabir'den," 2014).

İhsanoğlu also put a special emphasis on Gezi Park Protests in his campaign. During his campaign trail in Istanbul, he visited the park (İhsanoğlu'ndan Gezi," 2014) and commemorated Ali İsmail Korkmaz who had been killed at the age of 19 after being beaten by police during the Gezi Park Protests in Eskişehir:

> During the February 28 process, there was a tyranny that victimized our young headscarfed girls. I did not let them insult my students like this, stood by my students and my department at the university was shut up. There was water under the bridge and new babies were born. They got to the streets for their country. I stand by them today, as I did in the past. I will not let anyone insult my students and youth by calling them looters (referring to Erdoğan's words about the Gezi Park protesters). All our children are very precious. Ali İsmail Korkmaz, whom we lost last year today, was also one of them. I hope that these sufferings will not happen again ("Çapulcu dedirtmem," 2014).

In an atmosphere, where the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was carrying out its most bloody attacks and there were some serious question marks regarding the AKP Government's relations with the terror group, İhsanoğlu called the group a murderous gang that made a big damage to Islam: "These are gangs, culprits, and murderers. One must cut their financial resources. Only then these radical gangs can be rooted away" ("Bunlar katil," 2014).

In a conversation with the authors of one of the most popular online public forums, Ekşi Sözlük, İhsanoğlu was asked: "Would you still like me, if I am an atheist?" He answered this question as follows: "There is no oppression in religion.

What would I do if you were my daughter? Of course, I will still like you" ("Ateistim beni de," 2014).

Making all these efforts, İhsanoğlu's goal was to establish a reputation in the eyes of the pro-secular sections of Turkish society and prove them that he was not an Islamist like other AKP politicians. As a result, a considerable amount of limited time and energy of the opposition campaign, which was built on the purpose of de-polarizing the AKP voters, was consumed to conciliate the opposition voters.

Second, as underlined above, the joint presidential candidate of the CHP and the MHP Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu avoided direct polemics with his competitor Prime Minister Erdoğan. It was instead the party leaders and particularly CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu who targeted Erdoğan and responded to his statements. As he had also done in previous election campaigns, Kılıçdaroğlu used rather a harsh language against Erdoğan. "Evren without an epaulette", "Sunk into corruption up to his ears", "Hostage of ISIS", "A leader who is better than anyone at lying". These are some of the expressions that Kılıçdaroğlu used for Erdoğan:

> You have to face the political aspect of September 12. If not, you are Kenan Evren without an epaulette (…) You cannot even call the ISIS a terrorist organization. You have sent them trucks of weapons ("Apoletsiz Evren," 2014).
>
> In Iraq and Syria Muslims are killing one another and I am sorry to say that their weapons were sent by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan is partially responsible of the bloodshed in the Middle East, and he has blood in his hand ("Ellerinde kan," 2014).
>
> We should get someone to the presidency who is not sunk into corruption up to his ears. We know that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his family are sunk into corruption into their ears. The operations of December 17-25 proved it. Now, he is trying to take revenge from those who revealed it ("Barışı ekelim," 2014).
>
> They took our flag away, but Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not say anything. He could not call ISIS a terrorist organization. They took hostage our citizens and he barely said anything. It is impossible for us to accept this. There is only one person, in fact, whom ISIS took hostage, and this is Recep Tayyip

> Erdoğan. Why did not he evacuate the consulate even if he was warned? (…) He negotiates with ISIS. ISIS has arms and we know for sure that these arms were given by Erdoğan (…) And he still thinks he is a world leader. Look at the world leader! He is the stooge of the Middle East. He is a leader that the entire world is ridiculing. He is a leader that is better than anyone at lying ("Dünya alay," 2014).

The opposition's preference to target and respond to Erdoğan themselves rather than oblige İhsanoğlu to do so may be taken to be in accordance with its strategy of depolarization. The idea was that as the candidacy of İhsanoğlu aimed to de-polarize the conservative voters, it would be better if he did not target Erdoğan in a way that would make an adverse effect. However, the fact that such harsh words were used by Kılıçdaroğlu does not mean that İhsanoğlu's campaign was not influenced by the polarizing effect of this kind of language. After all, İhsanoğlu was by no means a popular figure in the eyes of the electorate and it was mainly the leaders of the opposition parties, the CHP and the MHP, who introduced the public to İhsanoğlu. His candidacy came out of the bipartisan agreement of these leaders and thus it would be baseless to think that their discourses would not have any impact on how İhsanoğlu and his campaign were perceived by the general public.

Third, whether or not İhsanoğlu was the right candidate given his ideological and political background, his candidacy was quite weak in terms of both his campaign and platform. Although this kind of a campaign might have been deemed more suitable for the statesmanship required by the symbolic presidency of a parliamentary democracy, this was the first time for the electorate in Turkey to directly elect their president and in such a big political stage İhsanoğlu was clearly too weak to challenge Erdoğan, who was campaigning like he had always been as a prime minister, giving promises and setting goals, and by no means cared if it was suitable to the office that he was running for.

Consequently, the depolarization strategy that was developed and applied by the opposition for the 2014 Presidential Elections clearly aimed to render the secular-conservative and the Turk-Kurd cleavages, which had always been practical polarizing tools in the hand of the ruling AKP, dysfunctional. However, this depolarization attempt by means of strategic nomination fell short of the expectations to offer an alternative axis of politics to the one generated and preferred by the incumbent AKP.

3.4.3 Concluding remarks

By 2014, the main opposition CHP already deciphered the strategy of the ruling AKP to ensure majority support by means of identity-based, populist, and nationalist polarization. The fact that the opposition needed to somehow depolarize the AKP supporters in order to have chance against the AKP in the elections had been grasped even before the 2014 Local Elections. However, as underlined previously, the ruling AKP's swift and successful reaction to the scandal-focused campaign of the opposition did not let these attempts pay off.

The first presidential elections that would be carried out by popular vote opened a window of opportunity for the opposition to come up with new strategies as to how could create a majority against the incumbent AKP. The need to change the axis of politics to prevent the AKP from creating a majority by using social fault lines was already obvious. The requirement to get the support of the absolute majority in the presidential elections, on the other hand, served as an institutional enabling factor for the opposition parties to engage in electoral cooperation. Consequently, as early as 2014 some, if not all, actors of the opposition already learned that in order to have a shot at winning against the ruling AKP, there was a

need for the pursuit of an opposition strategy that would simultaneously include cooperation and depolarization.

In order that it works in the most effective way possible against the AKP, the opposition cooperation would have to somehow include all opposition parties. However, this was clearly impossible given intra-opposition fault line between the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP. So, the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu grasped the need for cooperation but was also aware that it had to choose either of the remaining two opposition parties over the other one. Under the circumstances of the day, the leader of the party Kılıçdaroğlu came to the conclusion that cooperation with the MHP with a joint presidential candidate would be more functional and purposive to counteract the instrumentalization of social fault lines by the AKP and to pursue an effective depolarization strategy (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023) and that any official collaboration with the HDP would make it easier for the AKP to create a majority for itself by means of polarization. Moreover, the doubts of the CHP regarding the relationship between the HDP and the incumbent AKP mainly due to the ongoing Peace Process and the overall ambivalence of the party towards the Kurdish issue also played a role in its strategic choice to choose the MHP over the HDP for official cooperation. Kılıçdaroğlu's strategic calculus was that if with this strategy the opposition could push the elections to the second round, it could also get the support of the HDP voters in the runoff.

Nevertheless, the depolarization strategy did not bear fruits. The strategic nomination of İhsanoğlu might have somewhat made the secular-conservative, the Alevi-Sunni and Turk-Kurd fault lines less functional for Prime Minister Erdoğan but it could not produce a winning strategy mainly due to three reasons elaborated above: (1) Discontentment of the CHP's conventional base regarding the profile of the

candidate and the energy that was consumed to reverse it, (2) the harsh language of the opposition leaders against Prime Minister Erdoğan, which had already proved to be counterproductive for the purpose of de-polarizing the AKP voters and (3) the overall weakness of the joint candidate to challenge Prime Minister Erdoğan.

Despite the fact that the strategy of the opposition fell short to prevent the victory of Prime Minister Erdoğan in the first round of the elections by 52 percent, it established a model for future strategies of the opposition (Selçuk & Hekimci, 2020, p.6). From then on, the need for cooperation within the opposition was better grasped particularly by the main opposition CHP and depolarization continued to be an integral part of party's strategy.

Last but not least, its first presidential campaign was a real breakthrough for the pro-Kurdish HDP and its leader Selahattin Demirtaş in terms both their vote share (9,76 percent) and the capability to extend their audience by successfully appealing to various groups of Turkish society. This electoral success definitely encouraged the HDP to believe that they could pass the 10 percent electoral threshold in the general elections and pave the way for the HDP to decide to compete in the elections as a party and not anymore with independent candidates.

3.5 The 2015 General Elections

3.5.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

2015 General Elections were the first elections that the AKP did not compete in under the *de jure* leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was elected president on August 10, 2014. According to the constitution, Erdoğan was elected to a non-partisan post, which, despite some significant executive authorities untypical in a parliamentary democracy, was rather a symbolic position. However, even before he

was elected Erdoğan had already declared that he would not be an ordinary president but “a president that sweats and runs” (“Erdoğan yeni cumhurbaşkanının,” 2014), which was an implicit message that as the first popularly elected president Erdoğan would not let the constitutional limits constrain the way that he intends to execute his office.

Right after his election as president, Erdoğan handpicked Ahmet Davutoğlu, a professor of international relations and the minister of foreign affairs in the last two of his cabinets, both as the leader of his party AKP and the new prime minister. Having taken all possible measures to make sure that after the official end of his term President Gül could not go back to the AKP and run for leadership, and having handpicked party’s leader himself, President Erdoğan wanted to keep his party and at the same time the government under control. The *de facto* executive presidency assumed by Erdoğan is commonly taken to be the first step of his personal rule (Arat, 2019, p.12).

After assuming the role of AKP chairman, Davutoğlu had only eight months to prepare the party for the first general elections without Erdoğan as its leader. Although Erdoğan won the presidency in the first round of the elections with 52 percent of the votes, there would not be an easy victory for the AKP in the general elections because the opposition and particularly the main opposition CHP started early its preparations and the absence of Erdoğan itself could be a big advantage.

One of the novelties in the 2015 General Elections, which could have significant consequences for the ruling AKP was the decision of the pro-Kurdish HDP to compete in the elections as a party and to give up its strategy of contending through its independent candidates like in the 2007 and 2011 General Elections. The achievement of Selahattin Demirtaş, the co-leader of the HDP, to get nearly 10

percent of the votes in the presidential elections gave the party the courage and confidence to challenge the 10 percent electoral threshold. The military junta of September 12 had designed this threshold to prevent the smaller parties from getting into the parliament and as of the 1990s the parties of Kurdish political movement became the main victim of the threshold. The alternative strategy to run with independent candidates was practical but restrictive. For independent candidates there was not a national threshold, but all other things being equal the HDP could have won considerably fewer seats with this strategy, had it not decided to run as a party. Therefore, the HDP believed that it would be a real breakthrough in the political life of the HDP, if it could pass it in the general elections, and that it was thus worth taking the risk.

The decision of the HDP to participate in the elections as a party was reacted ambivalently by the AKP. A number of prominent figures from the AKP made statements that did not welcome the decision including that of President Erdoğan, who stated that if the HDP could not make it to the parliament due to the 10 percent threshold, it would not be able to stay at the negotiation table of the Peace Process ("AKP HDP'yi seçimlere," 2015). HDP co-chair Figen Yüksekdağ interpreted such statements as an effort by the AKP to force the HDP to go back to its old strategy and run through independent candidates (Ibid.). It was not quite senseless because as the main competitor of the HDP in its strongholds in southeast of Turkey was the AKP, the scenario, in which the HDP passes the threshold and makes it to the parliament would cause a significant loss for the AKP in the number of its parliamentary seats. The failure of the HDP to pass the threshold, on the other hand, would give AKP all the seats in the region and thereby an easy win of a supermajority in the parliament. Therefore, prominent figures of the AKP made several statements that according to

their data the HDP would not pass the threshold ("Hüseyin Çelik AK Parti'nin," 2015).

As was the case in the 2014 Presidential Elections, the *de facto* ceasefire provided by the Peace Process enlarged the political space for the HDP and enabled it to be able to reach out to new constituencies within the Turkish society. However, despite the ongoing Peace Process, the relations between the AKP Government and the HDP was not free of problems. One of the focal points of Demirtaş's campaign ahead of the presidential elections in August 2014, for example, was that the AKP did not keep its promises and that this jeopardized the Peace Process ("Demirtaş: barış sürecinin," 2014).

The uneasy relationship between the AKP and the HDP became even more complicated with further developments. The Kobane Protests in October 2014 was one of them. The protests started as a reaction to the AKP Government's unwillingness to help the defense of the ISIS-besieged city of Kobane in northeastern Syria by either allowing the Kurdish volunteers to cross the border or launching a military operation itself. The protests began as large-scale demonstrations but later turned into a violent clash between protesters and the police, whereby a total of 37 people including two policemen were killed ("6-7 Ekim olayları," 2021).

The Kobane Protests had initially a quite negative effect on the already delicate Peace Process. As a reaction to the violence in the protests and the statements of the prominent PKK militants that blamed the government ("Tezkere savaş," 2014), the government spokesperson Bülent Arınç stated that the government would not be the party that ends the process but also that they were "neither compelled nor bound to the process" ("Arınç çözüm sürecine," 2014). The HDP also made a softening statement, where co-leader Demirtaş said: "Our party does not want

the process to end. As long as the government or Öcalan does not say otherwise, the process does not end" ("Demirtaş'tan flaş çözüm," 2014). Consequently, the talks that had been suspended due to the Kobane Protests resumed in November 2014 with the participation of Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan and the HDP MPs ("Başlangıçtan bugüne," 2014).

The expectation of the government from Öcalan was to call on the PKK to remove weapons but before doing it Öcalan wanted to make sure that the government was ready to take some serious steps that had been promised. However, after tough negotiations, Öcalan agreed to make the call without any precondition and it was decided that the call would be announced in a meeting attended by government representatives as well as HDP MPs. So, the declaration that was commonly known as "Dolmabahçe Consensus" was finally made on February 28, 2015, and Öcalan's call was read by HDP MP Sırrı Süreyya Önder in the presence of Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan, Minister of Interior Efkan Ala and the Deputy Leader of AKP's Parliamentary Group Mahir Ünal ("Dolmabahçe'de tarihi," 2015).

Nevertheless, having continued to slam each other neither of the parties showed adherence to the consensus. On March 15, Cemil Bayık, the co-leader of the Kurdistan Comminutes Union (KCK), said: "The claims that the PKK will remove arms are mere election propaganda. Such a decision can only be taken in a congress attended by Öcalan" ("KCK Türkiye'ye," 2015). On the very same day, President Erdoğan made a statement regarding the Kurdish issue and said:

> They always talk about Kurdish issue. I stated it in 2015 that it was our issue and finished it. There are some who want to continue it. Why? In order to use the petrol bombs and kill the people with fireworks ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Kürt," 2015).

The reaction of the Kurdish part was rather heavy. In his party's parliamentary group at the TBMM, HDP co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş gave a three-sentence speech on March 17, 2015:

> Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as long as the HDP exists, the members of the HDP breath on this soil, you will not be able to be (an executive) president. Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, we will not let you become president, we will not let you become president, we will not let you become the president! ("We will not," 2015).

Erdoğan's desire to turn Turkish parliamentary system into an executive presidency was long known. It was also quite clear that if the HDP passes the 10 percent electoral threshold and makes it to the parliament, it would be almost impossible for the AKP to have a reliable majority for amending the constitution to install an executive presidency. From this perspective, Demirtaş's statement was a pledge that the HDP would work as hard as possible to pass the threshold to the detriment of the Erdoğan's presidential dreams. In an interview that he gave years later, Demirtaş explained why he had said these words as follows:

> Turkish society must know that after the Dolmabahçe Consensus, the PKK was only 10 days away from removing the arms. But Erdoğan did not allow this. The civilian group called "The Committee of Wise People" would go to the İmralı and get the message that arms were removed for good. Then we would take care of the rest in the parliament altogether ("Selahattin Demirtaş seni," 2021).

After Demirtaş's brief speech, President Erdoğan started giving signals that the Peace Process came to an end. On March 22, 2015, he stated that he did not approve the meeting in Dolmabahçe, where the government representatives came together with the HDP MPs to announce the consensus reached by the parties:

> I honestly do not approve that meeting. I personally do not approve that the deputy prime minister came together with a group that is currently in the parliament. Like in the past, a colleague of ours could do talks and make necessary statements. But making two declarations before the press was never the case ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan Ukrayna," 2015).

So, ahead of the 2015 General Elections, the Peace Process was unquestionably suspended. As the chain of events also shows, it was mainly the rather big gap between the expectations of the government on the one side and the PKK on the other that broke down the process. Moreover, with the decision of the HDP to compete in the elections as a party, the HDP became for the first time a real contender for the AKP, which, if it achieves its goal, would also be able to ruin President Erdoğan's plans. That was undoubtedly the key factor that accounts for the tensions between the HDP and the ruling AKP that marked the campaign trail ahead of the elections.

3.5.2 Description of the opposition strategy

As underlined above, the opposition made an early start on the preparations for the general elections that would take place on June 7, 2015. While the ruling AKP was busy with compelling issues like the leadership change, the new era in the Syrian civil war and the Peace Process with the PKK, the main opposition CHP was in preparation of its election campaign, which it built on a two-pillar strategy: First, in a political atmosphere where the economic performance of the government started to decline and thus economic problems became considerably more visible, the overwhelming focus of the campaign would be on a welfare program that addresses the problems of social injustice and unfair distribution of income and pledges to provide solutions for these problems. Second, while carrying out its campaign the CHP would ignore the provocations of the AKP and President Erdoğan and not engage in polemics with them.

The attempt by the CHP to turn the campaign trail into a platform for the discussion of economic problems was quite successful. Other opposition parties, the

nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP, considerably emulated the electoral promises of the CHP in their election declarations and even the ruling AKP could not ignore them during its campaign. So, an election campaign that could have easily been overshadowed by identity issues due to the new phase in Syrian civil war, the advance of ISIS and the problems of the Peace Process with the PKK, was clearly dominated by a debate on socio-economic issues.

Having drawn lessons from the experiences of previous elections, the leader of the main opposition CHP Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu understood that building his campaign on an attack against Erdoğan would be rather beneficial for Erdoğan's polarization strategy and targeted the AKP instead over three practical issues: First, in response to the questions from the AKP about where the CHP would find the required financial resources to keep its election promises Kılıçdaroğlu pointed out the public extravagance that was embodied in the new presidential palace that had started to be used as of Erdoğan's presidency. Second, he was criticizing Erdoğan of conducting a *de facto* campaign for his (officially former) party despite the very fact that the constitutionally non-partisan and neutral nature of his position forbids him to do so. Third, he claimed that Ahmet Davutoğlu, the new prime minister and AKP leader, was under the tutelage of President Erdoğan and was thus incapable of ruling the country.

Last but not least, the CHP under Kılıçdaroğlu was well aware of the fact that HDP's bid to surpass the 10 percent electoral threshold and get into the parliament was quite important to deprive the AKP of a parliamentary majority (Selçuk & Hekimci 2020, 6). Therefore, the CHP implicitly supported HDP's bid at the cost of losing a certain part of its electorate.

In his campaign, the nationalist MHP could not remain indifferent to the economic debate initiated by the CHP campaign and took inspiration from the election promises of the CHP regarding the problems of social injustice and unfair distribution of income. These problems also considerably shaped the discourse of the MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, who is known to mostly concentrate his opposition to the AKP on the issues security, terrorism, and the Peace Process. Bahçeli's main strategy was to take back the support of the nationalist constituencies that had been voting for the AKP since the 2002 General Elections.

As underlined above, the HDP made a rather risky strategic preference and decided to compete in the elections as a party. As a follow-up of the party's presidential campaign ahead of the elections in August 2014, the HDP continued to use the election campaign as a national platform to appeal to various groups outside its traditional voter base and address issues that concern different sections of the society. The HDP, at the same time, attempted to extend its base also among the Kurdish voters by presenting its presence in the parliament as indispensable for the representation of the Kurdish identity. As the Syrian Kurds faced an existential threat amid ISIS advance, the secular-conservative fault line was considerably softened among the Kurds and the survival of the Kurdish identity in the region became a common priority ("KONDA Genel Müdürü," 2017). The HDP under the leadership of its co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş tried to benefit from this trend and incorporated some religious elements into its campaign in an attempt to appeal to conservative Kurds that were conventionally within the voter base of the AKP.

The HDP also used the risks that the opposition would face in case of its failure to surpass the 10 percent electoral threshold and AKP's win of a

supermajority, thereby appealing to the secular constituencies mainly in the West of the country in an attempt to get their so-called “custodial votes”.

3.5.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

As a parliamentary election, the 2015 General Elections did not witness any inter-party cooperation within the opposition. However, the idea that the opposition parties would somehow have to come together, if the AKP were to be defeated was considerably stronger than it was in the previous general elections. Therefore, the campaign trail did not witness a major problem between the opposition parties that utterly concentrated their energy against the AKP Government.

Having decided to compete in the elections as a party, the HDP attempted to open up to new constituencies in order to maximize its votes and minimize the risk of not surpassing the 10 percent election threshold. The main opposition CHP and its base were aware of the fact that if the HDP’s vote share remained under the threshold, it would be the ruling AKP that would benefit from it. Therefore, apart from some rather small exceptions, the CHP acted very carefully not to undermine HDP’s bid to surpass the threshold even at the cost of losing a certain amount of votes. The leader of the party Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu proclaimed before the elections that he believed that the HDP would surpass the threshold (“Diyanet tuzağa,” 2015).

Following the terrorist attacks that targeted the local branches of the pro-Kurdish HDP in Adana and Mersin, the leader of the nationalist MHP, Devlet Bahçeli, urged his party to stay calm. Pointing out the AKP, he said: “They are trying to provoke us to engage in a conflict with the HDP. I do not want to see any of you in this conflict. Concentrate on your work!” (“Bahçeli bizi HDP,” 2015).

Consequently, the lack of tension among the opposition parties could be maintained up until the elections and though not in a coordinated ay they all managed to concentrate their energy on weakening the incumbent AKP.

3.5.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

The year 2015 marked the 13th year of the AKP in power. The June 7, 2015, General Elections would be the fourth general election that the ruling party would have to win to stay in power. During this rather long period of time, the AKP significantly frayed and, more importantly, for the first time since 2008 global financial crisis the problems that Turkish economy was suffering from became more palpable (Eğilmez, 2015). Under these circumstances, as the opposition and particularly the CHP strategized, the campaign trail ahead of the June 7, 2015, was dominated by a debate on the economic performance of the government, the economic program of the opposition and the resources required for the realization of that program.

The main opposition CHP was undoubtedly the initiator of the debate around the socio-economic questions through its welfare program, which was the main focus of its campaign. The program had various target groups including the retirees, students, wage earners, farmers and generally the poor and involved concrete promises concerning the everyday economic needs of the people. These promises included biannual gratuity payments to the retirees, the increase of the minimum wage to 1500 Turkish Lira, cancellation of loan interests as well as relief payments for the elderly, students, families, and the poor ("Yoksulluk sıfırlanacak," 2015).

What the CHP particularly endeavored to do in the course of its campaign was to make sure that the issues, which it claimed its program will offer a solution for, were continuously discussed as most important items at the top of the political

agenda. For this purpose, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu took a symbolic action and started this party's campaign with the declaration of a notarized commitment of a biannual gratuity payment to the retirees ("Noter onaylı," 2015). In almost the entire campaign, Kılıçdaroğlu obstinately focused on the socio-economic problems and promoted his party's welfare program.

With its program and campaigning strategy, the CHP was able to go beyond the promotion of its promises, managing to inspire other opposition parties to make similar emphases on the economic problems in their campaigns and forced the governing AKP to enter into a discussion with them on these issues. During the campaign trail, prominent figures from the AKP including Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and Minister of Finance Mehmet Şimşek questioned the feasibility of CHP's economic program, arguing that the CHP had no idea about how to finance their election promises ("Kılıçdaroğlu'nda ergen," 2015). This allegation gave CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu an opportunity to go on the offensive and corner the ruling AKP about its preferences on resource allocation, thereby making them perceived in a defensive position:

> They ask where we will find the sources from. We will give 750 Lira to 3,75 million households. The source is not the question. The question is how to use the source. The finance minister cannot make any objection because these are their figures. So, there are sources, but they are not used in an effective way for the future of the country ("Kılıçdaroğlu'ndan kaynak," 2015).
>
> They ask where find the resources from to finance our promises. Why can't you find anything for the retirees, while you can find any resource for your illegal palace? ("Para senin," 2015).
>
> It is a shame to ask about the sources to finance these promises. People cannot make their living. They do not have ships or palaces. You use the money for your cronies, for your illegal palace. I will use the money for the retirees, for the people of this country ("Kaynak sorusu," 2015).
>
> Let me address the finance minister. You said that increasing the minimum wage to 1500 Lira would be cruel. If 14 thousand Lira that you earn is not cruel, why should 1500 Lira that the minimum wage earners make be cruel?

> (…) I will create new sources by cutting the illegal sources of the palace ("Kaybeden sadece," 2015).

The fact that the government felt obliged to react to the promises of the CHP indicates that the CHP managed to set the agenda through its campaign strategy, possibly in an unprecedented way under an AKP government.

As far as the strategy of the CHP is concerned, focusing on people's economic problems not only intended to promote party's welfare program but it was also an integral part of party's depolarization strategy. The idea was that offering solutions for the economic problems that created cross-cutting ties between identities would be an antidote against identity-based polarization strategized by President Erdoğan, thereby helping the CHP change the axis of politics and appeal to new constituencies.

Nevertheless, a mere focus on people's economic problems would not automatically lead to a successful depolarization. As a matter of fact, in its campaign for the 2011 General Elections, too, the CHP had tried to build its campaign on its program as a part of its depolarization strategy. However, back then, Kılıçdaroğlu's tactical preference to incorporate a reactive anti-Erdoğan discourse into his campaign clearly had pushed the de-polarizing pillars of the CHP into the background. In an attempt not to repeat the same mistake in 2015, the CHP made a strategic decision to attack neither President Erdoğan nor the AKP, to ignore any provocation that might come from the AKP and not to respond to or engage in any polemics with them. Kılıçdaroğlu, himself, proclaimed at the beginning of his campaign that the party's strategy would be to tell people what it would do should it come to power, emphasized several times that he would never respond to Erdoğan's claims and allegations and ordered the party members to do the same:

> We will conduct a campaign that is going to touch the people (…) We will not make particular accusations by saying 'AKP did this or that' but we will explain what we are going to do to fix. We will not have many projects. We will have six remindful projects that directly offer a solution for the problems of ordinary people (Kılıçdaroğlu: Emekliye," 2015).
>
> (Addressing the MP candidates) During the campaign, do not you the language of opposition but use the language of the members of the future ruling party. Develop a discourse of government. The general situation is not good, so give hope. Avoid unnecessary polemics. Tell what we are going to do ("İktidar dili," 2015).
>
> (Addressing the MP candidates) Your campaigns should not be centered on targeting the AKP but the promises of the CHP. In 2011 we could not explain well enough our projects (…) Do not give the electorate your pessimism but hope. Promise prosperity and peace ("Kaynak soranlara," 2015).
>
> I will never ever address Erdoğan. Because our objective is to come to power ("Dine kitaba saygısı," 2015).

The strategic choice to focus not on Erdoğan or the AKP but its own program was clearly a result of the lessons that the CHP drew from previous campaign experiences, where an overarching anti-Erdoğan discourse was absorbing CHP's program and other de-polarizing pillars of party's campaigns. However, that does not mean that Kılıçdaroğlu never criticized the government or President Erdoğan in his campaign. He concentrated his criticism of the government on mainly three issues: First, in response to AKP's allegations that the CHP had no idea about the financial feasibility of its promises, Kılıçdaroğlu continuously pointed to the new presidential palace, proclaiming that the public resources extravagantly allocated would be used to finance CHP's welfare program:

> They ask where find the resources from to finance our promises. Why can't you find anything for the retirees, while you can find any resource for your illegal palace? ("Para senin," 2015).
>
> It is a shame to ask about the sources to finance these promises. People cannot make their living. They do not have ships or palaces. You use the money for your cronies, for your illegal palace. I will use the money for the retirees, for the people of this country ("Kaynak sorusu," 2015).

The other two issues brought up by Kılıçdaroğlu were rather procedural. He criticized President Erdoğan of explicitly violating the constitution and thereby breaking his presidential oath by conducting a campaign for the AKP in guise of opening ceremonies around the country, and also claimed that Prime Minister Davutoğlu allowed Erdoğan to keep the party under his tutelage and *de facto* leadership:

> He is making an immense effort to keep his party in power. How can this person (referring to Erdoğan) make an election propaganda? You took ac constitutional oath for your neutrality upon your honor. What is honor for you? I do not accept him as the head of the people, he is like a co-leader of the party in power ("Saray avucunu," 2015).
>
> No matter which party you will vote for, do not forget this: Davutoğlu is working for the palace, whereas Kılıçdaroğlu is working for the people, for you ("Cezaevi yapmakla," 2015).

In response to the attempt of the CHP to make the election campaign about the economy, the strategy of the AKP was to conduct a campaign based on security and antiterrorism, making use of the developments on the national and regional level that put forward security as a priority, such as the advance of ISIS in Syria and the resumption of low-level conflict with the PKK despite the ongoing Peace Process, as a leverage against opposition. Accordingly, President Erdoğan utterly campaigned for his (officially former) party, the ruling AKP, and accused the opposition parties of joining forces and allying with the terrorist organizations against the government. As usual, he pursued the strategy of polarization, particularly along the secular-conservative fault line, publicly questioned how religious CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu was and made a distinction between the religious Kurds and other Kurds, urging the former not to support the HDP:

> Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu, I grew up with the Quran and I live with the Quran. Say it to yourself. Everyone knows what importance the Quran has for your personality ("Kılıçdaroğlu'nu yuhalattı," 2015).

> The coalition of Old Turkey is headed by the main opposition, and it is supported by two organizations. One is the separatist organization (referring to the PKK) and the other is the parallel organization (referring to the Gülenists). They made a division of labor. One is abusing our citizens in the West and the South over their lifestyles, trying to manipulate their votes. The other is forcing our citizens to vote for itself by means of threat and force. The parallel organization, as their mentor, is providing them with a logistical support ("İki örgüt ve," 2015).
>
> The leader of the MHP is making accusations. When we look at what he says, we see that he is a nationalist of Esed (referring to Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria), Kandil (referring to the PKK) and Pennsylvania (referring to Fethullah Gülen). Because he is in agreement with them. Mr. Bahçeli, this nation will never esteem you until you become a nationalist of this nation (…) Kılıçdaroğlu claims that we are secretly helping the Turkmens in Syria. He is talking like Esed, Pennsylvania and Kandil (…) (Addressing the HDP) Do you think this is nation is faithless? They are teaching people up there in the mountains how to be a Zoroaster. They have nothing to have with either Islam or any religion. My religious Kurdish brother must know follow them ("Herkese kin," 2015).

Throughout his campaign, Prime Minister Davutoğlu, too, used a similar language, accusing the main opposition CHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP of secretly negotiating a post-election coalition and of cooperating with the terrorist organizations:

> The CHP is in an utter cooperation with the HDP. It is also very clear that the CHP is secretly collaborating with the Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front (DHKP-C) especially with its Syria policy. Will you allow those cooperating with the separatists? ("CHP, DHKP-C ile," 2015).
>
> CHP has started again striving against the *Diyanet* and Imam Hatip Schools. CHP says that it is very important that the HDP surpasses the threshold. Do you see the CHP-HDP coalition coming? The HDP was supposed to appeal to whole Turkey, but they have become like the CHP. They say they will shut down the *Diyanet*. The *Diyanet* is the representative of science and knowledge all over Turkey. Why do they want to shut it down? Because they want to detach people from religion. This is also the wish of international forces that are not happy with the *Diyanet.* The representative of the parallel organization (referring to the Gülenists) secretly met with the Diyarbakır Mayor. They may become a troika: the CHP, the HDP and the parallel organization ("İki eşbaşkan," 2015).
>
> All of them (referring to the CHP, the MHP and the HDP) joined forces against us to stop our march. There are three legal parties supported by three

> illegal organizations: Kandil (referring to the PKK), Pennsylvania (referring to the Gülenists) and the DHKP-C. Will you stop this gang of six? ("Hepsi bir cephe," 2015).

The strategy of picturing the opposition in an illegitimate alliance with not only one another but also with terrorist organizations against itself was nothing novel for the AKP. It had pursued the same strategy during its campaign for the 2011 General Elections. In 2015, as it was in 2011, this was an attempt by the AKP to set the axis of politics and make sure that the majority remains at its side of the axis by using various social fault lines. However, compared to 2011, the opposition's successful attempt to set the agenda of the elections through its economic debate substantially decreased the effectiveness of AKP's strategy ahead of the 2015 General Elections.

As underlined above, the nationalist MHP was not indifferent to the fact that the election campaign had become a platform of debate for the economic problems and the party's campaign included a considerable number of economic elements, apparently inspired by CHP's welfare program, such as an increase in the minimum wage, gratuity payments to the retirees and cheap credits to the needy. The economic issues also shaped the discourse of MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, who drew attention to the problem of unfair distribution of wealth during his campaign:

> For this minister [referring to Mehmet Şimşek, the Minister of Finance who said upon a critique from the opposition that the amount of public money spent for the official cars was actually peanuts ("Bu da Maliye Bakanı," 2015)] and government, 3,3 billion liras may be peanuts. For Erdoğan it may be hazelnuts or pistachios; for Davutoğlu it may be a dinner. However, this person who is against the opportunities that we will offer the retirees should know that he is an enemy of retirees, minimum wage earners, farmers and shopkeepers. If 3,3 billion liras are peanuts, then let the people enjoy these peanuts ("Bahçeli: Çerezi," 2015).

However, unlike the main opposition CHP, the campaign of the nationalist MHP was not substantially defined by a program to solve the economic issues. Nor was economic campaigning the main strategy of the party. The MHP harshly targeted the AKP in its campaign, underlining the corruption allegations and violations of law and by President Erdoğan and other members of the government and vowing to bring them to justice if it comes to power ("MHP Lideri Bahçeli'den sert," 2015). Taking advantage of the troubles in the Peace Process and resumption of the PKK attacks, MHP leader Bahçeli used an ultranationalist language against the AKP and made a special appeal to the nationalist constituencies of the AKP in order to persuade them to come back to the MHP. In a rally organized in the central Anatolian city of Yozgat, for instance, Bahçeli said:

> Isn't it time to do away the artificial distances although Yozgat is identified with the MHP? Isn't it time for embrace and reunion? (…) You have given the AKP a chance for years. What are we waiting for to say enough? (MHP, 2015).

> When we left the government in 2002, the invaders came. When we left in 2002, the unpatriotic came. After we had left in 2002, the number of our martyrs increased drastically (…) The AKP has been in power for 13 years, negotiated with the PKK and built an illegal palace in Ankara while you must skip your meals ("Bahçeli: Biz gittik," 2015).

Finally, compared to the previous general elections, the pro-Kurdish HDP clearly increased its relative importance within the opposition by making the risky decision to contest the elections as a party rather than through independent candidates. Benefitting from the relative peaceful period ensured by the Peace Process, the HDP managed to turn the election campaign into an opportunity to appeal to new constituencies both in the west of the country and among the Kurdish electorate. In an attempt to get their supports, the HDP tried to persuade its potential

voters in these new constituencies about the indispensability of its presence in the parliament, using various discourses, arguments and campaign strategies.

In order to appeal to various groups outside its traditional voter base, the HDP addressed issues such as unfair distribution of wealth, gender equality and femicide, vowed to raise the minimum wage to 1800 Lira and decrease the maximum week working ours to 35, promised to abolish the *Diyanet*, proposed policies to counter homophobia, to stop investment to nuclear power and to reform the higher education system ("İşte HDP'nin seçim," 2015). A part of these policies, through which the HDP aimed to appeal to different groups such as Alevis, leftists, women, youth, students, workers, etc., might have already been proposed by the HDP, or its predecessor parties, in its previous campaigns. However, was made the biggest difference for the HDP ahead of the June 2015 General Elections was its unprecedented capacity to make a nationwide appeal.

Along with these policies, the HDP made an emphasis on the vitality of its surpassing the 10 percent threshold for the future of the opposition vis-à-vis the AKP Government, for the particular purpose of appealing to the AKP's opponents, who are not in the tradition voter base of the HDP and might prefer to cast a "custodial vote" for the HDP. In his party's rally in Istanbul, HDP co-leader Demirtaş said:

> If we are determined to peacefully co-exist, do not fear the change. The HDP is coming by changing Turkey. For us these elections are not only a matter of whether or not we surpass the threshold but also a matter of peaceful coexistence without fearing and denying each other (…) We will also abolish the constitution made by Kenan Evren and instrumentalized by the AKP and make a brand-new constitution ("HDP'siz bir meclis," 2015).

However, the HDP did not only try to reach out to the constituencies that were already AKP opponents but also some constituencies that had been hitherto supporting the AKP, such as conservative Kurds. In order to soften the secular-

conservative fault line among the Kurds, HDP co-leader Demirtaş occasionally used a religious language in his discourse to both criticize the AKP Government and ask the electorate to support them. In the provincial congress of the HDP in Elazığ, an AKP stronghold in eastern Turkey where there is a considerable population of conservative Kurds, Demirtaş said:

> The biggest damage of the state is that it has so far done what it has done in the name of Islam. There is not a conception of holy state in Islam, where the only holy entity is Allah. The AKP has so far presented their luxury lives as a condition of Islam and thereby done the biggest harm to Islam by misrepresenting it (HDP, 2014).

Demirtaş also responded to those, who criticized him using a rather "Islamic language" in his election campaign:

> I am sorry but the leftist perspective that equals leftism with irreligion does no good. This country has suffered a lot from this. A person can believe in God and be a leftist at the same time. The failure of the leftists in Turkey is predominantly because their hostility towards Islam (…) I am a faithful Muslim. I am not a religionist; I do not use religion in politics. I am a leftist ("Selahattin Demirtaş'tan İslami," 2015).

As also underlined above, the regional developments such as the advance of ISIS towards the Kurdish populated cities in northeastern Syria, which was a survival issue for the Syrian Kurds, and the reckless approach that the AKP took also played a role in softening the secular-conservative fault line among the Kurds living in Turkey, thereby facilitating the HDP to make an appeal to the conservative Kurds.

As a result, there was not a single depolarization strategy pursued by the opposition parties in coordination. However, the dominance of the election campaign by economic issues, which was initiated by the CHP and contributed by other opposition parties, was a major factor that forced the AKP to fail in its attempt to impose its axis of politics by means of identity-based polarization. Besides, both the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP took advantage from the conjunctural

developments to win over nationalists and conservative Kurds, respectively, that had previously voted for the incumbent AKP. With the combination of these strategies, the strategy of the AKP to create majority support by means of polarizing the electorate along social fault lines did not work in an election for the first time since it came to power in 2002.

3.5.3 The aftermath of the June 2015 General Elections

The results of the June 2015 General Elections produced a hung parliament. For the first time since it came to power, the governing AKP lost its majority in the TBMM with 40,8 percent of the votes. The main opposition CHP, the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP got respectively 25 percent, 16,3 percent, and 13,1 percent of the votes.

Despite coming first in the elections, the ruling AKP and President Erdoğan, who had utterly campaigned for the AKP, were the biggest losers of the contest. Winning a qualified parliamentary majority to amend the constitution for installing an executive presidency was declared as a goal for the governing party, yet it failed to get a simple majority let alone a qualified one. Therefore, the results were interpreted as people's objection against the presidential system ("Halk başkanlığa," 2015), as HDP co-leader also stated that the debate over a presidential system came to an end in the election night ("Demirtaş başkanlık tartışması," 2015).

The first reaction from the AKP on what the next government would be like came from the leader of the party Ahmet Davutoğlu. He stated that the AKP was open to all scenarios but the CHP who was not represented in more than 30 provinces and the HDP who was not represented in more than 50 provinces could not rule the country ("Her senaryoya," 2015). The opposition, on the other hand, was clearly

divided on how they wanted to proceed with the election results. The main opposition CHP was of the opinion that the opposition parties that got a total of 60 percent of the vote had the real mandate to form the next government and made a public call to the MHP and the HDP to make it real ("İki partiye açık," 2015; "Koalisyonu kurmak," 2015). However, a government that included both nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP would not be an easy task. Although the HDP initially stated that it was open to almost all proposals, the MHP expressed its reluctance to be in any coalition already on the election night, stating that the people had assigned them the task of opposition ("Bahçeli koalisyona kapıları," 2015). The MHP leader Bahçeli later declared that even if they considered a change of mind regarding the formation of a government, it would not be a part of any coalition scenario that includes the HDP either as a partner or as a supporter ("Bahçeli HDP'nin içinde," 2015).

In an attempt to persuade Bahçeli to change his mind, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu even proposed him to lead the next government as prime minister but the rejected the proposal ("Başbakanlık tartışması," 2015). Bahçeli's objection to engage in a pragmatic and flexible collaboration with other opposition parties not only prevented the initiation of a government formation that would push the AKP to the opposition but also gifted the AKP the speakership of the parliament. The decision of the MHP not to support CHP's candidate for speaker, Deniz Baykal, and abstain in the third tour of the elections led to the election of AKP's candidate, İsmet Yılmaz. CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu described the situation as "a missed historic opportunity" and slammed MHP leader Bahçeli:

> It was not quite unexpected. Because whenever the AKP is stalemated, the one who always saves it, the one who serves it like a crutch is known (…) It was a historic opportunity for the normalization of Turkey. While we are obliged to take Turkey out of the difficult circumstances that it finds itself, an

> understanding of politics that makes things even more complicated is totally unacceptable ("Tarihi fırsat," 2015).

Meanwhile, President Erdoğan invited Ahmet Davutoğlu, as the leader of the largest party in the parliament, to form a government. Davutoğlu started the tour of talks with the CHP and agreed with Kılıçdaroğlu on the start of the exploratory talks between the two parties (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023). The talks continued until mid-August, when Kılıçdaroğlu stated that they were not offered a coalition government but only a three-month interim government to lead the country to early elections. Just before the official end of the talks, Kılıçdaroğlu said that it was not Davutoğlu but Erdoğan who obstructed the formation of AKP-CHP coalition:

> Davutoğlu has come to us with goodwill, and he wants to form a coalition. I believe and feel it. However, Erdoğan does not allow it and stirs up trouble. It is like throwing the country into the fire for the sake of power. I know for certain that he will accuse the CHP ("Davutoğlu istiyor," 2015).

After the failed talks with the opposition parties, AKP leader Davutoğlu visited President Erdoğan and informed him that the talks were inconclusive ("Davutoğlu görevi," 2015). From that moment onwards, it was President Erdoğan who was to call the shots and using his constitutional authority he declared early elections to take place on November 1, 2015, on the grounds that no government could be formed within 45 days after the election of the speaker of the parliament ("President Erdoğan calls," 2015).

Meanwhile, the ceasefire between the PKK and the TSK guaranteed by the Peace Process was ended by Turkey as a result of the killing of two police officers near the border town of Ceylanpınar. The PKK initially claimed responsibility but later refuted any connection with the murders ("Verdicts of acquittal," 2019). However, President Erdoğan and the AKP Government directly reached the

conclusion that the murders were undertaken by order of the PKK ("Erdoğan'dan Suruç," 2015). On July 24, 2015, Turkish Armed Forces bombed PKK targets in Kandil Mountain, which marked the *de facto* end of the Peace Process.

The violence that prevailed between two elections was unfortunately not limited to the resumption of conflict between the TSK and the PKK. On July 20, a suicide attack was carried out by ISIS in the border town of Suruç that killed 31 people. The majority of those killed were university students who were members of the Socialist Youth Associations Federation (SGDF) and the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP) Youth Wing, who were making a public announcement about their upcoming journey to rebuild the Syrian border town of Kobane ("Suruç'ta katliam," 2015).

Consequently, the failure of the coalition talks and the decision for an early election took place in an atmosphere of violence and terror, which unfortunately lasted up until the election day on November 1.

3.5.4 November 2015 rerun elections and the strategy of the opposition

The apparent reason for the calling of snap elections by President Erdoğan was that the political parties in the parliament failed to form a coalition government. As underlined above, the main opposition CHP claimed that unlike Prime Minister Davutoğlu, President Erdoğan never wanted the AKP to form a coalition accused him of obstructing the talks between itself and the AKP. As a matter of fact, a week after the elections, President Erdoğan made the following statement:

> If everything will go well and a coalition can be formed, there will not be any problem. However, if the largest party in the parliament cannot do it and the second largest party also fails to do it, well, in that case a rerun election will be inevitable as per the constitution. For it is unthinkable that this country had no government. The uncertainty should not last long in order not to have any problem with the foreign investments in our country and international

> relations. So, the government must be formed as soon as possible ("Erdoğan: Önce birinci," 2015).

From this statement it follows that President Erdoğan considered the formation of the government vital for the maintenance of the state affairs and wanted it to be done as soon as possible. He made a similar statement a week later, emphasizing on exactly the same points:

> It is inevitable that Turkey will be ruled by a coalition government. Our hope is that this will be figured out as soon as possible. The president has the authority to call early elections if no government can be formed in 45 days (…) If the politicians do not do so, the nation will solve the problem ("Erdoğan seçim mitingine," 2015).

In both statements that President Erdoğan made right after the elections, he underlined his wish for a rather speedy formation of a coalition government as well as what would happen, if this were not the case. However, President Erdoğan did not facilitate the process whatsoever. He assigned Davutoğlu with the task of forming the government on July 9, namely 16 days after the new MPs had taken oath in the TBMM, whereas this duration ranged from one to two days in all assignments between 1995 and 2002 ("Önceki cumhurbaşkanları," 2015). Moreover, after it became evident that the prolonged exploratory talks between the AKP and the CHP would not lead to the production of a coalition protocol, President Erdoğan did not assign Kılıçdaroğlu, as the leader of the second largest party in the parliament, with the task to form the government, as he said he would do. He instead preferred to wait until the 45-day period would be expired.

One can argue that even if Kılıçdaroğlu had been given the task to form a government, it would have been very unlikely that he would manage to do it given the hardheaded approach of the MHP. However, all these can be taken to provide evidence that supports the argument that from the very beginning President

Erdoğan's preferred early elections over the formation of a coalition government and to the extent permitted by his constitutional authority he managed the process accordingly.

In fact, the November 1 elections were the rerun of the June 7 elections. However, in terms of the conduct of the election campaigns, the former was far from being a repetition of the latter. A series of incessant terror attacks that lasted until the election day drastically changed the political landscape, generating new priorities for the electorate and thus imposing a different campaign for the opposition parties.

First and foremost, the campaign for the November 1 elections was not characterized by an economic debate. Although, having realized the impact of opposition's welfare-based program the AKP adopted the some of the economic promises of the opposition ("Kılıçdaroğlu neyi açıklamışsak," 2015), security clearly became a priority for the electorate ahead of the November 1 elections.

According to a widespread view, the end of the Peace Process and the resumption of the PKK terror was the integral parts of the strategy of President Erdoğan. The idea is that he pursued this strategy for the purpose of pushing the HDP under the 10 percent electoral threshold and taking back the votes that it had lost to other parties in June by creating a rally round the flag effect ("A perfect storm," 2015).

The opposition parties, too, accused President Erdoğan to use violence to manipulate the elections and stay in power. CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu said: "They created chaos (…) to use it for their power. By using the PKK, they utterly blackmail the people" ("Neron Roma'yı," 2015). Similarly, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli said that President Erdoğan set the country on fire for winning more seats ("Bahçeli: Büyük," 2015). Finally, HDP co-leader Demirtaş also addressed Davutoğlu, saying

that: “Turkish society knows why he does this. You have sent soldiers, the youth to their deaths only in order to be voted back into government” (“HDP co-chairs accuse,” 2015). Both leaders based their accusations on a statement that Erdoğan made in a live broadcast, where he said the following:

> As you know, we experienced the Kobane Protests of 6-8 October, the Suruç attack, the Diyarbakır attack. It is senseless to accuse anyone else because they are profiting from terror. It is what they are doing. If a political party had won 400 MPs or the required number to build a new constitution, everything would have been different today. This is so important to take a step towards New Turkey (“Hala 400 vekil,” 2015).

No matter what he meant by it, this statement did nothing but reinforced the above-mentioned arguments that it was President Erdoğan’s strategy to provoke violence and profit from it in the elections and that this violence would have never broken out if his (officially former) party had secured the majority that it wanted in the June 7 elections. His emphasis on a new constitution and “New Turkey” was reminiscent of Erdoğan’s desire to turn Turkey into an executive presidency and indicated that this goal was still a priority for him.

Meanwhile, unsurprisingly, the campaign of the opposition was not as lively as it had been ahead of the June 7 elections for at least two reasons: First, the economic issues, which the opposition parties had used very effectively, though in an uncoordinated way, to shift the axis of politics to the detriment of the ruling AKP fell off the agenda. Second, the divisions among the opposition parties that prevented them from coming together following the June 7 elections became deeper with the terror attacks, some of which were claimed by the PKK.

Having apparently lost its advantage to make a nationwide appeal with the resumption of PKK attacks, the pro-Kurdish HDP conducted a rather defensive campaign. Through its campaign, the HDP tried to fend off Erdoğan’s accusations of being associated with the PKK’s acts of terror and demonstrate that it was on the side

of peace by calling on both the government and the PKK to return to the Peace Process (“Demirtaş yeni bir,” 2015). Party’s co-leader Demirtaş slammed the government, claiming that it provoked violence for the sake of electoral gains (“HDP co-chairs accuse,” 2015). Having denied the government’s accusations of being the political wing of the PKK, Demirtaş repeatedly called on the PKK to stop violence “without ifs or buts” (“HDP co-chair Demirtaş calls on PKK,” 2015).

The nationalist MHP also slammed the AKP Government in its campaign, accusing it of deliberately not taking the necessary actions in order to benefit from the violence (“Bahçeli: Büyük,” 2015). By holding President Erdoğan and the AKP Government responsible from the rising terrorism, MHP leader Bahçeli built his campaign on the message of rightfulness to oppose to the Peace Process from the very beginning and the promise that with its clear stance on the issue the MHP could maintain peace and security (“MHP’den seçim,” 2015). To realize this promise, Bahçeli vowed to compensate the security gap by recruiting 60 thousand new security officers for a new preemptive counter-terrorism team. Bahçeli also declared that the MHP would be open to a form a coalition with any party apart from the HDP, if the election results would again produce a hung parliament (“Bahçeli'den flaş koalisyon,” 2015).

In this atmosphere of tension and violence, which resulted in a more divided opposition, the main opposition CHP presented itself as a viable actor to solve the problems of security and economy (“Bildirgede birlik,” 2015). Although it endeavored to keep its economic agenda alive by focusing on its promises, which it claimed were so original that even the ruling AKP barrowed them in their new election manifesto (“Vaatlerin hesabı,” 2015), security came up as a new priority issue and the CHP tried to adopt its campaign to it.

Throughout his campaign, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu pointed out President Erdoğan and his ambition of having a big majority in the parliament as the main reason for both the rerun of the elections and the violence that dominated the campaign process. He argued that his hunger for power dragged the country to conflict and chaos and that with its attack the PKK was serving Erdoğan:

> He (referring to President Erdoğan) campaigned from province to province and asked people to give him 400 MPs and an executive presidency. The nation did not give it. Then he said: "If you do not give it, I will bring blood, suffering and tears." That means he says to the nation: "You either vote for me or I do not care about your will" ("Erdoğan'a 400," 2015).

> The PKK is not serving the palace. It would be a big mistake to think that the PKK is an independently acting organization. It also damages the HDP with its actions ("PKK saray'a," 2015).

In his campaign, Kılıçdaroğlu also emphasized that arms and securitization would not be solution for the rising violence and terror and that the real solution would be able to be found through consensus in the parliament with the HDP as the main interlocutor:

> The HDP should be in the parliament. In the solution, HDP should be the legitimate interlocutor. You have a legitimate interlocutor that came to the parliament after being legitimately elected. The PKK damages the HDP with its attacks (Ibid.).

> This problem (referring to the Kurdish issue) cannot be solved by means arms and security measures. This problem can be solved through societal consensus ("Silah çözüm," 2015).

Amid turmoil and growing divisions, the CHP tried to present itself to talk to everybody, with Kılıçdaroğlu as the only person who meets the leaders of all parties, for the sake of Turkey in order to emphasize on the need for a broad consensus. After his statement regarding 400 MPs, Kılıçdaroğlu said that he would meet anyone but Erdoğan ("Kılıçdaroğlu: Erdoğan hariç," 2015). However, after the ISIS-claimed Ankara Bombings of October 10, where more than 100 people died, he changed his

approach and said that he could even go visit Erdoğan in his palace if he organizes a summit attended by leaders for a common and strong attitude against terror ("Saray'a bile," 2015).

Kılıçdaroğlu also repeatedly stated that the AKP could not rule the country, that President Erdoğan was the source of the problem and that Ahmet Davutoğlu placed his will under the tutelage of President Erdoğan ("Saray için Davutoğlu," 2015).

3.5.5 Concluding remarks

For the June 2015 General Elections, the opposition parties did not engage in any kind of formal cooperation against the ruling AKP. This was mainly because of the parliamentary system as an institutional disabling factor. However, another institutional factor, which was the 10 percent electoral threshold, played an enabling role for an implicit cooperation between the CHP and the HDP at the voter level, whereby the traditional voters of the CHP supported the HDP in the elections so that it could cross the threshold, thereby preventing the AKP from gaining overrepresentation in the parliament.

Besides, the debate around the economic issues, which was initiated by the main opposition CHP and amplified by the opposition parties also created a common front against the AKP and thus made a mark on the campaign process. Through their economic campaigns, the opposition parties could not only offer their solutions to the public but also set the agenda of the elections, which also obliged the ruling AKP to join the discussion with a defensive position.

As underlined above, the economy-based campaign turned out to be an effective de-polarizing tool for the opposition even though the conjuncture initially

seemed quite suitable for the usual strategy of the AKP to polarize the society along identity issues and create a majority for itself. In the 2011 General Elections, for instance, a similar economic program prepared by the main opposition CHP for the elections had not worked as efficaciously. This might have somewhat to do with the fact that the economic outlook was not as worrying in 2011 as in 2015. However, as far as the opposition strategy is concerned, the determined and persistent pursuit of the strategy by the CHP not to respond to AKP's accusive and provoking discourses and reject its axis of politics, which was clearly a result of learning from previous experiences, made a real difference. Thereby, de-polarizing strategy of the CHP was not overshadowed by counterproductive anti-Erdoğan or anti-AKP discourses, which had proved to be reinforcing Erdoğan's polarizing strategy. This strategy aimed to impose the AKP a new axis of politics and by engaging in the debate the AKP had no choice but accept this axis. Consequently, the domination of the campaign by the economic issues significantly decreased the functionality of the identity-based polarization, which had always been a strategic instrument in the hands of the AKP.

As elaborated above, the economy-based campaigns were not a result of a coordinated de-polarizing strategy of the opposition. However, the successful shift of the axis of politics to the detriment of the ruling AKP undoubtedly opened different windows of opportunity for each opposition party to make effective moves against the AKP. By means of its welfare program, the main opposition CHP attempted to make an appeal to the social groups outside its conventional base that would have been beyond its reach in a political atmosphere defined by a deepened secular-conservative fault line. The nationalist MHP benefitted from this shift and convince the nationalist constituencies within the voter base of the AKP to come back and vote

for the MHP. Finally, the pro-Kurdish HDP was able to extend its support both within the Turkish and Kurdish voter bases.

To conclude, the change of axis of politics achieved by the opposition, though in an uncoordinated way, paved the way for AKP's loss of its parliamentary majority for the first time since its foundation.

However, the post-election political atmosphere defined by the failure of the opposition to cooperate due to intra-opposition fault lines and rising violence and terror drastically changed the political landscape, whereby security came up as a number one priority and welfare was no longer capable of creating a political axis against the incumbent AKP. Moreover, once security and stability were imposed by the AKP as the main issues of the elections, the intra-opposition divisions became even more crystallized, thereby depriving the opposition of the ability to create a common front against the AKP. All the opposition parties continued to blame the ruling AKP but they all, particularly the MHP and the HDP, had quite different stances regarding how the issue of security had to be figured out. Consequently, the axis of politics was again imposed by the AKP, which resulted in the loss of majority for the opposition.

CHAPTER 4

THE CASE OF TURKEY UNDER EXECUTIVE PRESIDENCY (2017-2019)

This chapter process-traces the electoral strategies pursued by the Turkish opposition from 2017 up until 2019, examining one general election (2018), one presidential election (2018), and one local election (2019). Detailed descriptions of cooperation and depolarization strategies are provided.

4.1 The 2017 Constitutional Referendum

4.1.1 Background and main issues ahead of the referendum

The victory of the ruling AKP in the rerun of the general elections in November 2015 took the opposition by surprise. Most election polls indicated the AKP to be polling around 41-42 percent and, therefore, unless the pro-Kurdish HDP failed to surpass the electoral threshold, the AKP was barely expected to get the parliamentary majority, which it had lost in the June 7 elections. However, even though the HDP managed to slightly surpass the threshold by 10,8 percent, the ruling AKP got a majority in the parliament by winning 49,5 percent of the votes.

The atmosphere dominated by violence and terror, which was commonly considered as having probably played the biggest role in the election results, continued after the elections as well. Between January and June 2016, eight suicide attacks were carried out by ISIS and the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks (TAK), a break-away faction of the PKK, in big metropolitans like İstanbul, Ankara, Gaziantep and Bursa that resulted in the killing of 150 and the injury of more than 500 civilian people (“Türkiye'de haziran,” 2016).

In the meantime, what was commonly known as “Ditch Clashes” between the PKK and Turkish security forces, which started in August 2015 following PKK’s unilateral declarations of self-government in several southeastern provinces of Turkey, were still in play. With these declarations, the PKK made a very risky move and took the conflict to the cities through ditches and barricades. During the clashes that lasted until March 2016, weeks-long curfews were applied and in addition to the officially declared casualties in both Turkish security forces and among the PKK militants, there were also civilian casualties in contested numbers (TİHV, 2016). The AKP Government did not give any numbers and Prime Minister Davutoğlu claimed that the civilian casualties were not caused by the actions of the security forces (“Davutoğlu sivil ölümlerin,” 2015).

Claiming that the HDP was to blame as much as the PKK, President Erdoğan called on the parliament to lift the parliamentary immunities of the MPs. He particularly accused the HDP and its co-leader Selahattin Demirtaş of causing the death of 52 people in the Kobane Protests in October 2014. He said in a statement:

> How could those who took my Kurdish brothers to the streets and caused the death of 52 possibly not be judged and show up in the parliament? How could those who said they had the PKK, the PYD, the YPG behind them be possible clean? If the parliament does not do what is necessary, the people, the nation will hold it accountable. Lift their immunities and send them to the court (“Dokunulmazlıkların kaldırılmasından,” 2020).

To follow the order of President Erdoğan, the AKP prepared a constitutional amendment and Prime Minister Davutoğlu called on the opposition parties to support it. The nationalist MHP was only too pleased to do so, whereas the HDP took a clear objection, calling the move “a coup attempt of the palace”. When it comes to the main opposition CHP, the party was divided on the matter. On the one hand they knew that the AKP could use this against them by means of the judiciary under their

control. On the other hand, they also did not want to be labelled as supporting the terrorist organization. Furthermore, even if the CHP did not support it, the package would be passed and taken to the referendum. CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu thought that such a referendum would make a big damage to the country and decided to support the package despite the problems about its constitutionality ("CHP'liler neden evet," 2016). Consequently, the package got enough support and was passed through the TBMM without the need for referendum. Months later, some MPs mostly from the pro-Kurdish HDP but also from the main opposition CHP were arrested, after they had become prosecutable with this constitutional amendment ("Dokunulmazlıkların kaldırılmasından," 2020).

Meanwhile, the problems between President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu became increasingly evident and serious. Even though he resigned from the party after being elected president, Erdoğan was still the most powerful figure of the AKP and there was not an organized resistance against his bid to keep the party under his control. While handpicking him as the next leader of the party, Erdoğan must have expected Davutoğlu to be loyal successor. However, as prime minister, Davutoğlu was apparently more than a mere trustee, who was holding the position until he would finally give it to its rightful owner. So, the problems between the two can be traced back to before the June 2015 elections. Erdoğan did not allow Davutoğlu to have the final say on his party's list of MP candidates ("Hakan Fidan aday," 2015) and he also overtly intervened in the post-election attempts of government formation ("Erdoğan koalisyondan fayda," 2015). Most importantly, the two were in clear disagreement about the debate on the system of government. Although he gave his consent to include it to AKP's election declaration, Prime Minister Davutoğlu thought the results of the June 2015 elections were a clear signal

for Turkish people's objection against constitutional installment of an executive presidency, while Erdoğan believed the de facto system of government had already been changed with the election of the president by popular vote and that this the changed had had to be recognized de jure ("Beştepe ile kırılma," 2016). As the rifts between President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Davutoğlu were further growing, the AKP's Executive Board controlled by Erdoğan voted to take away Davutoğlu's power to make appointments in party's provincial bodies. Davutoğlu had no choice but to resign as the leader of the AKP and the prime minister and the party congress elected Binali Yıldırım, again handpicked by Erdoğan, in May 2016.

During those times, without any doubt, the most dramatic event that would have an enormous impact on Turkish political life was the July 15 failed coup attempt, which was carried out by a faction within the TSK, predominantly composed of Gülenists, who had infiltrated the military throughout the past decades. Even though this infiltration was carried out over a quite long period of time, the Gülenists' securing of high-ranking positions in the command echelon became possible only in the AKP era. By means of the purge trials like Ergenekon and Sledgehammer conducted by Gülenist prosecutors and judges under the auspices of the AKP Government, Gülenist officers were able to replace the senior secularist officers and captured strategic positions, through which they would ultimately organize and lead a coup attempt (Ergin, 2016).

In the course of the attempt, numerous state buildings including the TBMM, the Presidential Palace, the MIT and the Police Special Operation Department were targeted by land and air and as a result hours-long armed clashes more than 287 people died and more than 2000 people were injured ("15 Temmuz şehitleri," 2022).

All the opposition parties condemned the attempt and called on the society to oppose this anti-democratic move ("Kılıçdaroğlu demokrasimize," 2016).

The failed coup attempt was followed by mass arrests and the biggest purge in the history of the republic. More than 90 thousand people were arrested and around 130 thousand public servants were dismissed from their jobs ("15 Temmuz darbe girişimi," 2020). A few days after the attempt, the government declared a three-month state of emergency, which would then be extended in every three month-period until July 2018. Having benefitted from the extraordinary authorities provided by the state of emergency, the AKP Government not only targeted those that allegedly had connections with the Gülenists but also many more academics, journalists, politicians and activists, who were known with their opposition to the government, over alleged links with various terrorist organizations. In addition to dismissals from public service, the government shut down a total of almost 100 media institutions, including TV and radio channels, news agencies and newspapers, many of which did not have any connection to Gülenists ("7 kez uzatıldı," 2018). During the state of emergency, the government seized roughly a thousand businesses worth billions of dollars over alleged ties to Gülenists (Arat 2019, 15).

The AKP Government apparently abused the emergency rule to undermine the pro-Kurdish HDP. In November 2016, numerous politicians from the HDP including many MPs and co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ were arrested over terrorism charges ("4 Kasım 2016'da ne," 2021). Despite the European Court of Human Rights ruling that ordered his immediate release, Demirtaş was kept in prison ("AİHM'den Selahattin," 2020). Moreover, in 94 municipalities won by the HDP, the government appointed trustees to take the place of elected mayors ("OHAL sona erdi," 2018).

The coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency clearly accelerated the process of autocratization, which had already started years before. Considering the election cycles in 2015, the increasingly unequal playing field and the rising violation of rights and liberties, some scholarly works argued that Turkey was no longer meeting the minimal criteria of democracy and classified Turkey under competitive authoritarian regimes before the coup attempt (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016, p.2). As the state of emergency was extended over and over again, the number of reasons that lead the scholars not to categorize Turkey as a democracy steadily increased.

The coup attempt also paved the way for a debate on the system of government in Turkey. President Erdoğan was always of the opinion that his election as the president by popular vote had de facto changed the form of government and uttered that he was in favor of an executive presidency ("Beştepe ile kırılma," 2016). As a matter of fact, as he had continuously stated, he did not act like a symbolic president and even used his constitutional authority, which his predecessors had almost never used, to summon and preside the council of minister meetings. However, after failed coup attempt and subsequent declaration of state of emergency, this became like almost normal procedure, whereby in every respect President Erdoğan was acting like an executive president. In October 2016, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, who had relatively softened his opposition to President Erdoğan and the AKP after the declaration of the state of emergency, made a path-breaking call:

> The President has been imposing a de facto executive presidency on the grounds that he was elected by popular vote and explicitly violation the constitution. This created a de facto situation, which is quite opposite to the de jure provisions of the constitution (…) It is very dangerous that the government and the President act in conflict with the law on these days, when the Republic of Turkey is in a survival struggle. In order to eliminate this danger, we have two options: Either the President will accept to be constrained by the constitutional provisions or we should look for way for the

> legalization of the de facto situation (…) The AKP should bring to parliament a package envisaging the amendment of the constitution ("Bahçeli'den başkanlık," 2016).

With this statement, Devlet Bahçeli not only gave green light to a parliamentary discussion on a proposal of constitutional amendment envisaging the transition into presidential system but also signaled that they could get on board ("MHP lideri Devlet Bahçeli'den başkanlık," 2016). The AKP had a simple majority in the parliament, however, without the support of the MHP, this majority would not have been adequate to amend the constitution. If they all support it, the total number of AKP and MHP MPs would suffice to take the amendment package to referendum.

Consequently, the AKP prepared a package and discussed it first with the MHP. After they had reached a consensus, they brought the package to the parliament on December 10, 2016 ("AKP ve MHP'den ortak," 2016). Having completed both commission and parliamentary phases, the package was posthaste passed through the parliament and then approved by President Erdoğan after only two months. Because it was not supported by a two third majority in the parliament, the package was automatically taken to referendum, which was set to April 16, 2017 ("Erdoğan anayasa değişikliğini," 2017).

4.1.2 Description of the opposition strategy

As underlined above, the nationalist MHP joined forces with the AKP and these both parties built a de facto ruling bloc with the MHP first giving the green light and the also supporting the AKP's bid to turn Turkey into an executive presidency. So, the main opposition CHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP were the only parties with parliamentary groups to remain in the opposition and to conduct a "No" campaign in the 2017 Constitutional Referendum.

The pro-Kurdish HDP was compelled to conduct its campaign while struggling to survive the government crackdown against it, whereby most of its active politicians including the co-chairs had been arrested or eliminated in different ways. This led the party to make use of the campaign in order to indicate that it was still politically alive, and the referendum was largely considered by the party as an opportunity to show the government the people's reaction to its crackdown.

HDP's campaign was certainly essential for the incorporation of its voters to the overall "No' camp. However, due to the government crackdown against the HDP and the ongoing conflict with the PKK, the main opposition CHP almost seemed as the only actor in the overall "No" campaign.

In fact, the mission of the opposition was not an easy one. According to the latest general elections that took place slightly more than a year before, the vote share of the "Yes" camp, namely the ruling AKP and the nationalist MHP, was around 62 percent. Therefore, in order for the "No" campaign to have the slightest shot at winning the referendum, the opposition had to get the support of as many voters from the bases of the AKP and the MHP as possible. For the purpose of achieving this goal, the CHP pursued a two-pillar strategy:

First, considering that there are various groups within the society that would be very hard to classify under a single ideological, identity-based, or class-based category, the CHP prepared the most inclusionary of its hitherto campaigns. The main premise of the CHP's "No" campaign was that the proposed constitutional amendments were not a party or political affair but concerned the future of the country. Therefore, the CHP used none of its party symbols in the campaign, in an attempt to facilitate the cooperation with various social groups and civil society organizations that were willing to contribute to the "No" campaign. Accordingly,

CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu chose his emphases and language very carefully during the campaign, which he deliberately based not on conventional rallies but on closed meetings with various social groups, through which they believed they could realize a close encounter to reach out to would-be hesitant and undecided AKP and MHP voters.

Second, in its attempt to persuade people to say "No" to the proposed constitutional amendments, the CHP focused on the practical content of the package, avoiding discussions on its past with the AKP and creating arguments that could be quite regardable in the eyes of the AKP and MHP voters.

By means of this two-pillar strategy, the CHP took the pluralist nature of the "No" camp as given, endeavored to enlarge the political and public space for its campaign and in a politically strained atmosphere, where saying "No" to the package was attributed with terror, created a legitimate center, around which the opponents of the amendments could come together. The main goal of this strategy was to dissolve the majority of the AKP and the MHP by changing the axis of politics and smoothly persuading a part of their voter base and thereby to create a majority in the "No" camp.

4.1.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

While due to the political atmosphere they create, the referenda are generally considered to be quite suitable for interparty cooperation, they, on the other hand, enable different people and groups to join forces over their choices even without any cooperation between the parties that they vote for. In other words, by leading them to make a particular choice, the referenda allow political parties to unite their voter bases in a single bloc without having to make an official alliance. This was how the

main opposition CHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP chose to behave in their separate "No" campaigns for the 2017 Constitutional Referendum.

Following the widespread demonization and criminalization of the HDP after the 2015 election cycles and the failed coup attempt in 2016, the CHP was the only party left to openly talk to the HDP. This continued to be this way ahead of the referendum. However, the two parties never talked about an open alliance or cooperation for, in fact, they did not need that. Because each voter that these parties would persuade to say "No" in the referendum would come together under a single bloc anyway. In an interview the German newspaper Süddeutche Zeitung, Kılıçdaroğlu answered a question on CHP's reluctance to cooperate with the pro-Kurdish HDP by saying: "Each party has its own style and language to appeal to its voters. Yet, the message is the same: The amendments do not serve to democracy in Turkey" ("Wir setzen unseren," 2017).

Moreover, the leading motivations of two parties' campaigns were significantly different. Whereas the CHP endeavored to appeal to the voter bases of the CHP and the MHP by means of an utterly de-polarizing campaign and thereby attempting to bring together all potential "No"-sayers in a pluralistic way, the HDP considered this campaign as an opportunity to survive the battle for existence that it was fighting amid the government crackdown against it.

Consequently, instead of engaging in an interparty cooperation, the CHP and the HDP appealed to various groups in the society with their campaigns and tried to lead as many voters as possible to the "No" camp.

4.1.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

For reasons elaborated above, the de-polarizing part of the overall "No" campaign was carried out by the main opposition ahead of the 2017 Constitutional Referendum. When the CHP started to design its campaign, it was aware of the fact that in order for the "No" camp to have a slightest chance of end up prevailing vis-à-vis the "Yes" camp with at least 62 percent potential, the "No" campaign had to reach out to the voter bases of the AKP and the MHP and get a part of them on board. At the beginning of the campaign period, the CHP chose its campaign's target group within the base of the ruling bloc, examined its tendencies, and started to design its de-polarizing campaign based on the analogy of a river, whereby different branches that flow rather separately from each other end up in a single river, symbolizing diverse groups with various political and ideological orientations that come together in the "No" camp with their own reasons and rationales ("Başkanlığa karşı," 2017).

In order to realize its "river campaign", the CHP made three strategic choices to be applied in the campaign: First, the campaign was based on the premise that the referendum was not a matter of party but a matter, which was vital for the future of the country. Therefore, the CHP decided that the focus on the campaign would not be President Erdoğan or his mistakes and failures but the content of proposed amendments and their possible impact on the future of the country ("Sorun Erdoğan'dan," 2017). In order to establish a dialogue with the voters bases of ruling bloc, the "No" campaigners of the CHP would not argue with the "Yes"-sayers but cold-bloodedly share with them why they objected to the amendments. In a meeting with the chairs of CHP's provincial branches to discuss party's strategy for the referendum, Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> I want you to listen to me carefully. You will tell people the truth (about these amendments) without arguing, excluding or stereotypes but based on real

> knowledge (on the content of the amendment). This referendum is not about electing party. I understand your excitement, but we must keep it under control with our wisdom. We will have to control what we will say and how we will say it (…) Because it is not about a party A or party B. It is a matter of country, democracy, peaceful co-existence. It is not about right or left, Kemalist or nationalist, secular or conservative. We all have responsibility ("Hayırlı bir iş," 2017).

Second, in order to emphasize on the referendum was about the future of the country rather than any political party, the CHP decided not to use the party's own logo, flags and symbols but only Turkey's national flag in its campaign ("Korkuyorlar biz," 2017; "CHP'den gençlere," 2017). Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> During the campaign, no one will carry CHP flags. For it is not a matter of CHP. It is not a general election. It is about our motherland, our democracy, our flag ("Hayırlı bir iş," 2017).

Third, the CHP decided not to build on its "No" campaign on conventional election rallies but to rather concentrate on smaller closed meetings with the representatives of different societal groups. Given the AKP Government's domination of the conventional media, the CHP advised its local branches to use social media and concentrate on in-person meetings with the voters. In a meeting with CHP MPs and members of the party assembly, Kılıçdaroğlu underlined "We will not the make the propaganda to ourselves. Our base will say "No" anyway", ordering the campaigners to reach out to different groups of the society ("Hayır evleriyle," 2017).

Unlike the "No" campaign of the CHP, which deliberate chose not to attack the "Yes" camp, the "Yes" campaign carried out by the AKP and the MHP was predominantly based on who the "No"-sayers were and what would happen if they won the referendum. As a matter of fact, all prominent face of the "Yes" campaign, namely President Erdoğan, Prime Minister Yıldırım and MHP leader Bahçeli,

associated the “No” campaign with terror and claimed that if it won the referendum, chaos would take over. They strategized to portray the HDP as the main “No”-sayer and present the main opposition CHP as its collaborator. President Erdoğan, for instance, said during his campaign:

> Those who want to divide and fragment this country, who are against our flag, and who are against what is national and native in this country say “No”. The main opposition cooperate with them (“Hayırı teröre,” 2017).

> Kandil (referring to the PKK, whose HQs of PKK are in Kandil Mountain) say to say “No” in the referendum. We cannot ignore this. A person is together with those whom he or she loves. If the terrorist organization says “No”, well we should let our people know. I tell my people not to make this mistake. If I say “No”, my vote will go to Kandil. If I say “No”, the country will go to instability. If I say “No”, the security will go away. “No” is equal to ditches (referring to the ditches dug by the PKK following the end of the Peace Process in August 2015) (“Yine Kandil’le,” 2017).

Similarly, Prime Minister Yıldırım also focused on the CHP’s alleged partnership with the “separatist” HDP while calling on the voters to say “Yes” to the proposed amendments:

> The HDP and the CHP get their feet on the same ground. They did it in the parliament and apparently, they will join the choir of “No”-sayers in the streets. Look at the party of İsmet İnönü and Atatürk; it links arms with those who divide the country (“Hayır demeyi,” 2017).

> Who says “No”? The high-raking commanders of the PKK. The runaway gang of FETÖ terrorists. These are terrorists! If these say “No”, well of course, we will say “Yes”. There are other “No”-sayers as well: The HDP and the CHP. The CHP apparently reposes on the PKK (“Yıldırım’dan hayırcıya,” 2017).

Finally, MHP leader Bahçeli, too, attributed the “No” saying parties with terrorist organizations and claimed that should they win the referendum chaos would take over the country:

> CHP, HDP, FETÖ, PKK, DHKP-C, ÖDP, EMEP, TKP; they all come together and attack us. They ask why we say “Yes” (…) The CHP will again get a thick ear from the people and with its close relative HDP, they will sow the wind and reap the whirlwind (“Bahçeli Erdoğan’ı,” 2017).

> If the prosed amendments are not ratified in the referendum, there will be a mess in Turkey and the internal and external enemies will make use of it ("Bahçeli kaos," 2017).

In sum, the "Yes" camp used in their campaign the axis of terror and security, which President Erdoğan had been using from the 2015 election cycles onwards. The idea of this axis was that as terrorist organizations the PKK and the FETÖ[14] were always against President Erdoğan's presidential aspirations, so what these organizations were against had to be rightful and anyone else who was against this rightful thing served to the interests of these organizations. While making the propaganda of this idea, the "Yes" camp criminalized the pro-Kurdish HDP, which was relatively easy given the ongoing conflict with the PKK and accused the main opposition CHP of cooperating with the HDP, because they were basically together in the "No" camp. This was how the "Yes" camp used the axis of terror and security to polarize the society and consolidate their voter bases to prevent them from being persuaded by the de-polarizing "No" campaign.

The CHP, on the other hand, carefully chose its emphases and arguments that could be found regardable and rational by the voter bases of the AKP and the MHP in order to undermine the axis of security and terror and encouraged people to look at the amendments from another axis. These carefully chosen arguments were of a kind, which would not alarm and polarize but on the contrary help de-consolidate the would-be hesitant among the AKP and MHP voters. For instance, as a response to the statements from Erdoğan, Yıldırım and Bahçeli on the possibility of chaos in case of a rejection of the amendments in the referendum, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu continuously underlined in his campaign that a "No" victory would not unseat

[14] Fethullahist Terrorist Organization. The acronym that the AKP Government used for referring to Gülenists

President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Yıldırım and that they would continue to govern, in an attempt to not only encourage but also reassure the potential "No"-sayers within the bases of the AKP and the MHP:

> They say that if "No" wins the referendum, chaos would take over. If "No" wins, Turkey would have a big sigh of relief. The TBMM would continue legislating. The law proposals would continue coming to the TBMM and in the TBMM we would continue discussing. Everyone would go back their constitutional limits. President, Prime Minister, the main opposition… All would do their jobs like same as they have ("Hayır Türkiye'ye nefes," 2017).

> Why would chaos take over, if "No" wins the referendum? The president and the prime minister would preserve their seats ("Şehit yakınından," 2017).

In order to turn the axis of politics from security and terror, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu emphasized on societal differences and their peaceful co-existence. He underlined throughout the campaign that people could disagree in many respects and yet they could coexist in a peaceful manner. He argued that by letting "one man" take charge, the proposed amendments would make the political regime in the country less tolerant and democratic and more exclusionary, thereby jeopardizing the democracy and peace in the society:

> This constitution should have embraced all 80 million people. We do not accept a constitution prepared by a single party (…) They cannot explain the people why they say "Yes", and they label the "No"-sayers as terrorists. We should not allow this polarization but on the contrary express our opinions in a calm and cold-blooded way. We should also listen to others' opinions. We may disagree but we live together (…) What would happen, if all the authorities were given to one person. Some people may think that it would be very good. Fine. But what if that one person makes a mistake? The FETÖ tried so hard for all these years to capture the state but with these amendments it would not take so long. You would capture the state if you could deceive one person ("Kamplaştırazlar," 2017).

> If we want to live together in this country, the constitution must ensure the safety of life and property for all of us. It must be the constitution of all of us. It must be document of consensus. Whether we live in the east or the west, we want to live together regardless of our identities or lifestyles. The constitution must guarantee this for all of us. But this constitution would lead us into an uncertain path (…) It is the parliament that represents the will of all 80 million people. It is the parliament that conducted the War of Independence, the Cyprus Peace Operation and repulsed the coup attempt in

> 2016. No one should abolish the parliament except the nation itself. If you think that one person should not have the authority to do it, you should vote "No" (…) Oneness is peculiar to God. Err is human ("Şimdi aklımızı," 2017).
>
> In this beautiful country, we want to live together. We want to live peacefully in this country. The biggest ground that can ensure these for all of us is a freedom-based constitution. However, the proposed amendments will not solve any problem of this country ("Bu değişiklik hiçbir," 2017).
>
> Whoever he or she is, one person's reason cannot be more superior the reason of the nation. These amendments give one person to head the state, the party, the government, the parliament, and the courts. Giving all the authorities of the state to one person in an unrestrained way would only cause cruelty for the people ("Muhtarlara anlattı," 2017).
>
> So far over a thousand bills have been passed unanimously through the parliament. Then, why should be give the authorities of this parliament to one person? What if that person makes a mistake. All 80 million people would pay for it ("Daha ne istiyorsun," 2017).

In sum, the overall "No" campaign of the main opposition CHP was conducted with arguments based on the content of the proposed amendments. While criticizing the hyper-presidency that the amendments envisaged, the CHP did not necessarily assume Erdoğan to hold that position. Rather, they particularly emphasized that the system would lead to a "one-person rule", whereby regardless of who that person was the system would not function well due to its structural problems. Through its emphases on the diversity of the society, the peaceful co-existence of diverse groups and the perils of the "one-person rule", the "No" campaign of the CHP aimed to undermine the dominant axis of politics based on terror and security, which the "Yes" camp tried to impose throughout its campaign.

4.6.3 Concluding remarks

From the aftermath of the June 2015 General Elections onwards, the AKP pursued the strategy keeping the power through a security-based axis of politics. The terrorist attacks and the bloody coup attempt in 2016 made it possible for the AKP

Government to reinforce its grip on power. Ahead of the 2017 Constitutional Referendum, security was undoubtedly the number one political priority in the eyes of the electorate, as it had been ahead of the rerun elections in November 2015, due to the recurrent terrorist attacks and the coup attempt. As the AKP Government had implied in November 2015 that voting for itself had been requirement for security, it did pretty much the same ahead of the referendum, utterly arguing that voting "Yes" was a requirement for a safe Turkey. Meanwhile, the criminalization of the pro-Kurdish HDP was instrumentalized by the AKP Government as a functional tool in order to divide and embroil the opposition and to prevent them from building a solid bloc against the ruling alliance.

Turning Turkey into an executive presidency was brought up by MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli on the grounds that the de facto situation created by President Erdoğan would rather be legalized. Under the circumstances of state of emergency, the package of constitutional amendments presented to the parliament was hurriedly passed through the commission and parliamentary phases. The parliamentary sessions often witnessed physical fights and the content of the package was barely debated. The support of the MHP helped AKP take the package to the referendum.

Only six months after the failed coup attempt, Turkey found itself in the campaign trail for a constitutional referendum. Due to the government crackdown, after which most of its political cadre was imprisoned, the pro-Kurdish HDP conducted its most difficult campaign ever, which it tried to use as an opportunity to declare that it was still strong in the eyes of its voter base.

The presentation of the HDP as a criminal organization by the ruling alliance did not pose a huge problem for the "No" camp, as the "No"-sayer opposition groups did not need to make an official cooperation with one another due to bipolar

atmosphere created by the referendum, which automatically brings together those who make the same choice albeit for quite different reasons. Therefore, the CHP could conduct its campaign without having to collaborate with the pro-Kurdish HDP.

Nevertheless, this did not stop the "Yes" camp of the AKP and the MHP from associating the "No"-sayers with terror. Throughout their campaign, both the AKP and the MHP talked a lot more about how the "No"-sayers and, particularly, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu sided with terrorist organizations than the actual content of the proposed amendments.

The main opposition, CHP, on the other hand played a rather central role in the "No" campaign. Being aware that for a slightest chance to win the "No" campaign needed votes from the bloc of the AKP and the MHP, the CHP conducted a pretty de-polarizing campaign. The goal of the de-polarizing "No" campaign was to dissolve the "Yes" bloc with a 62 percent potential and pull a part of them to the "No" camp by means of de-polarizing campaign methods and plausible argumentation. Through the language that it managed to use persistently throughout the campaign and the sensible emphases on the perils of the "one-person rule", the risks that it poses for the peaceful coexistence of diverse groups in the society and the fact that the government would continue to rule the country even if the "No" camp won the referendum, the main opposition CHP undermined the axis of politics based on terror and security, which was imposed by the AKP and the MHP throughout the campaign.

Although the constitutional amendment package envisaged a presidency that was utterly designed for Erdoğan, the "No" camp led by the CHP did not build its campaign on attacks against Erdoğan. Particularly, the CHP's preference not to engage in personal polemics with Erdoğan, to build its "No" campaign on systemic

objections and not to use its party logo throughout the campaign points out a persistent depolarization strategy, like in the June 2015 General Elections, in which Erdoğan's AKP lost its majority in the parliament for the first time since it came to power. The preference of this persistent depolarization strategy pursued in 2015 clearly indicates the continuation of the learning process in the process of strategy development and implementation by the opposition.

4.2 The 2018 General/Presidential Elections

4.2.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

The Constitutional Referendum, which was held on April 16, 2017, was lost by a very short head by the "No" camp of the opposition that got 48,8 percent of the votes against the 51,8 percent of the votes received by "Yes" camp of the ruling AKP and the nationalist MHP. On the day of the referendum, The Supreme Election Council (YSK) made a very controversial decision before the official end of the voting process and ruled that the unstamped ballots would be considered valid, unless there was any evidence proving their fraudulence, thereby lifting one of its long-standing rulings.

Even though there was no evidence that this particular ruling of the YSK had a decisive effect on the final result of the referendum, given the slight difference between the number of "Yes" and "No" votes, this ruling aroused suspicion, particularly among the "No"-sayers. As a result, protests took place in at least 14 provinces including Istanbul, Ankara and İzmir, to contest the ruling of the YSK and thereby the results of the referendum ("Referandum protestolarında," 2017). The main opposition CHP that had played a central role in the "No" campaign neither organized nor supported these protests. Upon critiques that accused him of remaining

passive and not contesting the referendum results strongly enough, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu later made the following statement:

> We heard some rumors that there were armed people on the other side. Due to concerns that terrible incidents might happen, we decided not to risk anyone by calling on people to get to the streets ("Kılıçdaroğlu ilk kez," 2017).

However, Kılıçdaroğlu also said that he was certain that the "No" campaign won the referendum and the ruling of the YSK created a legitimacy problem:

> We did not compete in equal terms. In spite of this, let me say something which I am one hundred percent sure of, we got a result where the "No" votes prevailed (…) A ruling by the YSK changed everything completely and called the legitimacy of this referendum into question. They did not refrain from making a clearly unlawful decision (Ibid.).

At the end, the opposition did not do anything else to contest the referendum results. Meanwhile, the repression that the AKP Government started against the opposition with under the conditions of the State of Emergency was going on. Following prominent politicians from the pro-Kurdish HDP including the co-leaders of the party, CHP MP Enis Berberoğlu, who had been accused of espionage also faced prosecution. In 2017, an Istanbul court condemned Berberoğlu to 25 years imprisonment and on the day after the announcement of the verdict he was arrested and sent to prison ("Dokunulmazlıkların kaldırılmasından," 2020).

Following the announcement of court decision, an extraordinary meeting of CHP's Central Executive Board was called and after the meeting the leader of the party Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu declared that he would embark on a march from Ankara to Istanbul ("Kılıçdaroğlu yarın Güvenpark'ta," 2017). In a TV interview that he gave in Ankara in the night before the "Justice March", Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> Patience, patience, patience… We have no patience anymore. We are losing Turkey. The state is totally out of joint. What we are going to do is to awake and inform the society. This we will do by resisting. Resistance does not necessarily mean smashing things up or getting armed. I have always warned

> our party organizations not to get provoked and get in any conflict with the security forces. But we should declare the whole world that there is no justice in Turkey (…) I will have a single banner that reads "Justice". I will walk until justice is secured. It will begin from Ankara to Istanbul. I do not know how many days it will last (…) It is a march that is open to all. Those who will attend will never get provoked (…) Even if they ban our march because of the state of emergency, we will walk anyway so that the whole world sees it ("Kılıçdaroğlu adalet yürüyüşünü," 2017).

During the march, Kılıçdaroğlu was joined by many politicians from other opposition parties as well as artists, authors, musicians, unionists and hundreds of thousand ordinary citizens. The 450-km-long march lasted 22 days and ended in Maltepe on June 9, 2017, with the "Justice Rally" attended by hundreds of thousands of people. The Justice March was clearly the biggest opposition demonstration since the Gezi Park Protests in 2013 and was in many ways an unprecedented action to be taken by a leader of political opposition.

The Justice March was slammed by the AKP and the MHP. President Erdoğan stated that the march was organized to support the terrorists. He said:

> You cannot persuade anyone that your goal is justice if you organize a march in support of terrorists and their sympathizers, something you would never consider doing in opposition to terrorist organizations ("Erdoğan CHP'nin temsil," 2017).

Similarly, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım claimed that the march was supported by terrorist organizations. Referring to the fact that HDP representatives also joined Kılıçdaroğlu for a stage of the march, he said: "A march applauded by separatist terrorists is not a march for justice, it is an unaware march" ("Adalet değil gaflet," 2017). Finally, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli, too, claimed that the march was supported by the PKK, the FETÖ and "the enemies of the Turk" ("Bahçeli'den Adalet Yürüyüşü'ne," 2017).

Although it was organized by the CHP and led by the leader of the party Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, it was prohibited to carry party flags during the Justice March. Presenting merely "justice" as the main demand of the march, Kılıçdaroğlu became the leader of an inclusionary and de-polarizing cause and the voice all societal groups who claimed to experience injustice and particularly of the entire "No" camp in the referendum.

The post-referendum process brought about novelties not only for the CHP but also elsewhere in the opposition. The fact that the proposed amendments were ratified by 51,8 percent in the referendum despite the 62 percent potential, the total vote share of the AKP and the MHP in the latest general elections, means that a group of their voters did not vote "Yes". This was the main objective of the de-polarizing strategy pursued by the CHP in its "No" campaign. However, the biggest factor that contributed to this result was the discontent within the MHP that had started after the rerun elections in November 2015, become deeper with Bahçeli's green light to the presidential system and turned into "No" votes in the referendum.

The discontent within the MHP started following the rerun elections in November 2015. As a result of Bahçeli's obstinacy not to say yes to any coalition option, rerun elections had to be held and the MHP lost almost five percent of its votes to the AKP, which resulted in the loss of half of its seats in the parliament. Right after the elections, a faction within the MHP led by party's prominent figures such as Meral Akşener, Ümit Özdağ, Koray Aydın and Sinan Oğan challenged Bahçeli for party's leadership. The dissidents joined forces, collected enough number of signatures, and called an extraordinary party congress. The MHP leadership refused to participate in the congress, declared it to be unlawful, and filed legal action. In the end, the court upheld the argument that sufficient signatures had been

collected and ordered the MHP leadership to call a congress ("Mahkeme MHP kararının," 2016). However, two other courts controversially overturned this decision and suspended the call ("MHP'de kurultaya durdurma," 2016). In the end, the YSK struck down the case and ordered the MHP not to hold a congress ("YSK kararını verdi," 2016).

The hurried involvement of two local courts and the YSK in the ongoing judicial process was commonly considered as an interference by the AKP Government that had a stake in helping increasingly compliant Bahçeli keep his seat and preventing Akşener, who was known with her firm opposition to the AKP, from capturing the MHP leadership. However, Minister of Justice Bekir Bozdağ strongly denied the accusations ("Adalet Bakanı Bozdağ MHP," 2016). The dissidents whose challenges against Bahçeli's leadership had remained inconclusive were subsequently expelled from the MHP.

After having campaigned for the rejection of proposed constitutional amendments in the referendum around the country, the dissidents ex-MHP members accelerated their preparations for a new party ("MHP'li muhalifler," 2017). After completed their preparations, they declared the foundation of the Good Party (İYİP) in October 2017. Meral Akşener was elected as party leader. As a prominent politician in both nationalist and center-right circles, Akşener's leadership was expected to make the İYİP a center of attraction for both anti-AKP secular nationalists and former center right voters. Although it would not be an easy task to simultaneously attract both these groups, the İYİP was believed to fill an important vacuum, particularly after MHP's decision to ally with the ruling AKP, by creating a party, which would-be frustrated AKP voters that were still too far the CHP would be able to turn to.

After the approval of the constitutional amendments by referendum, the first general elections would be held in November 2019. However, despite several statements by both President Erdoğan MHP leader Bahçeli that the elections would definitely be held as scheduled in 2019 (“Erken seçim arşivi,” 2018), upon MHP leader’s suggestion, President Erdoğan declared that he and Bahçeli reached an agreement to call for snap elections on June 24, 2018.

4.2.2 Description of the opposition strategy

The 2018 General Elections would be the first general elections to be held after Turkey’s transition to the presidential system of government in the 2017 Constitutional Referendum, whereby the presidential and parliamentary elections are conducted simultaneously.

The change in the system of government, in which candidates need at least 50 percent + 1 vote to be elected executive president, paved the way for the advent of politics of pre-election alliances, whereby both larger and smaller political parties meet each other’s needs. While the larger parties need the support of the smaller parties to have their presidential candidate elected, and in this regard every vote counts, the smaller parties need the bigger parties to find a way to make it to the parliament, particularly in case they would not be able to do this alone.

In a clearly non-democratic context, like Turkey after 2016, the dynamics within the alliance were certainly not the same in the ruling bloc as in the opposition. As the ruling bloc has the chance to set the rules of the game in line with its roadmap to victory, something typical in all electoral authoritarian contexts, the opposition camp is usually obliged to make their moves by quick reactions just to stay in the game. In this respect, the call for snap elections in June 2018 was a move that the

ruling bloc of the AKP and the MHP took enough time to plan. It was absolutely part of that plan to catch the opposition off guard and unprepared. However, the main opposition CHP and the newly founded İYİP were able to quickly realize the intention of the ruling bloc to prevent the latter participating in the elections on the grounds that it did not complete its organization around the country as required by the law for eligibility to run in the elections. Yet, a quick and critical move by CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu to transfer 15 of its MPs to the İYİP ruined the ruling bloc's plan and by founding a parliamentary group the İYİP became eligible to run in the elections.

A quick reaction given by two opposition parties in consensus to a move of the ruling bloc was quite effective to disconcert their plans (Sözen, 2019a). However, such an agility was very difficult to perform at every turn. After all, the opposition was made of political parties from quite different ideological backgrounds, and they certainly did not have the adequate time to work out all their differences to come up with an all-inclusive joint strategy for an election that would take place in 66 days from its announcement.

Therefore, as opposed to what was originally envisaged by CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who was explicitly in favor of an all-encompassing alliance for the parliamentary elections and also, allegedly, a joint presidential candidate, the opposition parties agreed on a narrower agenda based on the formation of the Nation Alliance that would consist of three political parties: The main opposition CHP, the İYİP and the Felicity Party (SP). The alliance was designed as a loose election cooperation based on some mutual practical benefits arising from the new provisions in the electoral law and a declaration of a value-based common vision but not a comprehensive roadmap on a joint pre-election and post-election strategy.

As a result, the common strategy had two pillars. First, each opposition party would nominate a presidential candidate and try to maximize its candidate's vote share in order to push the elections to the second round. If an opposition candidate made it to the second tour, other candidates would support him/her on terms that would be set after the first round. Second, for the parliamentary elections these four parties would be under the umbrella of the Nation Alliance to benefit from the novelties of the electoral law, elaborated below, but would still have their own MP lists.

As mentioned above, the pro-Kurdish HDP was not a part of the Nation Alliance since it was not invited. Although CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu stated several times that he was in favor of the broadest opposition alliance possible to nullify the 10 percent electoral threshold for all opposition parties, the İYİP did not agree to be in the same alliance with the HDP. The exclusion of the HDP from the opposition alliance created an unsurprising rift between itself and the Nation Alliance. After all, it was a fact that neither in the first nor in the second round would the National Alliance be able to defeat President Erdoğan without the support of the HDP voters. However, as the HDP voters had already their own candidate to vote for in the first round, the Nation Alliance indirectly postponed this issue until the second round.

4.2.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

In March 2018, right before the announcement of the snap elections, the long-awaited amendments in the electoral law, which were prepared to harmonize the existing laws to the new system of government, were presented to the parliament.

The new provisions in the electoral law not only allowed the previously illegal pre-election alliances but also provided two main advantages to the allying parties: First, the 10 percent electoral threshold would not anymore apply to individual parties that are a part of an alliance but the alliance itself, which meant allying with a large party would automatically nullify the threshold for parties that might not be able to cross it alone. Second, as per the new provision, the parliamentary seats would first be distributed to alliances, which would create a benefit for the entire alliance under the d'Hondt system and also make it possible for the residual votes of the allying parties to turn into extra seats for the alliance ("Seçim ittifakı kanunu," 2018).

The AKP and the MHP that had been acting in cooperation since Bahçeli's suggestion to turn Turkey into an executive presidency, designed the amendments in the electoral law quite carefully in line with both parties' needs. First, the foundation of the İYİP became a major source of concern for the nationalist MHP. In several public opinion polls, the MHP seemed to have lost a considerable amount of vote to the İYİP and was thus not totally sure if it could cross the threshold alone. Second, since both the AKP and the MHP appealed to a more or less similar voter base, their unity under a single alliance would boost the total number of their MPs. So, probably assuming that the opposition parties would never manage to build a broad alliance, the AKP and the MHP amended the electoral law in a such a favorable way for their People's Alliance ("AKP ve MHP'nin Meclis'e," 2018).

In short, when President Erdoğan called snap elections in April 2018, almost everything was prepared for his bid for reelection: The new election law and the alliance. All he needed to do was to campaign and to create a majority in support of him, which he had done rather masterfully over the years.

The opposition, on the other hand, was yet to set a course for its election strategy. The opposition did not have an option but to accommodate itself to the rules set by its rival, the People's Alliance. However, before anything else, the opposition had to prevent a possible disaster, which was probably a part of the strategy of the ruling bloc by hurriedly calling for snap elections. In April 2018, the newly founded İYİP, which was only six months old, was still yet to complete half of its organization around the country, which was a normal course of action to be adopted by a new political party to qualify as eligible to participate in the elections. Due to the unexpected call for snap elections, this process was put in jeopardy. However, with a rather quick und unprecedented move, the CHP agreed to transfer 15 of its MPs to the İYİP so that they could form a parliamentary group, which was a shortcut procedure to get eligible for the elections. While announcing his party's decision, the deputy head of CHP's parliamentary group Engin Altay said: "In an attempt to prevent the YSK from making an undemocratic decision, 15 MPs resigned from our party and joined the İYİP for the sake of democracy" ("CHP'den 15 milletvekili," 2018). İYİ leader Akşener called the move of the People's Alliance a "trap" and thanked the CHP:

> They set a trap together and its was nullified. The behavior of Mr. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu deserves all the credit for overcoming the obstacles posed against the law and the will of people. It is a historically democratic behavior. It will be remembered in glowing terms in our political and democratic history ("Çalışmadığınız yerden," 2018).

CHP's decision to act in solidarity with the İYİP was a milestone for the cooperation between the two parties. However, there were will a great deal of decisions to make about the election strategy. It was still unknown whether the opposition would support a single candidate to face off President Erdoğan like in the 2014 Presidential Elections and which parties the alliance would be composed of.

The opposition parties negotiated on the possible strategies to be pursued in the presidential elections against the People's Alliance of the AKP and the MHP. SP leader Temel Karamollaoğlu conducted a shuttle diplomacy to convince the leaders of the CHP, İYİP and several other opposition parties to support the candidacy of Abdullah Gül, former president and AKP member ("SP'den CHP'ye," 2018). The CHP was reportedly preferring a single candidate to be supported by the entire opposition over the strategy of each party having its own candidate (Akşener'i ikna," 2018) and Kılıçdaroğlu gave an affirmative signal by saying that the CHP was ready to make all necessary sacrifices ("Kuruluştaki gibi," 2018). However, despite the reports all opposition leaders were positive ("Saadet Partisi'nden etkili," 2018), İYİP leader Akşener did not agree to the plan, insisting that she would be the presidential nominee of her party ("Adaylığım kesin," 2018).

Gül's potential candidacy against President Erdoğan and Akşener's non-compliance with it were considered as a "headline" and, thus, were the focal matter of debate in the media. However, Akşener stated that her objection was not to Gül's candidacy but to the overall idea of a joint candidate. In her opinion, the more candidates there would be in the first round, the better it was:

> The more candidates the opposition have, the more democratic the first round will be. So, the voters would not feel enforced to vote for a particular candidate. In this way, the vote share of the People's Alliance will decrease. However, if a particular candidate is imposed to the voters, then some of them might not go to the ballot box, which case would be beneficial for the People's Alliance and not the opposition ("Ortak adayda uzlaşı," 2018).

Akşener's stance took the opposition to a particular strategic path for the presidential elections, which had two pillars: First, each opposition party would nominate a candidate that would be most likely to consolidate the party's voter base and maximize his/her vote share in the first round in order to increase the turnout in

favor of the broader opposition camp and to push the elections to the second round. Second, if an opposition candidate made it to the second tour, other candidates and parties would presumably support him/her on terms that would be set after the first round. As a matter of fact, Akşener made it very clear that if it was CHP's candidate who made it to the second round, they would support him/her in full force ("CHP'nin adayı kalırsa," 2018).

As for the strategy for the parliamentary elections, there were also certain disagreements. The new provisions in the electoral law allowed the political parties to be free from the record high 10 percent electoral threshold by coming together under a single umbrella without having to have a joint list. CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu believed that the opposition would have better chances against the People's Alliance of the AKP and the MHP, if all actors of the opposition could join forces and create a synergy that would be reminiscent of that of the "No" campaign for the 2017 Constitutional Referendum. Therefore, he put forward a plan called "zero-threshold", whereby all parties except for the AKP and the MHP would come together under an electoral alliance in order to totally nullify the 10 percent threshold ("Formül sıfır baraj," 2018). The İYİP agreed to the plan with the precondition that the pro-Kurdish HDP would not be a part of it mainly due to the intra-opposition fault lines between her party and the HDP. In her meeting with CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu, İYİP leader Akşener reportedly grounded this objection by emphasizing on the potential support that the polls found out her party will get from the MHP voters. According to Akşener, if İYİP were in the same alliance with the HDP, those MHP voters could give up supporting the İYİP ("Gül'ü tabanınıza," 2018).

Despite Kılıçdaroğlu's persistent statements on the necessity of an all-encompassing "zero-threshold" alliance, the İYİP did not change its mind and the

Nation Alliance was formed by the CHP, the İYİP and the SP. The alliance was built on rather a short protocol that included a common vision rather than a set of concrete common goals and a roadmap as to how to achieve them ("Millet İttifakı resmen," 2015).

Consequently, the opposition cooperation ahead of the 2018 General Elections did not go beyond a loose alliance based on practical advantages offered by the new provisions of the electoral law which were namely nullifying the electoral threshold and maximizing the number of MPs. Actually, the parties were well aware of the fact that they would need each other both to win the elections and, if they do, to rule the country. However, the main idea behind the strategy was to postpone the cooperation until it becomes indispensable. So, instead of coming up with a joint strategy, the allying opposition parties merely kind of vowed that if the elections were inconclusive in the first round, they would support whoever would face off President Erdoğan in the second round. Until then, each of them would compete with its own candidate and its own strategy.

The Nation Alliance's decision not to let the pro-Kurdish HDP in was strategically a controversial choice. Not being a member of any alliance, the HDP was almost the only party, which still had a threshold to cross, and, given its history with the threshold, this predicament increased its frustration towards the Nation Alliance, which was also reflected in the first half of its campaign. On the other hand, the opposition parties desperately needed the support of the HDP voters to have the slightest chance to defeat President Erdoğan in the runoff. Therefore, reassuring the HDP voters or, in a broader sense, the Kurdish voters would be a task to be fulfilled by the opposition candidates during their campaigns.

4.2.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

From 2002, when the AKP came to power, until 2018, the opposition never developed and pursued a joint depolarization strategy. In this regard, the campaign of the opposition for the 2018 General Elections was not an exception. However, in previous elections, the main opposition CHP had always incorporated de-polarizing elements to its campaign as an integral part of its overall election strategy and regardless of its success, this de-polarizing strategy had always had somewhat an impact on how the incumbent AKP and the opposition parties positioned themselves vis-à-vis one another, as it was, for instance, perfectly the case ahead of the June 2015 General Elections. In the campaign for the 2018 General Elections, this was clearly not the case mainly because, among other reasons, the campaign was substantially dominated by the presidential candidates, which particularly for the CHP created a certain disconnection between presidential candidate's campaign and the party's years-long policies.

In fact, since the 2017 Constitutional Referendum and the subsequent Justice March, main opposition CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu had developed a different strategy. He believed that in order to end President Erdoğan's power the opposition parties needed to set aside the party differences as much as possible and concentrate on an alternative axis of politics, which would finally allow the opposition camp to get majority support ("Kılıçdaroğlu ilk kez," 2017). Right after the government's call for snap elections, Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> No one should regard the June 24 elections as a party election. This is a not a matter of parties but a common matter of our country (…) We will be together with all pro-democracy forces without making any discrimination. Let me address the voters of the AKP and the MHP. I know that they also demand democracy. We will rebuild the democracy with them, without making any discrimination between the voters ("Türkiye meselesi," 2018).

Looking at his preferences both in 2014 Presidential Elections and initial negotiations ahead of the 2018 General Elections, it is possible to infer that a joint presidential candidate supported by the entire opposition camp was more suited to Kılıçdaroğlu's strategic thinking, whereby cooperation and depolarization should complement each other. However, since the opposition parties ended up with their own presidential candidates, the opposition campaign was not based on a joint and all-encompassing depolarization strategy, as proposed by Kılıçdaroğlu. Therefore, to analyze the (de-)polarizing effects of the opposition campaign, we have to look at the individual campaigns of the presidential candidates.

The campaigns and overall discourses of the presidential candidates in the opposition camp were significantly shaped by the strategic choices made by the opposition at the beginning. As underlined above, the strategy that the opposition parties ended up agreeing on was that by motivating and consolidating their respective bases as much as possible the candidates would contribute to the increase in turnout in favor of the opposition and push the elections to the second round. The opposition was generally hopeful that President Erdoğan would not be get a majority support in the first round considering that the "Yes" camp could barely win the referendum a year before. However, a significant difference of this election was that unlike in the referendum the presidential candidates were struggling not only for a common goal of, say, pushing the elections to the second round but also for being the candidate to face off President Erdoğan in the runoff. This obviously created an inevitable competition between the candidates within the opposition camp.

Because the opposition suddenly found itself 60 days away from the first general elections to take place after Turkey's transition into an executive presidency and thus did not have much time to work on a comprehensive campaigning strategy,

the opposition's campaign was predominantly based on mass rallies where the candidates take to the stage around the country.

İYİP's candidate was clear from the very beginning. During the foundation of the İYİP, the leader of the party Akşener had already announced her willingness to run for president and she said that it was because of this commitment that she disagreed[15] to the plan of a joint presidential candidate to be supported by all opposition parties ("CHP'nin adayı kalırsa," 2018).

CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, on the other hand, who had already made it public that he would not seek the presidential nomination as a chairman of a political party ("Kılıçdaroğlu bir partinin," 2018), picked Muharrem İnce, a senior CHP MP. As far as the above-mentioned strategy was concerned, İnce was probably one of the best possible candidates, who would be even better than Kılıçdaroğlu at energizing and eventually consolidating the party's own voter base. As a good orator known with his witty repartee and a senior CHP MP, who had worked in many capacities at every level in the party since his youth, İnce's candidacy was a clear message that Kılıçdaroğlu had accommodated himself to the strategy agreed on by the entire opposition, whereby each party was set to exhilarate their respective bases and, if possible, the entire opposition camp. The candidacy of Muharrem İnce, indeed, achieved this goal by means of arguably the most crowded mass rallies in the history of the republic ("Belki de Türkiye'nin," 2018).

It was an enigma, whether CHP's presidential candidate Muharrem İnce would build on his party's years-long experience of depolarization during election

[15] Although according to the media reports Akşener always opposed to the idea of a joint presidential candidate from the very beginning, some people including İsmail Ok, former MP from İYİP, Levent Gültekin, journalist, and Prof. Özer Sencar, CEO of MetroPoll Polling Company, claimed that she had initially agreed to Gül's joint candidacy and then suddenly changed her mind. Akşener never publicly confirmed or even talked about these claims ("Özer Sencar: Mansur," 2022; "Akşener Gül'ün adaylığını," 2022; Gültekin, 2022).

campaigns, given his harsh opposition to Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership and his executive council, which he had utterly showed in his leadership challenges against Kılıçdaroğlu in 2014 and 2018 ("Muharrem İnce CHP genel," 2014; "Muharrem İnce CHP genel," 2018). In earlier stages of his campaign, İnce seemed quite focused on the need for depolarizing elements for the campaign to be able to appeal not only to CHP's voter base but also to others, which was an indispensable task to have a slightest shot at winning the presidential elections in the second round. In his first speech as presidential candidate, İnce said:

> I will be the president of all people, not only of CHP members or those who are in this hall but all 80 million people: Of AKP voters, HDP voters, MHP voters, SP voters, Turks, Kurds, Alevis, Sunnis ("Herkesin cumhurbaşkanı," 2018).

Inclusionary, reconciliatory and de-polarizing steps, indeed, made a mark on the early phases of İnce's campaign. After he had officially started his campaign, İnce said that he wanted the elections to be held under free and fair circumstances ("İnce'den Edirne," 2018) and that he would visit all other presidential candidates to wish them good luck including President Erdoğan and Selahattin Demirtaş, who was at the time kept in prison without any conviction. İnce said in different occasions:

> If he (referring to Erdoğan) invites me to the palace, I will go. A nation cannot get cross among each other. I will visit Selahattin Demirtaş as well. I am not such a person who binds the arm of his rival and then wrestle. Wrestling must be performed fairly. They say that those who give a signature for Akşener's candidacy are supporters of the FETÖ. How come is it possible. I am a guarantor, Akşener is not a supporter of the FETÖ. There will be a fair competition ("İnce hastalığa," 2018).

> I promise reform if I am elected president. I promise political reconciliation. We will reach a consensus, say, in education, there will be no imposition. We all, Alevis, Sunnis, conservatives, nationalists, Kurds, will reach a consensus. Because as long as we do not reach a political consensus with one another, we cannot maintain education ("Büyük uzlaşma," 2018).

During his campaign, İnce also mentioned his plans about some intractable issues in Turkey. He explained what he would do to solve the Kurdish issue, the problems of Alevis and vowed that Turkey would never have a headscarf issue again. Particularly, his statements on how he will deal with the Kurdish issue if elected attracted the attention of Kurdish voters:

> Yesterday I was in Edirne, today I am in Hakkari (…) I am here in Hakkari to build a brotherly bridge. My project is not construction. My project is peace, peaceful coexistence (…) Turkey needs reconciliation, normalization and peace, democracy, and freedom (…) We have an issue called Kurdish issue. Frankly speaking, it is an issue of morality. A politician comes to Diyarbakır or Hakkari and says good things to please Kurds and then goes somewhere completely different and forgets what he said. I promise you that I will give up politics if I cannot say tomorrow in Rize what I say to you today (…) A presidential candidate (referring to Demirtaş) cannot be kept in prison. Let him come and compete. It is totally unfair (…) They frighten people by saying if CHP comes to power, they will take your headscarf out. It is a lie! I promise all 81 million people. This issue is over. End of discussion! ("Kürt sorununa 3B," 2018).

> We will honor the Kurds and reassure the Turks. We will be frank, no secret negotiation! The address of solution is the TBMM (…) My goal is not votes; I want to solve the problem. My goal is peace, solution, consensus, and peace (…) My goal is to soften the politics, build bridges, reconciliate the nation. I have thus visited all four candidates (…) We will teach three languages to our children: The official language, Turkish, any language that is spoken at home, be it Arabic, Kurdish etc. and a foreign language, English, German, French, Russian, Chinese, to make world citizens ("Sorunu çözeceğim," 2018).

> As Sunnis we have done Alevis an injustice. Do they pay taxes, yes. Do they serve in the military, yes. Do they get martyr, yes. Then whey does not the state help the cemevis, when they help the mosques? That is unjust. One does not have to Alevi to fix this; it is enough to be human. In the first 100 days of my presidency, we will fix this issue ("Muharrem İnce biz Sünniler," 2018).

Nevertheless, when we look at the whole campaign, the inclusionary, reconciliatory, and de-polarizing parts were clearly outweighed by a discourse based on polemics with President Erdoğan in the forms of either attacking him or responding to his attacks. As İnce's campaign predominantly relied on mass rallies, which are generally attended by opposition voters, who already made up their mind,

such polemics made İnce's campaign more and more exhilarated. During those rallies, İnce was showing the videos of Erdoğan and responding him with his witty repartee. Here are various examples of such statements of İnce that he made in the mass rallies throughout his campaign:

> In 1923 Kemal Atatürk founded this republic by throwing the dirt into the sea. It seems that the waves might bring back some of the dirt. I do not want to fight but rather I want to talk about my projects. However, if he forces me to do it, I will be the best fighter ("Doktoru değiştirin," 2018).
>
> Give up breeding bad blood between me and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and look at your own comrades. None of them is with you. Abdullah Gül, Bülent Arınç, they all left you! ("Terk ettiler," 2018).
>
> I am trying to concentrate on our future in the rallies. But he is constantly attacking me, and I have got to be responding him. So, let me ask: Had you gone to Fethullah Gülen ask for his consent before you founded the AKP? ("İspatlamazsam," 2018).
>
> Binali Yıldırım claimed that I would shut down the TİKA if I am elected president. He is a liar just like his older brother (referring to President Erdoğan). Mr. Yıldırım, if you could ever prove that I said something like this, I promise you that I will do whatever you want ("600 milletvekili çok," 2018).
>
> Mr. Erdoğan, you are such a man who called İlker Başbuğ (referring to Former Chief of General Staff) a terrorist. When our army was conspired against, you were a partner and collaborator. But we will fix the army as well ("TSK ihraç," 2018).
>
> We know that tobacco is harmful for health, but Erdoğan is harmful for everything (…) I will not be like you Erdoğan. I love everybody. Erdoğan, you do not love Alevis, Kurds or leftists but I love them because I love humans. I do not make any discrimination among them ("Cam durdu mu," 2018).
>
> Erdoğan, you do not understand because you do not have a diploma (…) Look Erdoğan, we are both coming from poor families. But there is a difference between you and me: You have forgotten your past, and I have not. You have become corrupt, and I have not ("Şatafatı yıkacağım," 2018).
>
> The fake bully (referring to Erdoğan) goes everywhere and talks about my visit to Demirtaş. Erdoğan, have a long head for a second! Should I have asked you first where to visit? I even visited and bore you ("Formanızı giyip," 2018).

> First, he (referring to Erdoğan) moved to the palace and then betrayed his comrades. No one that he called comrade or brother at the beginning is with him now (…) If Erdoğan wins, we will all lose ("Torpil bitecek," 2018).

In later stages of his campaign, the polemics increasingly became more and more a dominant part of İnce's addresses in the mass rallies, which were the only occasions where he can share his vision and program. At some point, the polemics became so preponderant that İnce's speeches were turning into dialogues with Erdoğan. Such a kind of a campaigning tactic not only undermined the de-polarizing, inclusionary and reconciliatory credentials of İnce's candidacy but also prevented his election promises from being at the center of his campaign. Given the widespread media attention, such polemics are always easier to hear about.

In fact, it was not only a result of İnce's own tactical choices but also of the provoking elements of Erdoğan's campaign that shaped the course of İnce's campaign. As a matter of fact, despite the challenges of multiple candidates against him from the opposition camp, President Erdoğan solely attacked İnce throughout his campaign, almost never even mentioning the names of other candidates, and thereby aimed to present the whole elections as a simple battle between himself and the CHP. Like in previous elections, propagating its alleged ties with terrorist organizations such as the PKK and the FETÖ was the most preferred means used by President Erdoğan to undermine the CHP. Besides, Erdoğan also somewhat instrumentalized the conventional secular-conservative fault line and also continued to attack Kılıçdaroğlu during his campaign to represent that he was the mastermind behind İnce, who was just a puppet:

> The chairman of the CHP and their presidential candidate are constantly lying because they are in competition with another (…) You could not prove your claims about me having gone to Fethullah Gülen to take his consent before founding the AKP. Why are you lying? Do you have to lie just because your chairman (referring to Kılıçdaroğlu) is also a liar? ("O yazar da," 2018).

> Have you ever heard from Mr. Kemal or Mr. Muharrem (referring to Kılıçdaroğlu and İnce, respectively) that they would fight against terrorism? Of course not! After all he (referring to Kılıçdaroğlu) walked from Ankara all the way to Istanbul with those who entered the parliament with the help of the terrorists. The other one (referring to İnce) visited the one who ordered the killing of 53 citizens (referring to Demirtaş and the Kobane Protests). Isn't it necessary to slap them in the elections? ("Pişmanlık tehtidi," 2018).

> Don't we know how much our headscarfed daughters suffered from you? (…) He says his mother and sisters are headscarfed. I have respect for that, but I do not have respect for you. Because you forced them to suffer, and you have not changed ("Kıraathane savunması," 2018).

> You (referring to İnce) are together with the separatists for a couple of more votes. We have not done this. What are doing in Edirne? Who is the one you visited? Isn't he the one who caused the killing of 53 citizens? (…) You call me tired. Well, I played football for 16 years and I have been in politics for 40 years. I do not get tried so easy. But you are already done. Why? Because you do not have any other capital than lies ("OHAL'e güzelleme," 2018).

This kind of provocative discourse that was utterly dominant in Erdoğan's campaign was reciprocated with an increasingly sharpening language. While in the earlier stages of his campaign İnce had said that prosecuting Erdoğan would not be his job but the job of an independent judiciary, which, if necessary, could prosecute him as well ("Erdoğan telaşlı," 2018), in this last two rallies İnce explicitly spoke of prosecuting some government officials:

> Look, there are three institutions: Anadolu Agency, TRT and YSK. I do not have any feeling of revenge, but I will bring the executives of these three institutions to justice, to independent and impartial judiciary. Because they are committing constitutional crimes ("Ben değil biz," 2018).

> Now, there are five million people in Maltepe but no TV channel is broadcasting it live. We will prosecute live those who blocked these live broadcasts today ("Muharrem İnce finali," 2018).

Consequently, the polemic-based campaigning by President Erdoğan and CHP's candidate İnce created a political atmosphere of reactive polarization, whereby they both could consolidate their voter base. The difference was that while

this consolidation meant victory for Erdoğan, the opposition needed quite the opposite to have a slightest shot at winning.

Although President Erdoğan did not really mention about her in his mass rallies, İYİP's candidate Meral Akşener, too, conducted quite a salient campaign. At the beginning of her campaign trail, she seemed quite aware of the polarizing strategy of President Erdoğan and the fact that it had to be absolutely nullified so that the opposition could win. In an interview with journalists, she said:

> The opposition has got 49 percent of the votes. No matter who survives the first round, be it Mr. Muharrem or myself, the opposition will keep this vote. We need the votes of others. For 16 years now, Mr. Erdoğan has successfully prevented these votes from coming to the opposition. I am trying to decipher and undermine this ("Kürt kökenli," 2018).

Even though she had always been an opponent of Erdoğan and, in a way, was kicked out of the MHP mainly due to this opposition, the voter base of the People's Alliance certainly did not view Akşener, who came from a conservative nationalist background, as it viewed the CHP or its presidential candidate Muharrem İnce. Thus, Akşener could achieve more easily what it would take to de-consolidate these voters in favor of the opposition through her campaign. However, while CHP's Muharrem İnce was thrilling the anti-Erdoğan masses in the rally fields with his exhilarated campaign, Akşener could not just leave the field open for him in the race for a place in the second round of the elections. Winning the elections would eventually require some votes from the base of the People's Alliance, whereas to qualify for the second round, getting as much support as possible from the opposition voters was also crucial. Therefore, Akşener seemingly prioritized the latter goal over the former in order not to be the backmarker of this race within the opposition. Consequently, Akşener's campaign was also characterized by polemics with Erdoğan as well as harsh critiques and offensives against him:

> While FETÖ members were capturing the army and the judiciary, you just watched. And now you claim that we are connected to FETÖ, but you are not. Look at the mirror, you will see the biggest FETÖ there. Not poor people of that community, but this government that helped the FETÖ capture all these institutions will be prosecuted for aid and abet ("Yargılanacaksınız," 2018).

> The one (referring to Erdoğan) who had begun his political career with a ring, is now among the ten richest leaders of the world. He had once said: "If I will ever possess anything other than this ring, know that I have stolen it." Well, he is right ("Yandaşlarını zengin," 2018).

> He is not mentioning my name because he is frightened of me (…) They have been claiming ties between me and the FETÖ for two years. Those who have any proof about this could go to the court. However, those who put forward those claims but did not come up with any proof are walking around as ignoble ("Erdoğan benden," 2018).

Finally, the pro-Kurdish HDP was only opposition party with a parliamentary group that was not a part of an electoral alliance and had thus a 10 percent threshold to cross. The rationale behind Nation Alliance's exclusion of the HDP was that if the HDP were also in the alliance the AKP and the MHP would abuse it to propagate ties between the opposition parties and the PKK, and that this opportunity should never be given to them, otherwise it would have never been possible for the opposition to attract the attention of the AKP and MHP voter bases ("Gül'ü tabanınıza," 2018). Another argument was that the bases of the parties of the Nation Alliance were not eager for HDP's inclusion in the alliance either. To a question why the HDP was not invited to the Nation Alliance, SP leader Temel Karamollaoğlu gave the following answer:

> We should not regard it as discriminatory. While making a decision, you have to check to pulse of the public. In politics, two times two is not always equal to four. In elections, the opinions of the party executives are not sufficient, the base has to agree too ("Taban da ikna," 2018).

The reaction of the HDP to the decision of the Nation Alliance not to invite them to the alliance was not soft at all. They resented the opposition parties making

up the alliance, including the CHP whose leader had put forward the project of "Zero threshold", for excluding the Kurds and leftists. The leader of HDP's parliamentary group Filiz Kerestecioğlu said:

> There is a social democratic party (referring to the CHP) that hide behind the İYİP and its reluctance of having the HDP in the alliance. However, today we are sure that the intention was to form the alliance without the HDP from the very beginning. No matter what they do, (…) this alliance is a rightist alliance. (…) So, two rightist alliances will compete ("İttifak sağa," 2018).

Having been kept out of electoral alliances, the HDP also needed to consolidate its voter base to be able to stay above the 10 percent threshold. In the 2017 Constitutional Referendum, the share of "No" votes in the predominantly Kurdish-populated southeastern provinces was slightly lower than expected. However, falling short of the mark was not an option for the HDP in the general elections, as there was the danger of staying totally out of the parliament. Therefore, in early stages of his campaign, which he tried to conduct behind bars in Edirne, HDP's presidential candidate Selahattin Demirtaş continuously emphasized on HDP's exclusion from the opposition alliance and utterly criticized them in order to underline the gravity of the situation and thereby consolidate its voter base:

> All other parties that avoid walking together with us, act as if we did not exist and try to push us below the threshold will be ashamed of their behavior and feel embarrassed. Because the HDP, whom you are excluding and trying to destroy, is making its greatest alliance with the oppressed people. To two ambiguous alliances, there is only one alternative, which is the HDP ("Arkadaş, yoldaş," 2018).

> The CHP has never become a real alternative and hope. They cannot go anywhere with a style of politics, whereby you do not face yourself and the reality. Their rather distant approach towards the HDP is a perfect example of political shortsightedness ("Faşizmi yeneceğiz," 2018).

> I believe in dialogue and principled cooperation for solving problems through politics. I know Ms. Akşener from the parliament and I do not have any prejudice to her. However, we have never heard anything from her regarding her projects to solve the problems of this country. It is not possible to solve

> any problem with perspectives that avoids the HDP like the plague ("Tek sol aday," 2018).
>
> If the Nation Alliance had been formed with the participation of the HDP and other parties, it could have been an alliance for democracy, and one could have really come together with democratic rules. However, an alliance without the HDP could only an unprincipled cooperation based on narrow interests. Because they are very far away from accepting the HDP and its principles, they became a rightist and depthless alliance. If the HDP cannot cross the threshold, the AKP would directly get 70 undeserved seats in the parliament. This is not only our problem, but also a problem of democracy and fair representation. If we cannot cross the threshold, we would continue our political struggle out of the parliament. But the Nation Alliance should think what they would do, if the AKP easily got an undeserved majority in the parliament ("Baraj altında kalırsak," 2018).

However, in the later stages of the campaign, the HDP also gave massages about the importance of solidarity within the opposition. Particularly, with CHP's candidate Muharrem İnce's appeal to the Kurds during his campaign through his visit to Demirtaş in prison, his mass rally in Diyarbakır, where Ülkü İnce, his wife, visited Başak Demirtaş, the wife of Selahattin Demirtaş, the voter base of the HDP started to approach positively to the idea of supporting İnce in the second. Therefore, HDP spokesperson Ayhan Bilgen made an important statement, where he compared the solidarity at the electorate level in the first and second rounds:

> The solidarity in the second round will be as important and valuable as the solidarity towards HDP's bid to cross the threshold in the first round. Regardless of any candidates, we will respond with an equal maturity in the second round to the voters who support us in the first round ("Baraj dayanışmasına," 2018).

To sum up, despite the advent of an official opposition alliance, the parties competed with their own candidates and almost completely with separate campaigns and, consequently, there was not any joint strategy for depolarization pursued by the opposition ahead of the 2018 General Elections.

When examined individually, the campaigns of the opposition candidates seem to have focused on trying to beat President Erdoğan by paying back in his own coin rather than pushing him to play their own game. Furthermore, the fact that the opposition was caught unprepared, and the overall strategy hurriedly chosen by the opposition parties at the beginning did not help the opposition change the axis of politics either.

4.2.3 Concluding remarks

As previously explained in depth, the opposition was caught unprepared by the call for snap elections. The elections had originally been scheduled for November 2019 and after the foundation of the İYİP, representatives of the opposition parties were coming together on various occasions, which were significant for the debates on how opposition parties could cooperate ahead of the elections in November 2019.

It was a fact that in order to have the slightest chance of winning the elections against the ruling alliance, the already very plural voter bloc of the opposition had to be first consolidated and then also joined by a group of voters from the bases of the AKP and the MHP, so that the People's Alliance would be denied their majority. In order to achieve this very complicated objective, the opposition needed a comprehensive set of cooperation and depolarization strategies. However, on the day when the snap elections were called by President Erdoğan, Turkey was only 66 days away from the election day and thus there was no time to develop and negotiate such comprehensive strategies. The opposition, nevertheless, negotiated the issues of a joint presidential candidate and the alliance of "Zero threshold" but they failed to agree on neither of them. Consequently, the opposition cooperation remained quite

limited and was built merely upon certain practical gains such as nullifying the threshold and maximizing the total number of MPs for the allied parties.

This particular cooperation strategy was a result of a combination of enabling and disabling factors. As for the enabling factors that led to this strategy outcome, one should first mention the institutional enabling factors. The transition to executive presidential system in 2017, whereby unlike in the parliamentary system the executive branch is solely represented by the president, who is elected with the absolute majority of the total votes, necessitated some kind of an opposition cooperation, since none of the opposition parties had solely such an electoral support (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023; O. K. Salıcı, personal communication, January 18, 2023). Moreover, the construction of an alliance by the incumbent AKP with some of the former opposition parties and the new provision of the electoral law, whereby for the parties in an alliance the 10 percent electoral threshold applies to the alliance and no more to the parties are other institutional enabling factors that encouraged the actors to cooperate.

Regardless of the institutions, there was a set of other factors that incentivized, for instance, the convergence of the CHP and the İYİP. As elaborated above, the main opposition CHP obstructed the plan of the ruling bloc to prevent the newly formed İYİP from running in the snap elections by transferring 20 of its MPs to the İYİP so that it could form a parliamentary group to be automatically eligible to run in the elections. In addition to CHP's solidarity, another factor that led the İYİP to cooperate with the opposition was the experience of the June 2015 elections, in which due to the unwillingness of the MHP the opposition was unable to capitalize on AKP's very first loss of parliamentary majority. So, as a splitter of the MHP the İYİP must have learned that without cooperation the opposition would never be able

to prevail against the ruling bloc. This is also to say that in addition to institutional arrangements and learning from past experiences, the process of autocratization itself is a factor that allow the diverse opposition actors to converge.

On the other hand, there were also set of disabling factors that hindered the deepening of the opposition cooperation. First and foremost, the intra-opposition fault lines, particularly that between the İYİP and the pro-Kurdish HDP, obstructed the construction of the "alliance of the zero threshold" to be joined by all opposition parties. Secondly, the insistence of İYİP's leader Akşener on her presidential bid (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023), and thereby the obstruction of the nomination of a joint opposition presidential candidate, can be attributed with her leadership ambition. Additionally, as elaborated above in the descriptions section, Akşener's reference to her commitment to her party's organization and base, and to the fact that just like Ekmelleddin İhsanoğlu, the joint presidential candidate of the CHP and the MHP back in 2014, Abdullah Gül would not be able to sufficiently mobilize the bases of the opposition as the joint nominee points out that learning from past experiences also played a role in her insistence of the strategic choice based on multiple presidential candidates from the opposition.

The opposition's strategy based on limited cooperation for the parliamentary elections and multiple candidates for the presidential elections inevitably led to competition within the opposition, which was particularly manifested in the first round of presidential race, where the candidates contested each other for a place in the second round. This strategy had at least two problems:

First, since the parties rejected the strategy of a common candidate, they sought to nominate a candidate that could consolidate their respective bases. Particularly for the CHP as the largest opposition party, consolidating its regular

voter base in the first round would be an automatic access to the second round. However, to push the elections to the second round and have the slightest shot at winning there required a totally different strategy, whereby the opposition had to convince some voters from the base of the People's Alliance to support them. In this respect, for instance, the best candidate for the first-round goal of the parties might not even be a suitable candidate for the ultimate second-round objective, which was to win the elections. So, as the opposition parties made their strategic choices substantially for the first round, they were utterly unequipped to push the elections to the second round and, if they somehow manage it, to win against Erdoğan in the runoff. Especially, as elaborated below, the fact that the opposition did not have any joint depolarization strategy would make things much easier for Erdoğan, who had a variety of polarizing instruments that he had always successfully functionalized to create a majority and thereby win the elections.

Second, although it was an electoral cooperation based on practical gains, the Nation Alliance produced an understanding among the allied opposition parties that if one of them could make it to the second round, the other would support them. However, given the fact that there was not any cooperation or even negotiation between the alliance and the HDP, the support of the HDP voters in a possible second round should not be taken for granted. Given the resentment of the HDP for its exclusion from the alliance, it is doubtful whether the two-week time between the two rounds would suffice to win the hearts of all HDP voters for their support in the second round.

The lack of a joint depolarization strategy can well be considered as an expected result of the choice of multiple candidates and, thus, multiple campaigning strategies. However, as we witnessed ahead of the June 2015 General Elections,

when there was not yet legal grounds for interparty alliances and the opposition parties competed completely as separate entities, the opposition somehow managed to speak a common de-polarizing language and change the axis of politics to the detriment of the AKP Government. Back then, continuous attempts of the AKP Government to present the opposition as allied with terrorist organizations and to use polarization as an instrument did not suffice to prevent the opposition from successfully defining a new axis of politics.

Ahead of the 2018 General Elections, Erdoğan's strategy was fundamentally the same as the three years before. He claimed that the opposition was cooperating with the terrorists and tried to use the very same fault lines once again to create a majority for his power. However, the opposition failed to pursue an effective depolarization strategy for the strategic choices that it made reinforced rather than undermined the strategy of Erdoğan due to several reasons.

First and foremost, as underlined above, the presidential candidates of the opposition were designated by their parties in line with their first-round goals. Particularly, CHP's pick Muharrem İnce was arguably the best possible candidate to consolidate the base of the party for the first round. Therefore, it was almost clear from the day one that if President Erdoğan did not manage to finish the election in the first round, it would be İnce, as the candidate of the largest opposition party CHP, whom he would face in the runoff. Erdoğan used this probability very effectively and managed to turn the elections into a battle between himself and the CHP, through which he hoped to achieve two main goals: First, by ignoring other opposition parties and candidates, he was able publicly underrate the plural characteristic of the opposition camp and characterize it solely with the CHP. Second, the background of the CHP, particularly with Erdoğan's own reading of history, enabled him to create

an imagined enemy for his voter base, which he should and would always defeat no matter the circumstances. Although this was not a novel strategy for Erdoğan at all, the nature of the runoff elections and İnce's preference to largely focus on polemics with Erdoğan in his campaign made this strategy work even more effectively than in 2015.

Had the opposition had a de-polarizing strategy to be pursed either jointly or separately like in 2015, Erdoğan's habitual strategy that relied on the polarization between the CHP and what he claims he stands for would have been less likely to succeed. Although Akşener at some time realized that Erdoğan would prefer İnce to face him in the runoff because he would be easier to defeat ("Meral Akşener ikinci," 2018), it was already too late. Akşener had probably thought that her chances would also be higher in the first round since she was more likely to be supported by the voter base of People Alliance than any candidate from the CHP in a possible runoff. What she seemingly did not take into account was that as the largest opposition group, the voter base of the CHP would regard fit any fair candidate from their party and could easily be consolidated under his/her leadership. This was also how things actually turned out with İnce's nomination. On the other hand, Akşener's candidacy had also deficiencies such as her party's hesitant attitude towards the HDP and Kurdish issue in general and her failure to come up with a de-polarizing campaigning.

At the end, the strategy based on multiple presidential candidates from the opposition boosted intra-opposition competition, which led the actors to use partially polarizing discourse by constantly attacking Erdoğan. This inevitably undermined the de-polarizing effect of the cross-ideological alliance formed by the CHP and its nationalist and Islamist partners, thereby preventing the opposition from being able

to effectively appeal to the bases of the ruling bloc. Therefore, although İnce, for instance, got more votes than his party CHP in the first round due to the support from the bases of other opposition parties, this was not quite meaningful because even the support of all opposition voters would fall short to push the elections to the runoff. Consequently, as the opposition parties strategized, their voter bases got consolidated in the elections. However, this was not adequate to deny President Erdoğan the majority support.

4.3 The 2019 Local Elections

4.3.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

The People's Alliance won both the presidential and the parliamentary elections that were held simultaneously on June 24, 2018. So, the constitutional amendments that had been ratified in the referendum on April 16, 2017, took full effect and President Erdoğan became the first executive president in the republican history of Turkey.

Although the People's Alliance won the parliamentary majority, the AKP had no more its own majority and would be dependent on MHP's support in every action that it would take in the parliament. Disregarding the short period between two elections in 2015, this was the first time that the AKP would have to rule the country without relying on its own majority in the parliament.

With AKP's parliamentary dependence on it, the nationalist MHP's partnership became even more essential for the AKP-led government. Thereby, the MHP became officially a part of the ruling bloc. However, the leader of the party, Devlet Bahçeli, neither took a position in the government nor gave a minister to Erdoğan's first executive cabinet. Therefore, despite its unwavering support in the

parliament for every bill proposed by the government, MHP's position within the ruling bloc would often be debated.

On July 9, 2018, President Erdoğan took the presidential oath in the TBMM and then announced his cabinet. Unlike it had been the case in the Erdoğan governments under parliamentary system, Erdoğan's first executive cabinet was mostly composed of technocrats rather than political figures from the AKP ("İşte Erdoğan ile," 2018), with several exceptions including Berat Albayrak, President Erdoğan's son-in-law, who had served in previous governments as Minister of Energy and Natural Resources and took a far more important position of Minister of Treasury and Finance ("Berat Albayrak hazine," 2018).

Two weeks after the announcement of the cabinet, the state of emergency, which had been declared following the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, and extended seven times to last for two years, was lifted. However, one of the issues that was inherited from the emergency period became first a diplomatic and then an economic crisis, which utterly shaped the atmosphere leading into the local elections to be held on March 31, 2019.

A couple of months after the failed coup, Andrew Brunson, an American pastor of an evangelical church in İzmir, was accused of "activities threatening the national security" dispatched to the foreigners' department for deportation in September 2018. During transactions of deportation, Brunson was taken into custody as a result of the testimony of a secret witness. In December 2018, he was arrested by a court over spying accusations and his alleged ties to the PKK and the FETÖ ("Papaz FETÖ'den," 2016). In May 2017, US President Donald Trump brought up the issue for the first time in his meeting with President Erdoğan and requested his release ("Trump Erdoğan'dan," 2017). Brunson spent the next 15 months behind bars

in July 2018 the court ruled to put him under house arrest. Not satisfied with the ruling on house arrest, the US administration announced its sanctions on two ministers in Erdoğan's cabinet ("ABD'den Türkiye'ye," 2018).

With a number of successive tough statements from the US, the diplomatic crisis between the two countries quickly produced big economic consequences for Turkey ("Turkey's diplomatic," 2018) that started with a currency crisis. Turkish Lira, which had been around 3,8 in January 2018, hit a record low of 7,21 to the US dollar following the announcement of the sanctions in August. While Erdoğan Government claimed that Turkey was under "an economic siege" (TCCB, 2018), what was initially a currency crisis eventually turned into a staggering economic crisis at the end of the year with rising inflation, declining domestic demand, and increasing unemployment (Eğilmez, 2018). Consequently, the economic issues such as cost of living, inflation and unemployment dominated the campaign period ahead of the 2019 Local Elections.

As alliances became prominent players in Turkish politics, particularly during the period of elections, following country's transition into executive presidency, formation of alliances and electoral cooperation became an essential part of parties' preparation for the elections. As the mayoral elections, as the highlight of local elections in Turkey, are carried out based on the first-past-the-post principle, electoral cooperation in the ruling bloc enforced the opposition bloc to do the same and vice versa.

4.3.2 Description of the opposition strategy

After they had lost the 2018 General Elections, the opposition Nation Alliance actually fell apart. It was not quite surprising because unlike the ruling People's

Alliance, they had neither the reason nor the motivation for maintaining the alliance ("İYİ Parti millet," 2018). However, with the approaching local elections, the opposition considered some kind of an election cooperation inevitable because the AKP and the MHP would probably continue their strategy of joining forces in mayoral races. As a matter of fact, the MHP declared as early as September 2018 that they would cooperate with the AKP in almost 30 provinces around the country ("MHP'li Kara," 2018). The leader of the party, Devlet Bahçeli, underlined the importance of winning the three biggest metropolitan municipalities, Istanbul, Ankara and İzmir for the People's Alliance ("Bahçeli İstanbul'da," 2018). However, the AKP initially approached to the idea with caution. Party's spokesperson Ömer Çelik said that the AKP would have its own nominees in all constituencies, thereby rejecting the MHP's cooperation proposal based on reciprocal withdrawals in favor of each other's candidates ("AK Parti Sözcüsü Çelik," 2018). This was the first time that the allying parties of the People's Alliance made public statements that were utterly not in accordance with each other. Meanwhile, another matter of disagreement came up. The MHP proposed at the time a general amnesty bill to the TBMM with the expectation that the AKP would uphold it ("MHP'nin af teklifi," 2018). Yet, neither the AKP nor President Erdoğan approved the scope of the proposal. Erdoğan made it clear that that he was against the very idea of granting amnesty to those who committed crimes against other people. For him the state could pardon only the crimes committed against itself ("Erdoğan devlete karşı," 2018). It was also wide discussed within the AKP whether the MHP was using the importance of the People's Alliance for the local elections as a leverage to impose its agenda (Miş, 2018).

As a result of these increasing disagreements, MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli made a statement and declared that his party was no longer seeking electoral

cooperation in the 2019 Local Elections and that the MHP would compete in the elections with its own nominees in every constituency:

> No alliance can survive with one of the parties rejected, forced to retreat, and ignored. No alliance can be maintained by running down the clock or teaching an allying party its place. It is time to put an end to the discussion around whether there is a legal basis or whether the parties will talk to each other. As MHP we no longer have any intent and willingness for an alliance for the 2019 Local Elections. We cannot go anywhere with far-retched negotiations. We will draw our own path. We will take part in the 2019 Local Elections with our own nominees and emblem and compete in every constituency democratically ("Bahçeli yerel seçimde," 2018).

This was probably not a card that the AKP was expecting Bahçeli to play this fast. As the senior partner of the ruling bloc, they utterly did not want to look like they were ready to do whatever the MHP would ask for. However, given the negotiations for the local elections were being conducted in the meantime by the opposition bloc (Çelik, 2018), the AKP was also desperately in need of the People's Alliance. Consequently, the AKP and the MHP resumed the talks and eventually agreed on cooperation in the local elections. President Erdoğan said:

> The last elections fully indicated the sensitivities of the People's Alliance. We are in solidarity with each other and have sensitivities in our joint march towards the future (…) We are determined not to let others damage our alliance. These local elections are particularly crucial as they take place in a period, when our country and nation are under siege of external powers ("İttifakı bozdurmayız," 2018).

Consequently, both the ruling bloc and the opposition ended up in agreement on taking part in the elections as alliances ("AK Parti ile MHP 27+3," 2018). The cooperation would essentially take place in mayoral races, whereby according to the decisions taken after long negotiations one party withdraws its nominee in favor of its ally party. The scopes of both alliances were by nature mutually reinforcing, as bloc formation by one side enforces the other side to do the same. Therefore, the People's Alliance, for instance, initially agreed on cooperating in almost 30

constituencies, which eventually increased to 51 (“AK Parti ve MHP seçim yarışına,” 2019) as the Nation Alliance of the CHP and the İYİP also increased the number of constituencies where they cooperate (“İşbirliği büyüyor,” 2019).

As the economic crisis hit Turkey, the cooperation between the CHP and the İYİP would provide them with a big advantage against the People’s Alliance in some metropolitan provinces such as İzmir, Ankara and Balıkesir. However, this cooperation might not be sufficient to win the mayoral races in other cities like Istanbul, Adana, Antalya, and Mersin, where the support of the Kurdish voters was also vital for the Nation Alliance. Therefore, the strategy of the pro-Kurdish HDP would be very crucial, particularly in a metropolis like Istanbul, where the party have more than a million voters.

The HDP adopted a two-pillar strategy for the 2019 Local Elections. The party strategized to win back its municipalities, where the ruling bloc had dismissed the mayors of the HDP and appointed trustees as of 2016 in the eastern and southeastern part of the country, and to help defeat or at least weaken the AKP-MHP alliance in the west (“10 HDP’linin 8’inin,” 2019). In pursuit of this strategy, the HDP decided not to nominate any candidate for the mayoral seats of the metropolitans such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Antalya, Bursa, Adana, and Mersin. In all these provinces, the HDP said that it would encourage its voters to support CHP candidates. The HDP later decided not to do the same for İYİP candidates (“HDP İYİ Parti'nin,” 2019), as the İYİP declared that they would not nominate anyone and support the People’s Alliance in eastern provinces of Iğdır and Ahlat for the particular purpose of not allowing the HDP to win the mayoral races (“Akşener Iğdır ve,” 2019).

The electoral alliance formed by the CHP and the İYİP, which was based on a set of mutual compromises, was mostly welcomed, and embraced by both parties' organizations and voter bases. The leaders of both parties, Kılıçdaroğlu and Akşener, conducted joint rallies in most the metropolitans, where the alliance nominated joint candidates. As the voter bases of the CHP and the İYİP were not particularly far from each other, apart from a few exceptions the alliance was not very difficult to acquiesce for both parties' voter bases. The HDP, on the other hand, was not within the alliance but still acted in accordance with its original strategy by encouraging its voters in the west of the country to support the Nation Alliance, whose mayoral candidates also attempted to make a special appeal to Kurdish voters in their constituencies to get their support.

Besides a sophisticated strategy of cooperation, the opposition also pursued a three-pillar depolarization strategy, which was not centrally developed by the alliance but rather a product of a separated but somehow concerted set strategies pursued by different campaigning actors of the opposition, namely the candidates, individual parties, and the alliance itself. These three pillars are as follows: First, as underlined above, the campaign of the opposition campaign centered on economic hardship and people's real problems in their local daily lives. Thereby, the opposition campaigned along an axis of politics as an alternative to that of the People's Alliance, whereby the AKP and MHP continuously claimed in their campaigns that the local elections were a matter of survival for the country under siege of foreign powers and that the opposition was collaborating with the terrorists. The opposition, on the other hand, criticized the discourse adopted by the People's Alliance and claimed that the country did not have any survival issue, but the ordinary people had economic issues, which they contended were a result of the misgovernment of the ruling bloc.

Second, the opposition, and particularly the CHP, built its campaign not on polemics with the People's Alliance that constantly accused it of collaborating with the terrorists but on the concepts of inclusion, peace, and love. Thereby, the opposition aimed to indicate that in the municipalities that they win the services will be provided to everyone without any discrimination, and also to nullify the accusations of the Erdoğan Government by continuously underlining the senselessness of the suggestion that all opposition parties were terror related.

Third, in its campaign the opposition deliberately did not characterize the local elections as a means to topple the Erdoğan Government but rather presented it as an opportunity in order for the voters to send a warning to the government amid economic crisis. Thereby, the goal of the opposition was to make a special appeal to discontented voters of the People's Alliance, who probably would not have voted for the opposition in a general election but at the same time would like to send a clear message to the government that it should fix the economy by either abstaining from the vote or voting for the opposition.

Apart from the official cooperation between the CHP and the İYİP on the one hand, and unilateral support of the HDP on the other, the opposition was also in close contact with the SP. Despite being an official partner of the Nation Alliance in the 2018 General Elections, the SP preferred to compete with its own candidates in the 2019 Local Elections, as a result of a tacit consensus within the opposition that the SP could be of even more help with this strategy.

To sum up, the opposition did not build up an all-encompassing umbrella organization as an alliance against the ruling bloc but rather preferred to take all national and local dynamics into consideration in an attempt to construct the perfect combination of winning alliances all over the country.

4.3.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

The mayoral races are and have always been the highlight of the local elections in Turkey. As the mayoral seats are far for more important than the municipal assemblies in local governance, it is quite difficult for two parties to make cooperation for the mayoral races. Because in these elections, cooperation basically means that one party withdraws its candidate and supports the candidate of the other party in a constituency. Therefore, the negotiations between the İYİP and the CHP that had started in November 2018 were not quite smooth. In December, the deal was almost brokered but the parties were still arguing about three important metropolitan municipalities: Ankara, Mersin and Balıkesir. The entire deal was about to fall apart but the intervention of the party leaders, Kılıçdaroğlu and Akşener, apparently saved it ("Kritik görüşme sona," 2018). On December 12, 2018, the CHP and the İYİP leaders conducted their final meeting and declared that they had reached an agreement regarding their electoral cooperation for the 2019 Local Elections. During the press conference, Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> You might very well anticipate the difficulties of making cooperation. However, our priority has been Turkey and its democracy like always. People have expectations from us. Therefore, putting aside some personal engagements and putting Turkey above everything else, we went on meeting these expectations (Ibid.).

In several statements that she made a couple of years later, İYİP leader Meral Akşener went into details on how the cooperation was possible. She said that it was the İYİP that made CHP a cooperation proposal. She said:

> Ahead of the March 2019 Local Elections, it was us who proposed the CHP to cooperate (…) So, if Istanbul is lost by the ruling elite, if Mr. Yavaş (referring to Mansur Yavaş, CHP candidate for Ankara mayor who was later elected) is currently governing Ankara, it is because we proposed this cooperation, and we upheld it ("Meral Akşener ilk," 2022).

In another statement, Akşener also underlined that the reason why they proposed CHP to make cooperation in the local elections was because after the loss of the 2018 General Elections opposition voters almost entirely lost their hope. The İYİP wanted, she said, to restore this hope through a probable opposition victory in big metropolitans in the local elections. Akşener said that her biggest objective was an opposition victory in Istanbul:

> Honestly, my real objective was Istanbul. Because Mr. Erdoğan has always said that Istanbul was his love. Winning Istanbul would be to take his love away from him. I aimed at that love (…) Frankly, except myself no one believed that we could do this. So, with this perspective we showed the people of this country: 'Yes, we can do it. If we want, we can achieve' ("Akşener parlamenter sistem," 2022).

The Nation Alliance of the CHP and the İYİP eventually enlarged the scope of their election cooperation, as the People's Alliance was doing the same. Whereas according to the initial deal the cooperation would be valid only in 21 constituencies, it was extended further to include tens of other provinces and district ("İşbirliği büyüyor," 2019).

As underlined above, although the Nation Alliance provided the opposition with a very big advantage vis-à-vis the People's Alliance of the AKP and the MHP, without the support of the pro-Kurdish HDP voters it would be almost impossible to win some big metropolitans such as Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Adana, and Mersin. The HDP was aware of that and developed its strategy by taking it into consideration. On January 29, 2019, HDP spokesperson Saruhan Oluç declared his party's election strategy as follows:

> We have already picked our candidates for the eastern and southeastern constituencies of Turkey. As we declared before, our strategy for the western part of the country would aim to help narrow down the sphere of influence of the AKP and the MHP and to help strengthen the democratic forces of Turkey. So, we will not nominate candidates in Istanbul, İzmir and Adana (…) Yes, we are making a sacrifice and we are not doing it in favor of this or that party.

> We are doing it in the name of the democratic struggle in Turkey ("HDP üç büyük," 2019).

So, through its strategy the HDP aimed to win back its municipalities in the eastern and southeastern provinces from the government-appointed trustees and to support other opposition parties in the western part of the country, where they were stronger than the HDP in order to weaken the People's Alliance as much as possible. The motivation of the HDP not to let the People's Alliance was particularly evident in a statement of party's co-chair Pervin Buldan, where she said:

> We did not nominate anyone from our party in Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Adana, Antalya, and Mersin. In all these cities we will be working until March 31 double tides so that the candidates of the AKP and the MHP lose. We will not abandon these cities to fascism ("Temelli: AKP," 2019).

Nevertheless, the HDP decided not to apply this strategy in the constituencies relinquished by the opposition to the İYİP candidates, after the İYİP had announced that it would not have any candidate in the eastern provinces of Iğdır and Ahlat in order to help the candidates of the People's Alliance prevail vis-à-vis the HDP. Akşener even called on the People's Alliance and offered them the support of her party to win in these provinces:

> Iğdır and Ahlat are very important to us. Iğdır is a border city and Ahlat has had a very big symbolic importance since the Ottoman era. We will not nominate anyone from our party for these two constituencies. I call on the People's Alliance. If you are sincere about the survival of the country (referring to the election slogan of the People's Alliance), do not have separate candidates in these provinces but agree on a joint candidate. This is the concrete step taken by the İYİP for the survival (…) If both of you agree in a joint candidate, you might have our voters' support ("Akşener Iğdır ve," 2019).

The pro-Kurdish HDP harshly criticized the action of the İYİP, accusing it of having the same approach as the People's Alliance. HDP's co-chair Sezelli Temelli stated:

> We will have candidates in every constituency, where the İYİP candidates are running. There is a gap between its politics and the ground of the alliance that it is a part of. They particularly agree with the People's Alliance on the hostility towards the HDP. We have difficulties understanding this. Because an opposition party opposes to the government, trying to come to power. Can an opposition party oppose to another opposition party? We know where this comes from (…) They are trying to build an understanding of politics based on this racist approach ("HDP İYİ Parti'nin," 2019).

As a result, though not under a single umbrella, all actors of the opposition engaged in the opposition cooperation one way or the other. The official alliance between the CHP and the İYİP were embraced by their respective bases. The parties not only relinquished the candidacies to each other but also actively took part in the campaigns of each other's candidates. The two parties also co-organized joint rallies in several important provinces and two leaders took the stage one after the other. Despite being not in the Nation Alliance, the pro-Kurdish HDP sticked to its original plan and encouraged its voters to support the CHP candidates in the big metropolitans including İstanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Bursa, Antalya, Adana, and Mersin.

4.3.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

Ahead of the 2019 Local Elections, the opposition neither centrally developed nor pursued a joint depolarization strategy. However, as the entire opposition was somehow a part of the same electoral cooperation, different actors the opposition – the candidates, the parties, and the alliance itself – implicitly sticked to the common objective of depolarization while pursuing their own strategies, which can be categorized into three pillars: First, all opposition actors wanted their campaigns to center around people's daily problems including economic hardship, which they claimed were a result of the mismanagement of the government, thereby focusing on their projects that were to dilute the negative influences of the crisis. Therefore, the

first pillar of the main opposition CHP's campaign was pronounced to be "the issues in people's everybody lives from economy to health, from education to security" ("CHP her ilde," 2018). In this regard, one of the strategic objectives that the CHP promised to prioritize in its municipalities was to take measures that would lower the costs of living ("Halkçı belediyecilik," 2019).

This particular party policy turned into concrete election promises in the campaigns of almost all mayor candidates of the CHP including Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, party's candidates for Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities. İmamoğlu's election promises ("200 bin kişiye," 2019) included 150 thousand new jobs in five-year time, cheaper water supply, subsidized agriculture to decrease volatility in food prices and social aids to the poor, while Yavaş also promised social aids for the poor, cheap housing, and cheap drinkable water ("Dar gelirliye," 2019).

By focusing on people's everyday issues and economy in particular, the opposition attempted to corner the ruling bloc, which thus tried to build its campaign entirely on presenting the elections as a matter of "national survival". Designing their campaign centered on national survival, the People's Alliance of the AKP and the MHP constantly securitized the economic crisis and other issues that the opposition raised in their campaign trail and criminalized them by means of alleged ties to terrorist organizations to further polarize the society and thereby keep its voter base intact. In different occasions during his campaign, for instance, President Erdoğan repeatedly made statements like the following ones:

> The terrorists in Kandil ordered the HDP to cooperate with the CHP in the elections. And there another party called İYİ, another little party called Felicity, they are a quadruple gang ("Bedelli askerlik," 2019).
>
> Today in Turkey two alliances are competing (…) The abasement (referring to the Nation Alliance of the CHP and the İYİP) alliance is a product of secret

> negotiations, interest calculations and political engineering. It is under the command of Kandil (referring to the PKK) and Pennsylvania (referring to the FETÖ). They always resort to lies, slander and insult. Their goal is the bring the representatives of the terror gangs into municipal assemblies ("İfadeleriyle böldü," 2019).

President Erdoğan even claimed that as a party that was in line with the terrorist groups the CHP nominates the members of the PKK from its lists. ("Başkentte sandık," 2019; "Ağır fatura," 2019). AKP's candidate for Ankara Metropolitan Municipality Mehmet Özhaseki went so far as to claim that if the CHP were to win the elections, it would hire terrorists in the municipality:

> If the CHP wins the election in Ankara, terrorist organizations like the PKK and the DHKP-C will say to the CHP: 'We have helped you a lot, now you should help us in return.' There will be militants rather than ordinary people in the parks. God forbid, imagine that the officer who brings you your water bill is a militant ("Özhaseki su faturanızı," 2019).

In his first mass rally ahead of local elections, which took place in Sivas, President Erdoğan dwelled on the complaints regarding the skyrocketing prices of foodstuffs, comparing them to the prices of bullets. He said:

> They (referring to the opposition) are talking about tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant. Think of how much a bullet it, think! They do not shut up about tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant. George, Hans (referring to external powers) are trying to damage us, and they are helping them do it ("Erdoğan biber," 2019).

In response to the skyrocketing increase in the prices of foodstuffs, which was widely utilized by the opposition in their campaign, the government decided to establish direct sale points, where foodstuffs would be sold at prime cost. Accusing and speculators and private middlemen of "food terrorism" ("Turkey cracks down," 2019), President Erdoğan vowed to end the "terror in the marketplace" and described the long queues in front of the government sale points as "queues of wealth" as opposed to the "queues of poverty" that he claimed had been very common in Turkey before his party came to power:

> They (referring to the opposition) are constantly talking about tomatoes, potatoes, eggplant etc. These are all lies. Now there is a new gang in the marketplace. As government, we joined forces and as of tomorrow we will go to all provinces, establish sale points, and sell foodstuffs at their prime costs (…) Those who think they are more powerful than the state must know that as the state destroyed the terrorists in the mountains, it can also destroy those terrorizing the marketplace ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan halde," 2019).
>
> I am calling out to my brothers and sisters who are supporting the CHP. This man (referring to Kılıçdaroğlu) does not know anything other than lying and slandering. He is hand in hand with terrorists. He is together with the HDP. We must teach them a lesson (…) They (referring to the opposition) say that the AKP brought long queues. There are two types of queues: One is the queue of poverty. Ours are not queues of poverty, they are queues of wealth through which to teach the opportunists a lesson ("Erdoğan şimdiki kuyruk," 2019).

By means of the securitization of the economic crisis, which is clearly manifested in President Erdoğan's comparisons between the prices of foodstuffs and a bullet, and between the real terrorists and "the terrorists in the marketplace", the People's Alliance tried to persuade the electorate that the increasing costs of living were a result of external attacks against Turkey rather than the mismanagement of the government. The main idea behind their campaign was that the real problem that the country was facing, the national survival, was obviously bigger than the economic crisis and a possible victory by the opposition would thus jeopardize the country's security given their ties with the terrorist groups targeting Turkey.

The opposition responded to this strategy by means of, on the one hand, the above-mentioned election program focusing on people's everyday problems that were mainly pronounced by the mayoral candidates and discourses developed and used by parties' leaders on the other. Hence, both CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu and İYİP leader Akşener concentrated their Erdoğan criticism on his underestimation of the economic crisis in an attempt not to allow him to shift the axis of politics towards

security and to keep the outcomes of the economic crisis as the main concern leading into the 2019 Local Elections. In his various speeches, Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> Erdoğan says to us that we do not have the right to talk about the prices of potatoes and tomatoes and asks us whether we know how much a bullet costs. This is the most ungrounded accusation that I have ever seen. You are importing everything from abroad, this is your policy. Is it because of the fight against terrorism or the bullets that our security forces use against the terrorists? What do these have to do with each other? A huge land is not planted in Turkey. Is it because of the bullets used by security forces or your mismanagement? (…) The person who occupies the presidency started to put the blame on the salesmen in the marketplace, calling them terrorists. Then what about the big price increases in gas, electricity, tunnels, bridges? If they are terrorists, then you are the biggest terrorist of price increases ("En büyük yalancısın," 2019).
>
> He says that these are the queues of wealth. Well, you are the wealthiest person living in the palace. Then why aren't you in the queue? Now that it is queue of wealth, you can take your colleagues and line up ("Sen de kuyruğa," 2014).
>
> He (referring to Erdoğan) calls the long queues as the queues of wealth and says that it is the external powers who did everything. Well, is it the external powers that have been ruling the country for 17 years? ("Kılıçdaroğlu: Yeni bir," 2019).
>
> Those who have been ruling the country for 17 years ended up forcing the people to line up to buy some foodstuffs. It would be unfair, if we disregard this fact while voting (…) Do you know what unemployment means? It means not being able to go out, to give pocket-money to one's children. It means constantly thinking what to cook, what food we will give to our children. Is there such problems in the palace, is there unemployment in the palace? They are in clover. They do not know what unemployemt and poverty mean. They do not understand the problems of farmers, salesmen (…) The son-in-law (referring to Berat Albayrak, the Minister of Treasury and Finance who is also son-in-law of President Erdoğan) is part of the jet-set of the palace. They do not know the people ("Bu iş partileri," 2019).
>
> The person who has been ruling for 17 years is now enforcing people to line up to get their foodstuffs (…) If you entrust the economy of the country to your son-in-law, it is not ruling the country. It is dragging the country into chaos ("Her şeyi kullanıyor," 2019).
>
> After 17 years of AKP rule, thousands of people do not have a job in Zonguldak (…) You have given them everything for 17 years and ended up with the lines for foodstuffs. My brothers and sisters who are supporting the AKP, please ask them: 'Why did you oblige us to line up?' ("Önce namuslu," 2019).

Akşener also criticized Erdoğan for his comparison between the prices of foodstuffs and the bullet:

> We have never seen that the word 'bullet' is used in the same sentence with foodstuffs. How many bullets would cost your new airplane which is worth 2,5 billion Lira? If the solution is to let the state sell everything expensive at a cheap price, why did you privatize the most strategic factories of the state? ("Lüks uçağın," 2019).

The second pillar of depolarization strategy pursued by the opposition aimed to ease the tension of the campaign, particularly caused by the strategy of the People's Alliance to accuse the opposition of collaborating with the terrorists and to build its campaign on the concept of national survival. For this purpose, the opposition widely incorporated concepts of love and peace into its campaign, vowing that local governments would serve all in an inclusive manner without making any discrimination. The CHP particularly adopted this principle while designing its campaign. While introducing the campaign, CHP deputy chair Seyit Torun said:

> The language of our campaign will be very positive (…) We promise societal peace and solidarity. We will offer solutions for all the problems that we have from the local to the national level. We have built our campaign on three pillars: First, people's daily problems from economy to health, from education to security. Second, societal polarization. There is a very deep fault line within the society. Polarization is existent even within families. Third, peace which is very important. Who has no peace at home has no peace in the street. Who has no peace in the street has no peace in the country (…) 'I love you' will be one of the phrases that we will be often using during the campaign (…) Our campaign will be away from polemics. We will not engage in arguments; we will never respond. The AKP will be polarizing, like always but we will not fall into their trap. We will lose a language that will embrace all the people regardless of their religion, language, race, ethnicity, political party etc ("CHP her ilde," 2018).

CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu constantly underlined the importance of serving everyone in the local government without any discrimination. In one of his speeches during the campaign, Kılıçdaroğlu said:

> No matter his/her identity and faith, every human being is valuable. They (referring to the People's Alliance) try to divide the society and pick a fight. We will avoid any fight and embrace everyone (…) The poor neighborhoods should be more taken care of. We must apply positive discrimination to a neighborhood, where there is poverty and people have difficulties making their living. We must bring more service to such places, unlike them (referring to the AKP Government). We must treat all equally and fairly but even fairer to the poor ("Yurttaşı varoşlara," 2019).

İYİP leader Meral Akşener, too, stated that neither her party nor the Nation Alliance will treat the People's Alliance the way they were treated by it:

> Neither Kılıçdaroğlu nor I have so far used a discourse that insulted or harass the cooperation produced by the People's Alliance. However, they are constantly insulting and ignoring the people that support an alliance founded by two big parties, who made up a big portion of the Turkish nation and this is totally disgracious. Nevertheless, we will not take this hostile and polarizing discourse seriously ("Hem uzlaşı," 2019).

The campaigns of Ekrem İmamoğlu and Mansur Yavaş, opposition candidates for Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities, are two good examples, where there were strong emphases on inclusion, peace, and love. Right after the announcement of his candidacy, İmamoğlu put a particular emphasis on the inclusiveness of his campaign, vowing that he would ignore the exclusionary, polarizing, and provocative discourse of the People's Alliance:

> I do not have any problem with our rival, the People's Alliance. I believe that the language that we use is inclusionary for everyone and that we approach to the whole election process with a perspective that goes beyond the political parties. So, we are asking the vote of the entire city with the concept of 'Istanbul alliance' (…) Of course, we have an official alliance with the İYİP. However, we cannot merely rely on the official alliance at the top. Our real goal is to form an alliance at the bottom with the participation of all groups of electorates (…) We will ignore the polarizing discourses of the ruling alliance (…) We will take care not to use an exclusionary, a discriminatory language. I will only be busy telling people what I will do as the mayor. I know that it takes a very big patience and I have it ("Siyaset okulunda," 2019).
>
> We will only be telling our objectives. We will only be telling in what kind of a city we want to live in. The elections are won and lost but I will be winning people's hearts. We will keep away from a discriminatory and polarizing language (…) The fight is over. We are totally focused on the end of the 25-

> year local mismanagement in Istanbul. I do not accept any political fight in our campaign. We will consider everyone as one of us and not exclude anyone ("Kavga bitti," 2019).
>
> The politicians should keep away from arrogance. We are here and doing what we are doing to bring about love, peace, and joy. If we manage to base our politics on conscience, that takes care of that ("İmamoğlu: Yönetici," 2019).
>
> My only field of interest is Istanbul. They (referring to the People's Alliance) will not manage to make me engage in any other discussion. They try to drag us into arguments and fights, but we will ignore. I am not interested in fighting ("20 milyon metrekare," 2019).

During his campaign, İmamoğlu used an inclusionary and de-polarizing discourse not only towards the electorate of the People's Alliance and towards the alliance itself. He was invited to a Newroz celebration with his rival Binali Yıldırım, former prime minister, and People's Alliance's candidate for Istanbul mayor. However, Yıldırım came to the celebration after İmamoğlu had left. To the question whether Yıldırım might avoid meeting with him İmamoğlu gave the following answer:

> Newroz is the feast of peace, an antidote to the polarizing perspectives (…) I wish we could meet (with Yıldırım) and gave a message hand in hand, arm in arm. Newroz is the day of peace and coming together. We should not fear peace. This is the salvation of this country, and this is how a sweat competition can be possible. Despite all, I wish Mr. Yıldırım a beautiful Newroz ("Keşke el ele," 2019).

İmamoğlu also used his campaign's emphases on love, peace and inclusion while dealing with the accusations of the People's Alliance that the opposition was collaborating with terrorists. To the question whether the CHP was in cooperation with the HDP, İmamoğlu gave the following answer:

> They are breaking many people's hearts. People are coming to me and asking tearily whether they are terrorists. These are people who are 60-70 years old, living in this city. We are neighbors. Are the voters that used to vote for them (referring to the AKP) now terrorists just because they gave up voting for them? What a shame! ("İmamoğlu: Bizim," 2019).

Nation Alliance's candidate for Ankara mayor Mansur Yavaş, too, vowed that he would not resort to the polarizing language used by the People's Alliance, underlining that he would serve all the residents, whether they voted for him or not:

> We will offer a fair and equal service to all residents, whether they vote for me or not, as a necessity of honor and rightfulness. We will consider and treat every resident as just human being and not supporters of a particular political party or members of a particular identity group ("Yavaş: Zafer," 2019).

> Evil be to him who evil thinks. We are not using their (meaning People Alliance's) language. While serving, a mayor gets blind and disregards the political identity of the residents. We are conducting an election campaign without polarizing and discriminating against anyone (…) I will never use such a language and I invite them to give up this dirty politics. May our services and project compete ("Hem ankette hem," 2019).

The third, and the final, pillar of the depolarization strategy pursued by the opposition aimed to make a special appeal to the voter base of the People's Alliance and persuade them to behave differently in the 2019 Local Elections. To that end, the opposition presented the local elections as an opportunity for the electorate to send a warning message to the government that it had to continue delivering and solving people's problems in order to keep winning the elections. Thereby, the opposition avoided to characterize the local elections as a zero-sum game between the People's Alliance and the opposition but, on the contrary, the opposition campaign was designed to deliberately give the impression that a possible opposition victory in the local elections would not be a big blow to the Erdoğan Government, which in that case would keep governing at the national level. The target group of this pillar of the depolarization strategy was apparently the discontented voters of the People's Alliance, who were for any reason probably not yet ready to vote for the opposition in a general election but at the same time would like to send a clear message to the

government about their discontent by either abstaining from the vote or voting for the opposition.

During her campaign, İYİP leader Akşener, for instance, continuously called on the voters of the People's Alliance to "admonish" the ruling bloc (to "give them a flea in their ears") by making it lose the local elections. For this purpose, Akşener constantly underlined that the elections were local elections, where local, and not national, governmental bodies would be elected and thus the elections had nothing to do with the survival of the nation, thereby nullifying the main election message of the People's Alliance:

> We will not have elections for the next four years; you must make your decision accordingly (…) This is a big opportunity for you. You will give them a flea in their ears for yourself. I do not tell you to pull off their ear but just send a warning ("Akşener: Kulaklarını," 2019).
>
> You should give them a warning. Put a flea in their ears so that they lose İstanbul, Ankara, Bursa, Balıkesir, Antalya. This is only how he (referring to President Erdoğan) will say in his post-election balcony speech: 'My nation, I got your message and will do the necessary' ("O kulak," 2019).
>
> This is a local election. Please do not get in bad with one another. On March 31 the election will end and from the next day we will continue our normal lives. Please put a flea in their ears ("Bin Meral feda," 2019).
>
> I stayed by you (referring to Erdoğan) when you were imprisoned (referring to the case where Erdoğan, then Mayor of Istanbul, was convicted to 3-month prison because of a poem that he read back in 1998). In the name of democracy, law, and justice, I stood by you. Please put a flea in their ears and do not allow the polarizing language in politics. These are local elections, where projects and services are supposed to compete. It is like we are going to war. No one should allow for the polarizing and discriminatory language. For us the voters of the AKP and the MHP are our brothers and sisters. We must know that we are a country that should be united and need to stay together ("Erdoğan'a gönlümü," 2019).
>
> These are local elections, where we will elect our local governments. What does this have to do with the survival of the nation? (…) Do not get bad with one another; we are only electing a mayor. We should not do anything that would make it harder for us to get along well with each other after March 31 ("Akşener: Beka," 2019).

Opposition's candidate for Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, too, avoided to present the elections as a hostile confrontation between the Erdoğan Government and the opposition. From the beginning of his campaign, where he visited all former İstanbul mayors including President Erdoğan ("Erdoğan'dan oy," 2019) till the end, İmamoğlu used a quite respectful language towards in an attempt to persuade his voters that if elected mayor he would endeavor to work in harmony with the Erdoğan Government:

> There are a lot of issues to be dealt with by the government at the national and international level. (If I am elected) I will do my work by solving the problems of Istanbul and thereby lighten the workload of the President ("Yükünü hafifleteceğim," 2019).
>
> (During a visit to the neighborhood of Istanbul, where President Erdoğan has his house) We will bring more services here because it is the neighborhood of the President. In his neighborhood, it would be a pleasure for us to see people contented and also to see him contented ("Erdoğan'ın mahallesinde," 2019).

Similarly, opposition's candidate for Ankara mayor Mansur Yavaş also made it clear that the elections had nothing to do with the survival of the nation:

> Whoever gets elected on March 31 will strive to keep his promises as of April 1. This is not a matter of national survival. Would we allow the survival of the nation to be jeopardized? ("Ben yaptım oldu'ya," 2019).

When it comes to the pro-Kurdish HDP, as elaborated above, it pursued its own strategy. Despite not being an official part of the opposition's Nation Alliance, the HDP supported CHP's candidates in almost every constituency in the western part of the country and by utterly objecting to the criminalizing discourse of the ruling bloc and using an inclusionary discourse CHP's candidates attempted to make a special appeal to the Kurds and particularly the HDP voters.

To conclude, the opposition pursued a sophisticated and multifaceted depolarization strategy against the ruling bloc ahead of the 2019 Local Elections. While picking its candidates, too, the opposition and particularly the CHP acted in

such as a way as to complement its strategy of depolarization, which was particularly evident in party's picks for Istanbul and Ankara metropolitan municipalities. For İstanbul, the CHP picked Ekrem İmamoğlu, the mayor of Beylikdüzü, a peripheral district of Istanbul, who was from Turkey's Black Sea region, an AKP stronghold, and had experience as a local CHP politician to win an elected office by getting the support of the ex-AKP voters. For Ankara, the CHP picked Mansur Yavas, former mayor of Beypazarı, peripheral district of Ankara, who was an ex-member of the nationalist MHP and with his profile could make an appeal to different groups of opponents of the People's Alliance in Ankara.

At the first glance, the candidate picks may seem to be the only de-polarizing means used by the opposition. However, as underlined above, the strategy was more complex than that and although it was not centrally developed and applied, different actors of the opposition contributed to the same depolarization strategy with their individual campaigns. Thereby, the actors of the opposition campaigned in such a way as to reinforce the objective of rejecting People's Alliance's axis of politics and bringing about a new one through which to get the majority support.

4.3.3 The aftermath of the March 2019 Local Elections

As underlined previously as well, unlike in the general elections, the main success criterion is not leading other parties in terms of the nationwide vote share in the local elections in Turkey. The total vote shares at the national level were particularly not helpful to make sense of the support level of individual political parties since alliances and joint candidates extensively conflated their voter bases. Therefore, winning of the mayoral seats of the biggest metropolitan municipalities was rather commonly considered more relevant as a success criterion. In this respect, winning

the metropolitans such as Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Antalya, Adana and Mersin, the opposition had a great success and came out as the clear winner of the 2019 Local Elections.

It was way more difficult for the ruling bloc to concede defeat in Istanbul than in other metropolitans. Because of its political and financial significance for the whole country, governing in Istanbul has always been considered as the step before governing in Turkey. President Erdoğan, a former Istanbul mayor himself, famously said several times that the one who wins in Istanbul wins in Turkey ("İstanbul'u kaybedersek," 2017). In a city, where almost 10 million votes were cast, the difference between the votes of the AKP and the CHP was only a few tens of thousands with the CHP's candidate İmamoğlu leading. However, the public news agency Anadolu Agency cut the information flow and the unofficial results were not declared ("AA'dan açıklama," 2019). Meanwhile, the AKP placed banners and billboards all over Istanbul, where it read "Thank you Istanbul" with pictures of Erdoğan and Yıldırım. The defeat was apparently quite unexpected and the AKP was caught utterly unprepared for it. Although AKP's candidate Binali Yıldırım even gave an ungrounded and vague victory speech ("Binali Yıldırım İstanbul'da," 2019), the CHP under the leadership of its candidate İmamoğlu did not concede the defeat and continued to inform the public until the next day about the data that they had, eventually proving that they ended up as the winner ("CHP İstanbul adayı," 2019). Finally, in the next morning the chair of the YSK admitted that İmamoğlu was leading Yıldırım according to the latest results ("YSK Başkanı Güven," 2019).

Nevertheless, the official results were not yet out. The AKP requested a recount of the votes several times and the difference between the votes of the two parties fell down to 13 thousand votes. However, it eventually became clear that the

gap would not be closed any further and CHP's candidate İmamoğlu was finally declared the winner of the mayoral seat in Istanbul ("Ekrem İmamoğlu mazbatasını," 2019).

Despite the CHP was declared the winner of the elections in Istanbul by the judicial authorities, the AKP continued to make its objections, submitting petitions to cancel the elections citing several alleged irregularities ("AK Parti'den YSK'ya," 2019). President Erdoğan himself stated that a difference of 13 thousand votes would not be adequate for any candidate to declare himself the winner ("Erdoğan: 13-14 bin," 2019). At the end, the YSK cancelled the elections for the mayoral seat of the İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality on May 6, 2019, and ordered a re-vote scheduled for June 23, 2019 ("İstanbul seçimi iptal," 2019). The opposition unsurprisingly slammed the ruling but what made it even more suspicious was that the YSK did not cancel three other ballots cast by voters in Istanbul in the very same envelope but only cancelled the election for the mayoral seat of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the only one clearly lost by the AKP ("4 pusuladan 1'i," 2019).

Nevertheless, despite its harsh reaction to the ruling, the opposition did not even consider a boycott and started its campaign for the rerun elections with the objective to win again. Right after the announcement of the YSK ruling, İmamoğlu made a speech to tens of thousands of people who gathered to show their support to him and stated: "Do not lose your hope, we will never give up" ("İmamoğlu asla," 2019).

4.3.4 The June 23, 2019, Rerun Elections in Istanbul and the strategy of the opposition

Despite their harsh response to the YSK's ruling, all opposition actors agreed on not even considering a boycott as an option and giving the message to the electorate that the objective was to win again stronger. In his messages after the announcement of the YSK's ruling, İmamoğlu both drew attention to the inconsistencies of the ruling and reassured the electorate that he would never give up and win again:

> President Erdoğan pressured the YSK. They stole the votes of all 16 million people whether for me or not. It is the YSK that committed the theft ("YSK emek," 2019).

> I know that we have rightfully won this election. The decision-makers might have decided otherwise but we will never give up. Because I know that the conscience of the whole Turkey is with us. Our people might get hopeless. We will surprise those who expected us to engage in a fight or unrest. They made the decision to win another 45 days to clear up their mess. But we will get strongly back what we have already deserved with hope and respect. We will do it through democracy ("Söke söke," 2019).

CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, too, slammed the ruling but called on the electorate to give a strong response to it by means of their votes in the rerun elections:

> We have won almost all cities that we aimed for. They (referring to the government) put up for all of them but not Istanbul, where they plotted a conspiracy against us. Against people's will, against democracy. With whom? They did it with certain so-called judges in the YSK. I am not sure whether they would be ashamed to call themselves a judge (…) A judge is not the one who rules in the direction the wind blows. A judge rules in line with his conscience. A judge is not the one who submits to political pressure. A state cannot survive without justice. They damaged the very foundation of the state. They conspired against the will of the nation through seven judges of the YSK (…) As the CHP what will we be doing now? We will defend democracy altogether, no matter who we are, which party we support, which faith we have, if we want to coexist peacefully together in this country. All the Istanbulites should give a very big lesson to the gang in the YSK. İmamoğlu is the candidate of all 16 million Istanbulites ("YSK'de 7 kişilik," 2019).

İYİP leader Meral Akşener also harshly criticized the ruling and vowed that she would never stop abiding by democracy:

> I am embarrassed to be the chair of a political party, who is forced to seek democracy in the 21st century (…) I am ashamed of the situation that they put our country in. I am ashamed but they (referring to the government) but they are not. I will never give up the flag of democracy and, so help me God, I will never embarrass the great Turkish nation ("Utanıyorum," 2019).

Even if it was an official party to the opposition's Nation Alliance, the pro-Kurdish HDP also rejected the ruling against İmamoğlu, the candidate that they also supported, stating that their approach would not change in the rerun elections:

> This is a coup against people's will in Istanbul. The rerun elections on June 23 will be a referendum about the authoritarian rule (…) and we will continue doing what we did before ("Demokrasi bloğu," 2019).

The ruling of the YSK, which was widely considered as an outrage upon justice, created a new wave of deepening opposition cooperation in support of İmamoğlu's candidacy. Right after the announcement of the YSK ruling, the Democratic Leftist Party (DSP) and the Labor Movement Party (EHP) declared that they withdrew their candidates and backed İmamoğlu ("İmamoğlu lehine," 2019). The SP, which was a part of the Nation Alliance in the 2018 General Elections but competed with its own candidates in the 2019 Local Elections also slammed the ruling of the YSK (Ibid.), but it decided strategically not to withdraw its candidate with the thought that it would be more of a help for İmamoğlu to win, as some of the SP voters might find it difficult to vote for the CHP ("Hak gaspı," 2019).

Ahead of the rerun elections, the opposition formulated a common strategy based on a division of labor. According to the strategy, first, İmamoğlu will continue to tell people about his projects on Istanbul but the main emphasis of the campaign would be on the injustice that he was subjected to ("Görevim geçici," 2019). Secondly, as part of the campaign was to be conducted during Ramadan, religious sensitivities will be paid attention and discriminatory and polarizing language ("CHP

haklılığını," 2019) as well as anti-Erdoğan discourse will be avoided ("Hak gaspı," 2019). The CHP also strategized to keep İmamoğlu in the foreground as the candidate, who would mainly be in the field among people, and Kılıçdaroğlu would focus on closed meetings with opinion leaders and representatives of different societal groups (Ibid.) The İYİP also strategized to refrain from polarizing discourses and target MHP voters to tell them that the elections were not about national survival but about justice and that in order for justice to be served İmamoğlu needed to win again ("Beka değil," 2019).

In response, the People's Alliance formulated a three-pillar strategy for their campaign ahead of the rerun elections. First, the People's Alliance strategized to present the opposition in alliance with the external powers that were against Turkey and to propagate that the reason for the cancellation of the elections in Istanbul was election fraud performed by the opposition. President Erdoğan, for instance, continuously said that the external powers that conspired against the country were in support of the opposition, through which the opposition rigged the elections:

> Everything that our country has been through for six years now shows how big the conspiracies plotted against us are. Those who think that the economic problems that we face are just a result of our own dynamics are unaware of these big conspiracies (…) We have realized a situation that overshadowed the fairness of the elections; they (referring to the opposition) stole the votes. If external powers follow these elections more closely than Istanbulites, are happy or sad about the results, then it means that there is a bigger game. Did you see how the West, the European nations cheered up about the candidate that they thought won the elections? Didn't we understand what powers were behind them? ("Erdoğan oyunu," 2019).

People's Alliance's candidate Binali Yıldırım also claimed that the opposition stole his votes. To the question why the elections were cancelled, Yıldırım gave the following answer: "So simple, because they stole it" ("Yıldırım'dan şaşırtan," 2019).

Second, the People's Alliance strategized to discredit opposition' candidate İmamoğlu. On the one hand, they claimed that as a CHP politician İmamoğlu was representing everything that was against the AKP. As the CHP was always easier for President Erdoğan to discredit, he allegedly ordered the AKP members to call İmamoğlu not with his given name but as "CHP's candidate" ("Erdoğan Ekrem İmamoğlu'na," 2019). On the other hand, they made a manipulation regarding the identity of opposition's candidate İmamoğlu, claiming that he was secretly of Greek descent and that his candidacy was supported by Greece ("AKP's Istanbul campaign," 2019).

Third, the People's Alliance strategized to prevent the HDP from further supporting İmamoğlu's candidacy, without which they thought he would never win. They thus sent a special representative to the İmralı Prison, who brought a letter allegedly written by Öcalan to the Kurdish voters. The representative claimed that Öcalan called on the HDP to stay neutral in the rerun elections ("AKP İmralı'ya," 2019). In order to strengthen the credibility of this message, the government even allowed the public broadcaster TRT to interview Osman Öcalan, a member of the PKK and Abdullah Öcalan's brother, in which he also approved that his brother did not want the Kurdish voters in Turkey to support İmamoğlu ("TRT teröristbaşı Öcalan'ın," 2019).

Nevertheless, as underlined above, the opposition did not campaign in line with the axis of politics preferred by Erdoğan during his campaign. They rather continued to stick to their own axes of politics, making the elections about justice and fairness. CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, for instance, emphasized the injustice done by the YSK by cancelling the elections, calling on the voters to help justice be served:

> Ekrem İmamoğlu served as the mayor of Istanbul for 18 days (…) He worked for those who take the bus on daily bases and not for those who have been profiting from municipalities' rents. I am calling on all the Istanbulites who are residing in the poorest areas of the city: You have a moral responsibility to support İmamoğlu in the rerun elections. He defended your rights and not those of the rich. He worked for you ("Nasıl serbest," 2019).

> We will make a struggle of right, law, and justice in Istanbul. If your will was disregarded, we will get it back stronger. İmamoğlu is not the candidate of the CHP anymore but he is the candidate of all 16 million Istanbulites ("O iradeyi söke," 2019).

> The foundation of the state is justice. Those who should be the first ones to act in line with justice are those who rule the state. Ekrem İmamoğlu won the elections in Istanbul but his election was taken back. In order for the justice to be served, he needs to be reelected (…) There is an unjust treatment. There is a violation of a right. Therefore, all Istanbulites need to decide with their conscience and reelect Mr. İmamoğlu ("İstanbul'da hak," 2019).

> On June 23, we will all go out to vote, so that everything will be fine again. I would like to particularly address the citizens who did not vote for Mr. İmamoğlu on March 31. We have just been through the holy month of Ramadan when we experience our spiritual values in deepest possible way. We all talk about right, law, and justice during this particular month. We would like this nation to stop the injustice done against Mr. İmamoğlu, whose election was taken back. Please decide with your conscience ("23 Haziran'da bayram," 2019).

Whereas the People's Alliance presented the elections to be a choice between itself and the CHP, the opposition was determined not to campaign along this axis. İYİP leader Meral Akşener, for instance, also emphasized on the injustice done against İmamoğlu:

> This election will be between the elected mayor of Istanbul and unelected candidate for mayor (…) The ballot boxes will explode to protest the injustice done against our elected mayor ("Nasıl bir talan," 2019).

Opposition's candidate İmamoğlu also based his campaign on what he called "a battle for democracy". He slammed the claims that the opposition stole the elections and continuously emphasized that the justice would be served again:

> They caused a big defect for democracy. We will fix this democratic defect, God willing, with our nation on June 23 (…) You (referring to Yıldırım) have

> been a minister, the prime minister, the speaker of the parliament… How could you possible use the word 'They stole'? I will not respond to you by sinking to your level. Just look at yourself in the mirror ("Demokrasi arızası," 2019).
>
> They violated our rights based on fabricated excuses. But we will not give up. We will make a ballot box battle like in the feast. These bad boxers want to fight but we will leave them alone in the ring ("Sürprizlerim olacak," 2019).
>
> In my political career I have been both in the opposition and take the power from the incumbents. We consider ourselves to be in power in Istanbul despite their enforced pause. I do not have a character to treat others the way I would not want them to treat me. They damaged the democracy so much, but we must fix it. We must take this responsibility, otherwise the history will never forgive us ("Çocuklarına baksın," 2019).
>
> No position or office is permanent, including the office that I am aspiring to in this rerun election. In five years, it will be over. When it is over, one needs to be ready to go. Those who do not know how to go, treat the posts as their own, are defected according to our faith. Because every worldly task is temporary (…) What is important is to carry out the tasks in a proper manner. My goal is exactly this ("Gitmeyi de bilmek," 2019).
>
> These are very bad days in the name of law. As we previously said, the ruling was based on an ungrounded reasoning. I asked them about the investigation everyday but could not get any answer because there was not reason. If there were, the referendum in 2017 and the elections in 2018 would also be invalid. I condemn those in YSK who took this decision because they made a big damage to democracy and stole the will of the Istanbulites (…) The task to fix and correct democracy belong to the Istanbulites ("Emaneti gasp," 2019).
>
> This is a local election but at the same time this a battle for democracy. We all must contribute to this battle no matter which political party we support. I expect all voter groups to support me. Because I will serve all ("İstanbul kazanacak," 2019).

Besides, İmamoğlu also underlined that should he be reelected, he would fight against the extravagance and use the savings to fight against poverty:

> Those who are profiting from the order of extravagance do not recognize right, law and justice. This order is only for a very small minority that has been using Istanbul municipality in line with their interests. They are robbing Istanbul's economic and environmental resources. This order is the one that cancelled the election. This order indicates itself sometimes in the robbing of the city's resources and sometimes in the bid corruption. This order of extravagance is transferring hundreds of millions to its crony institutions and foundations (…) But we are determined to end this order, as I intended to do during my 18-day mayorship. The order will again belong to the people

> again. Istanbul is full of extravagance and poverty. We will transfer resources to the people by means of welfare mechanisms (“Para halka,” 2019).
>
> If I am elected on June 23, I will end the order of extravagance. The resources go always in the same direction. We are for everyone profiting from the resources in a fair way. We are coming to end the partisanship in resource distribution (“Adrese teslim,” 2019).

In sum, despite the cancellation of the elections in Istanbul came as a shock, the opposition could swiftly pull itself together and formulated a strategy for the rerun elections. The cooperation of the opposition that was based on the Nation Alliance of the CHP and the İYİP and the external support of the HDP continued to exist. Having made an effective division of labor, the two parties of the alliance worked in harmony with one another when putting their joint strategy into practice. Moreover, the pro-Kurdish HDP and its imprisoned ex-leader Selahattin Demirtaş continued to encourage their supporters to vote for İmamoğlu, in spite of the letter from İmralı Prison, in which PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan allegedly called on the HDP to stop supporting İmamoğlu and remain neutral (“HDP’den Öcalan,” 2019; “Demirtaş'tan İstanbul,” 2019). The Nation Alliance was further strengthened with the endorsement of the other parties’ candidates, who withdrew from the elections in support of İmamoğlu.

The strategic preference of the opposition to stick to the elections and not to resort to some extra-institutional means in its struggle against the ruling bloc after the cancellation of the elections in Istanbul was quite critical. By doing this, the opposition managed to incorporate the axis of justice to its campaign, through which it could easily undermine the polarization strategy of the People’s Alliance.

4.3.5 Concluding remarks

Although the opposition were frustrated and divided after their loss, the 2018 General Elections served as crucial experience for the opposition in terms of building pragmatic electoral alliances, which they could build on while formulating their strategy for the 2019 Local Elections. The electoral system based on the first-past-the-post principle and the existence of the incumbent bloc led the opposition to strive for the best possible electoral cooperation (O. K. Salıcı, personal communication, January 18, 2023). The flexibility of the local elections, in which there are numerous mayoral seats to contest unlike, for instance, in presidential elections where the prize in "indivisible" (Ong, 2022), is another institutional enabling factor that facilitates cooperation.

Ahead of the 2018 General Elections, the opposition Nation Alliance did not include the pro-Kurdish HDP, as it would make it much easier for the AKP and the MHP to associate the opposition with terrorism. However, without the support of the HDP voters the opposition could win no election whether in national or local level. This dilemma arising from intra-opposition polarization, which had exhausted a lot of the opposition's pre-election energy during the campaign trail in 2018, was still the case ahead of the 2019 Local Elections. However, both the flexibility offered by the dynamics of the local elections and the experience gained from the previous elections prevented the difficult relationship between the HDP and the Nation Alliance from becoming as problematical for the opposition as in 2018. Moreover, as the main focus of its strategy was on winning back its municipalities in its stronghold from state appointed trustees, the HDP neither needed nor requested to be a part of the Nation Alliance to support CHP candidates in western part of the country, where it would not be able to win mayoral seats anyway.

The strategy of the Nation Alliance to select its joint candidates, who according to the local dynamics of their respective constituencies could appeal to not only the voters of the CHP and the İYİP but also the HDP and other political parties, made it possible for the opposition to get ahead of the People's Alliance in most of the big metropolitans and win the mayoral seats.

As the joint candidates of the opposition's Nation Alliance aimed to get the support of not only the parties that made up the alliance but also that of other voter bases, the opposition had to neutralize the polarization strategy of the People's Alliance and formulate an alternative axis of politics while campaigning. To that end, the Nation Alliance concentrated its campaign on daily local problems of the people, particularly the economic crisis, and vowed to provide the services that it promised to all citizens on an equal basis (Demiralp & Balta, 2021). Unlike the People's Alliance led by President Erdoğan, who built on his campaign exclusively on national survival and antiterrorism, the opposition took care to avoid polarizing and discriminatory language in its discourse, deliberately refraining from creating a mood of a general elections, where his voter base could have easily prioritized to keep Erdoğan in power. All these brought about a package of depolarization strategies that was strong enough to undermine the polarization strategy of the People's Alliance ahead of the local elections on March 31 (Yavuzyılmaz, 2021; Esen & Yavuzyılmaz, 2023).

The cancellations of the elections in Istanbul with the allegation that the opposition rigged the vote could easily lead the opposition into boycotting the rerun elections and give up its strategy of avoiding polarizing language against the ruling bloc. It could even encourage the opposition to resort to extra-institutional strategies by exhausting its faith in the elections. However, disregarding the demands of some

rather marginal voices, all actors of the opposition implicitly agreed that the only way forward was to win the rerun elections with a bigger margin. This approach not only deepened the election cooperation between the CHP and the İYİP but also extended it by means of larger support from the HDP voters and other voter bases, whose candidates withdrew from the elections in support of İmamoğlu. Furthermore, with the common idea that the cancellation of the elections was truly unjust, which partially affected even the AKP voters, the opposition was able to formulate an axis of politics based on the need for justice to be served, which fundamentally undermined the strategy of the People's Alliance to get the majority support by means of polarization along the issues of security and terror as well as cultural and identitarian fault lines.

In sum, in the 2019 Local Elections, the opposition managed to formulate a strategy with regard to both cooperation and depolarization that had the potential of neutralizing the strategy of the ruling bloc to create majority support, which was, in addition to institutional enabling factors, undoubtedly a result of years of experience and learning through which to decipher this strategy (A. H. Koç, personal communication, January 18, 2023).

CHAPTER 5

THE CASE OF HUNGARY (2014-2022)

This chapter process-traces the electoral strategies pursued by the Hungarian opposition from 2014 up until 2022. It examines a total of three general elections (2014, 2018, 2022) and one local election (2019), providing detailed descriptions of cooperation and depolarization strategies.

5.1 The 2014 General Elections

5.1.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

The landslide victory of the conservative coalition of the Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) and the Christian Democratic Party (KDNP) in the 2010 General Elections was a crucial turning point in the post-Soviet era of the history of Hungary. Benefitting from the "perfect political storm" (Bozóki, 2015, p.2) created by the dangerous combination of the economic and political crises during the first decade of the millennium, the Fidesz-KDNP alliance under the leadership of Viktor Orbán managed to secure a two-thirds majority in the Hungarian parliament.

The "anti-incumbent voting" (Batory, 2015, p.291) that brought the Fidesz-KDNP alliance to power not only gave it a supermajority in the parliament but also, through that majority, the chance to claim the mandate for changing Hungary from top to bottom. Prime Minister Orbán particularly depicted his election triumph as "revolutionary" (Bozóki, 2011, p.651), which was the clearest signal of his intention to entirely reconstruct the legal and political system of the country.

Although the Fidesz-KDNP alliance had not promised any systemic change during its campaign trail, the government under Orbán's premiership started its

revolution by amending the constitution to accommodate it to its political project. Due to its supermajority in the parliament, the Fidesz-KDNP parliamentary group was able to amend the constitution however and whenever it wished without having to get the support of the opposition. Therefore, if any plan of the Orbán Government was not in line with the constitution, what needed to be done was not to give up that plan but amend the constitution (Ibid).

The so-called revolutionary mandate that Orbán believed Hungarians had given him in the 2010 General Elections brought about the political conviction that no force should stand in the way of his party's parliamentary majority. As a matter of fact, when the Constitutional Court annulled a government-enacted law in autumn of 2010, the government responded by packing the court with new judges and constraining its jurisdiction and thereby cleared the way for the installation of a brand-new constitution (Bozóki, 2015, p.2).

In March 2011, the Fidesz-KDNP Government finally presented the parliament a new constitution that it had secretly drafted (Ibid, p.1). Without a meaningful debate neither in the parliament nor by the public, the government had its majority approve the draft and adopt it as the new constitution of Hungary, which then entered into force on January 1, 2012. The new constitution was largely criticized by the domestic opposition as well as the European and international organizations of effectively weakening the checks and balances and the rule of law mechanism (Pap, 2018, p.23-24).

Its two-thirds majority in the parliament gave the Fidesz-KDNP alliance the possibility to either dismantle or capture almost all institutions by unilateral moves. By means of their parliamentary majority, the alliance was able to get their candidate easily elected President, arbitrarily dismissed civil servants to cleanse the institutions

of public administration, created new institutions such as the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and National Judicial Council (OBT) and filled them with loyalists, packed the Constitutional Court, took control of the National Election Commission (NVI) and introduced a comprehensive reform in the electoral law.

With the electoral reform that it introduced, the Fidesz-KDNP alliance completely rewrote the rules of the competition. The reform brought about two significant changes: First, with the reform that abolished the two-round system and introduced the first-past-the-post principle in the single member constituencies, electoral system lost a significant part of its proportionality and became substantially more majoritarian. Second, the reform also involved the redrawing of the boundaries of the single member constituencies to be carried out arbitrarily by the governing alliance, which unsurprisingly resulted in such a way that the votes from the opposition strongholds would count less (Bozóki, 2011, p.653; Pap, 2018, p.24-25).

All these changes were carried out by the governing Fidesz-KDNP alliance through its parliamentary supermajority, which even allowed it to install a totally new constitution in a number of months without having to get the approval of any other actor. However, the supermajority in the parliament was more than a merely arithmetic advantage for the governing alliance. It was also an evidence for the fact that the Fidesz-KDNP alliance was the sole representative of the Hungarian people, which implicitly pointed out the illegitimacy of the leftist opposition discredited after its long tenure in power during the first decade of the 2000s (Batory, 2015, p.289). The full-blown crises during those years were traumatized and used by the governing alliance to justify the comprehensive institutional changes.

In order to strengthen its populist claim of being the real representative of the people, the governing alliance also constructed a historical narrative in such a way as to rebuild the national identity. This selectively and manipulatively built national identity was systematically instrumentalized by the Fidesz-KDNP alliance not only as a shield against critiques, particularly from outside Hungary, but also to delegitimize the opposition (Toomey, 2018, p.101-103). After all, according to Orbán's narrative, the "revolution" of the 2010 General Elections and the subsequently declared "System of National Cooperation" were all a result of Hungarian people's rising to the enemies both outside and inside (Batory, 2015, p.289).

While staging its revolution, the Orbán leadership also extensively used religion and traditions. The 2011 Hungarian Constitution, which was a product of a unilateral government action, refers to the "values of Christianity" as both the base and the cement of Hungarian society (Bozóki, 2011, p.659-660). This was not mere rhetoric, but the institutions of welfare, education and culture were all restructured accordingly (Bozóki, 2015, p.6; Pap, 2018, p.85-86). In the area of welfare and social policy, for instance, an utterly "conservative and familialist agenda" was pursued, predicated upon the traditional family values in the new constitution (Szikra, 2014, p.495-496).

All these changes were made without a popular ratification or even a proper public debate. The government under Prime Minister Orbán constantly referred to the results of the 2010 General Elections, which they had won by landslide, as the approval of the people for all these changes, which were carried out rather sharpish despite his party's supermajority in the parliament (Bozóki, 2011, p.652).

Orbán's "Blitzkrieg" (Bozóki, 2015, p.7) against the pre-2010 Hungary unsurprisingly did not remain uncontested. The opposition parties in the parliament that were largely discredited and even delegitimized got further passivized and weakened vis-à-vis the Fidesz-KDNP supermajority by means of the new laws and the constitution enacted by the government. Nonetheless, Orbán's ruthless war on independent media, impartial institutions and rule of law created rather a civic reaction. In December 2010, One Million for the Freedom of Press in Hungary (Milla) was founded as an online opposition group. As initially a platform of digital activism that virtually mobilized more than a hundred thousand people in its Facebook group, Milla managed to turn its virtual platform into a social movement by organizing a number of mass rallies in Budapest with the participation of tens of thousands of protestors (Wilkin et al., 2015, p.9-10). In 2011, Hungarian Solidarity Movement (Solidarity) was founded by prominent figures from various workers' unions and civil society and helped organize some of the largest demonstrations against Orbán Government in 2011 and 2012 (Boris & Vári, 2015, p.191-192). Through this new wave of civic activation, tens of thousands of people got mobilized in protest against the new constitution throughout 2012 ("Opposition protests," 2012).

In October 2012, these civic movements, Milla and Solidarity came together with the Patriotism and Public Policy Foundation founded by Gordon Bajnai, former Prime Minister of Hungary, to establish the umbrella organization called Together (Együtt) to defeat the Fidesz-KDNP alliance under Prime Minister Orbán in the 2014 General Elections ("Választási mozgalmat," 2012). Bajnai, who declared his decision to return to politics, presented the Együtt 2014 not as a political party but as an electoral platform of cooperation that was open to all opposition parties willing to

join forces to form a broad-based anti-Orbán coalition and emphasized: “We may fail on our own, but together, we shall prove victorious” (“Speech of,” 2012). However, as it would not be able to compete in the elections as an association, the Együtt 2014 turned into a political party in March 2013 (“Párttá alakult,” 2013).

5.1.2 Description of the opposition strategy

The 2014 General Elections were the first elections carried out according to the new provisions in the electoral law that came into force in 2012. As elaborated above, the new provisions rendered the electoral system significantly majoritarian, and the gerrymandered borders of the single member districts gave the Fidesz-KDNP alliance a head start on the competition. As a result, the opposition felt ultimately compelled to join forces.

The new electoral system made it compulsory for the opposition to form a bloc against the ruling alliance, but such broad-based pro-election alliances were almost unprecedented in Hungary. Moreover, there were multiple political and ideological fault lines within the opposition, which made it difficult for opposition parties to come together. The far-right Jobbik, for instance, was neither eager nor invited to join such a bloc. The LMP, on the other hand, rejected the invitation. The remaining, predominantly left-wing, opposition parties could reach an agreement on building a pre-electoral alliance in January 2014, that is three months before the elections, following more than a year of discussion and months-long negotiations. According to the agreement, this left-wing opposition alliance would nominate a single candidate in all single member districts and have a joint national list led by a joint candidate for prime minister.

The left-wing opposition alliance also agreed on a joint program and based its campaign on the discourse that these elections would be a turning point for Hungary, whereby the electorate were to choose between a modern European nation and Russia-like autocracy.

5.1.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

The changes in the electoral law, which the Fidesz-KDNP alliance had produced, rendered the electoral system far more majoritarian. Particularly, the introduction of the first-past-the-post principle for the gerrymandered single member districts made the governing alliance led by Prime Minister Orbán more difficult to defeat than ever. In order to have the slightest chance to do it, some kind of an electoral cooperation was indispensable for the opposition ahead of the 2014 General Elections.

While declaring the formation of the Együtt 2014 in the anti-government demonstration organized by the Milla on October 23, 2012, former prime Minister Gordon Bajnai uttered the need for cooperation within ranks of the opposition and, thereby, started a discussion that lasted up until the elections on what kind of a strategy the opposition had to pursue against the ruling bloc:

> The year 2014 shall not be the usual contest between the political left and right. Instead, the year 2014 will mark the battle between those who will join together to forge a normal country and the forces seeking to cement their power through our disunion. This fight calls for us to reorganize ourselves, to strengthen the political center. A new political middle ground is needed, one that is strong enough to overcome the powers bent upon dividing our nation. A new political middle ground, one that is widely diverse, but united by a common feature: its rejection of any force of radicalism. The communists. The far right. Those obsessed with, and those peddling in, power. Because the actors on the new, strong political middle ground may argue with the other side's proposed ideas and solutions, but never with the other side's right to exist (…) We are therefore not establishing a new political party but calling for cooperation. We invite all those united by these common goals to join our alliance. Those with whom we can find a common denominator with regards to the principles, the ethics, and the programs for turning the political page. Those with whom we can agree on issues of the constitutional state, on

> patriotism and progress, on solidarity and Europe. We must create a framework for cooperation between hopeful left-wingers, disappointed right-wingers, politically abandoned free-thinkers and committed Greens. As well as those who are unable, or perhaps unwilling, to choose a party for themselves ("Speech of," 2012).

Although from its constituent members it was clear that the goal of the Együtt 2014 was to be a new political force in center-left, Bajnai made it very clear in his speech that the organization aimed to go beyond and be a platform for a political alliance across the left-right fault line. For him, this was clearly the only way for the opposition to defeat Orbán.

The Együtt 2014 first approached the Politics Can Be Different (LMP), the Hungary's Green Party, with an official invitation to join the platform ("Az Együtt 2014," 2012). There was apparently no consensus within the LMP as to whether the party should accept this invitation. While a group of leading figures of the party including Benedek Jávor and Gergely Karácsony were advocating for cooperation with other opposition parties to form a strong bloc to defeat Orbán, the others including András Schiffer were deeply skeptical about a cooperation with other parties and particularly with the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), which they believed would eventually be the case if they were to join the Együtt 2014 ("Sorsdöntő kongresszus," 2012). After all, the idea behind the emergence of the LMP was to offer an alternative to the bipolar political contest, which made the party at least as critical for the traditional left as it was for Orbán's Fidesz (Batory, 2015, p.296). As the prime minister of the last MSZP-led government before Orbán took over in 2010, Gordon Bajnai was also considered, despite his rather technocratic profile, a part of the old political elite, who was the architect of the neoliberal austerity policies detested by the LMP (Boris & Vári, 2015, p.202; Tóth, 2015, p.253).

Amid internal divisions the LMP finally convened its congress on November 17, 2012, where majority of the party members voted not to join the platform. This decision deepened the rifts within the LMP, leading key figures in managerial positions to resign their posts in the party ("Az LMP nemet," 2012). In early 2013, the party congress confirmed the decision that it had taken in November, which then resulted in the split of the LMP ("Szétszakadt az," 2013) and the establishment of a new party, the Dialogue for Hungary (PM), by those who were in favor of joining the Együtt 2014 and thus left the LMP. ("A Párbeszéd Magyarországért," 2013). In March 2013, as soon as it turned into a political party, the Együtt 2014 officially declared its electoral alliance with the PM, thereby making the first concrete step for opposition cooperation ahead of the 2014 General Elections. In the joint declaration, the two parties vowed to nominate joint candidates in the single member districts as well as a joint prime minister candidate (Párbeszéd, 2013).

As underlined above, the Együtt 2014 was built on the civic movements that increasingly became active with the series of reforms swiftly made by the Fidesz-KDNP majority, which the opposition parties could not effectively withstand. It was not only their small minority in the parliament that weakened the opposition but also the government propaganda that all those reforms were made to repair the damage done by the opposition, particularly the Socialists, while they were ruling the country. Therefore, the Együtt make a big emphasis on the need for a "new Hungary", which was quite evident in Bajnai's speech on October 23.2012:

> A change of government, a change of regime, a change of era. This is what we must achieve for the crossroads of 2014 to bring about a new chance, a new opportunity for Hungary ("Speech of," 2012).

This "new Hungary" would, of course, not be built by the "old elite". Therefore, it was not surprising whatsoever that the LMP, as a new and promising

actor, was the first political party to be approached by the Együtt 2014 to start building the alliance that it envisaged. As two political groups that were in a tacit agreement on the need for renewal of the opposition, an Együtt 2014 – LMP alliance would have made quite a new center of attraction for the opposition voters, which the remaining opposition parties would eventually be compelled to join. After all, for the formation of the largest possible coalition against Prime Minister Orbán for the 2014 General Elections, the opposition certainly would not have the luxury to exclude any political party willing to join. Yet, the alliance could have been still novel enough to be able to build the "new Hungary" with the new actors as its initiators. Nevertheless, the rejection of the LMP to join the Együtt 2014 in early 2013 strengthened the hands of the MSZP under Attila Mesterházy vis-à-vis the Együtt 2014 for a possible opposition cooperation.

The start of the year 2013 marked the beginning of a quite long and not very fruitful set of cooperation negotiations among the opposition parties. In January and February, the talks between the Együtt 2014, MSZP and the Democratic Coalition (DK), a political party founded by the former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, mainly aimed to set the principles for the constitutional and institutional reforms that would be made in case of an opposition victory in the elections ("A szerveződő ellenzék," 2013). Then, the interparty talks were yet to cover the terms of an opposition alliance. Given the new and enormously majoritarian electoral system that would be applied for the first time in the 2014 General Elections, it was almost certain that a divided opposition would never defeat the Fidesz-KNDP alliance and that sooner or later the opposition parties would have to find a way to somehow cooperate. In fact, the MSZP seemed quite eager to start the negotiations, which as the largest opposition actor it hoped would take place under its auspices, while the

Együtt 2014, which was frustrated following the rejection of the LMP to join it, rather believed that it was still too early for negotiating concrete alliance. So, all opposition actors were certain that they would eventually have to engage in cooperation and yet tried to play their cards in such a way as to strengthen their hands until the moment that they were going to have to deal with each other.

In April 2013, Gordon Bajnai, as the representative of the Együtt-PM, proposed the MSZP that the bilateral negotiations for a concrete alliance would start in summer. The MSZP leader Attila Mesterházy was rather in hurry, but Bajnai clearly wanted to first set forth the program of the Együtt-PM, communicate it with public and make a popular appeal before sitting with the MSZP ("Mesterházyt meglepte," 2013). In a meeting on April 27, Mesterházy and Bajnai came together to set the goals of their future alliance and agreed on starting the negotiations in June to nominate joint candidates in all 106 single member districts against the ruling bloc and take further steps to strengthen the alliance. The two leaders reportedly did not discuss the issue of a joint Prime Minister candidate and decided to install a direct line with each other to better handle the probable conflicts ("Közös jelölteket," 2013).

In June 2013, the MSZP and the Együtt-PM finally started negotiating the alliance ("Kész Bajnaiék," 2013). What was hitherto agreed on establishing a joint commission to develop a common program and joint candidates in the single member districts. Although MSZP leader Mesterházy stated several times that he was also in favor of a joint national list and, by implication, a joint candidate for prime minister ("Szkanderozni kezdett," 2013), these were not yet a part of the negotiations ("Bajnairól nem," 2013). After meaningful progress in the negotiations on joint nominations for the single members districts, the sudden start of the debate on who

will be the joint prime minister candidate unexpectedly froze the talks. Bajnai reportedly proposed the selection of the joint candidate by means of by two carefully organized opinion polls. Mesterházy considered this proposal as an "ultimatum" and came up with a counterproposal, whereby instead of polls all joint candidates including that for prime minister were to be selected by primary elections ("Kitört az Együtt," 2013). It makes sense that the two leaders proposed different methods to pick the joint candidate for prime minister. As the leader of the largest opposition party, Mesterházy must have thought that he would have a bigger chance in a primary among the opposition voters, whereas Bajnai probably considered himself as having better chances in the eyes of the general public. Apparently both Mesterházy and Bajnai proposed the methods that would work best for them and accused one another of creating a fait accompli ("Bajnai Gordon: Az," 2013; "Mesterházy Attila Ebből," 2013).

In order for all the work accomplished by the months-long interparty negotiations not to go down the drain because of the question of how the joint candidate for prime minister will be selected, the leaders of the MSZP and the Együtt-PM came together on August 29, 2013, and finally reached a consensus. According to the agreement, the MSZP and the Együtt-PM would have separate lists and, by implication, separate candidates for prime minister but they would stick to the original plan of nominating joint candidates for 106 single member districts. So, in the event of an opposition victory in the elections, the agreement follows, the leader of the largest opposition party would automatically hold the office of prime minister ("Ezt sikerült," 2013).

The idea behind the talks between the MSZP and the Együtt-PM was to bring synergy to the opposition, through which the alliance could eventually expand and

turn into a coalition large and wide enough to oust Prime Minister Orbán's ruling bloc. However, the agreement that was reached in late August by the leaders of the MSZP and the Együtt-PM was far from achieving this goal, as it was harshly criticized by both the LMP and the DK, and even by Fidesz. LMP leader András Schiffer said that what was originally intended as "Together 2014" came out as the "Separate 2014":

> Our party has nothing to do with the agreement between Mesterházy and Bajnai, as we do not want to interfere in the internal affairs of the ruling elite between 2002 and 2010. This prime ministerial casting fits into a Brazilian soap opera ("Schiffer Úgy," 2013).

The DK also criticized the agreement. Calling the agreement a failure, leader of the party and former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány said:

> Two party leaders might have saved their faces but that does not mean that the agreement was a success. In order to achieve the desired success, at least three things would be necessary: common opposition candidates in all constituencies, a common national party list and a common prime minister candidate. On Thursday, the negotiating parties were unable to fulfill any of these. The MSZP and Együtt-PM did not fail Viktor Orbán, but themselves, us and ultimately democratic Hungary (Ibid.).

Finally, the ruling Fidesz criticized the agreement as well. Party spokesperson Péter Hoppál said:

> They were ousted by the majority of voters in the elections not because they were leftists but because they placed their personal ambitions above the interests of the country. They seem to have learned nothing from these mistakes (Ibid.).

In sum, despite the agreement to nominate joint candidates in the single member districts, which both the MSZP and the Együtt-PM tried to present as a big achievement, the end of the negotiations on the questions of a joint list and a joint candidate for prime minister with failure was a huge frustration by all measures. The fact that these opposition parties could not meet an expectation that they themselves

created not only took out the synergy that had been once created by means of civic activism against the Fidesz-KDNP alliance but also caused the opposition to lose the moral high ground as the main reason behind the consensus failure seemed to be related with the personal interests and the appetite to hold the highest office.

After the MSZP and the Együtt-PM had reached a consensus on continuing with separate lists, the MSZP tried to make a deal with the DK in September so that no multiple candidates from the left would have to compete in the single member districts. The DK asked for the second place in the list and ten single member districts, where joint candidates would be from its ranks ("Bevállalja-e az MSZP," 2013). Having found these expectations excessive, the MSZP offered in return only four districts, which were according to the DK impossible to win, lower ranks in the nationalist list and no consent for its leader Ferenc Gyurcsány to run neither in the list nor in the single member districts ("Az MSZP megalázó," 2013), arguing that as one of the least popular politicians in the country Gyurcsány's candidacy would keep the undecided voters away from the MSZP ("Gyurcsány Ferencet és három," 2013). The DK consequently declined the proposal, which Gyurcsány called as a "political hara-kiri" ("Gyurcsány politikai," 2013).

For celebrating the Republic Day on October 23, all the opposition parties except Jobbik came together in a jointly organized rally, where each party leader would give a speech ("Gyurcsányék meghekkelték," 2013). The idea was to organize a festive rally in order to create a synergy and give hope to those who wish for a change in government in March 2014. Therefore, in their speeches, the leaders would focus not on internal differences within the opposition but on replacing Orbán Government ("Bajnaiék nem bíznak," 2013). During the rally, a group of people among the crowd chanted "Unity!", thereby not allowing MSZP leader Mesterházy

to start his speech. The MSZP claimed that the group was organized by the DK to deliberately harass their leader ("Az MSZP-sek szerint," 2013), which the DK strongly denied ("DK nem volt," 2013). After the joint rally, both Mesterházy and Bajnai criticized Gyurcsány of violating the agreement on not bringing up opposition's internal problems during the celebrations ("Bajnaiék nem bíznak," 2013). While the primary goal of that organization was to bring the opposition together despite previous inter-party disagreements, this incident drove a further wedge between them.

Despite the arguments between his party and other opposition parties, DK leader Gyurcsány called on the MSZP and the Együtt-PM to reconsider their agreement on October 25, 2013. In a post on Facebook, he said:

> The agreement of the MSZP and the Együtt-PM not only did not result in the mobilization of opposition voters but on the contrary it disappointed many (…) Orbán can only be defeated together, which requires a joint list, and a single person must be elected to lead the opposition. If Bajnai and Mesterházy cannot agree on who should be the leader of the opposition, then they should look for a new person (…) If I were the obstacle to the compilation of the joint list, then I would be ready to step back and resign from the candidacy for representative ("Gyurcsány valamelyikőtök," 2013).

This debate initiated by Gyurcsány about whether the agreed arrangement between the MSZP and the Együtt-PM would be enough to create the required mobilization to replace the Orbán Government in the 2014 General Elections continued among opposition circles until the end of the year. Ildikó Lendvai, former MSZP leader, also joined the fray and said that the model based on separate lists did not work and the opposition had to work on a new arrangement. In an interview she said:

> The two-list model was a technical solution for the given situation. But the catharsis did not come even after this, this agreement did not mobilize emotions. Where have we come since October 23, 2012? A year ago, the excited audience dressed up for the theater and prepared to applaud the

> performance. Well, that was missed (…) In short: in the theater there is such a thing as re-arranging the play. This may cause controversy, but doing nothing is worse than that. (...) There are times when life does not conform to the decisions that were reasonable at a given moment ("Lendvai Gyurcsány," 2013).

If the MSZP and the Együtt-PM were to respond to the calls for deeper opposition cooperation and revised their agreement, there would be two issues for them to reconsider: First, the participation of the DK into the alliance and subsequent reorganization of the single member districts to have joint candidates in all of them, and second, a joint national list under the leadership of a joint candidate for prime minister. Együtt-PM leader Gordon Bajnai said that the extension of the anti-Orbán opposition alliance so as to include the DK could only be possible, if trust that had been shaken after what had happened on October 23 celebrations was restored ("Bajnai két feltétellel," 2013). MSZP leader Mesterházy, on the other hand, stated that the key to the victory was not an alliance of all opposition parties, which was a utopia, but the capacity to persuade undecided voters ("Mesterházy utópia," 2013). With this statement Mesterházy undoubtedly implied that given the traumas of the electorate, an opposition bloc that had the former prime minister Gyurcsány in its vitrine would be less likely to be supported by the undecided voters. However, one question remained unanswered: Could a leftist opposition bloc prevail against the Fidesz-KDNP alliance if it simultaneously has to face the candidates of the DK?

Finally, on January 6, the Együtt-PM declared that they were willing to renegotiate the agreement with the MSZP to "expand and further develop" the opposition alliance. Both the MSZP and the DK welcomed the declaration and stated that they were also open for the talks ("Bajnaiék újra," 2014). It was commonly argued that the main reason that led the Együtt-PM to propose the reconsideration of the opposition agreement was the fact that according to the polls Együtt-PM's

support rates were not strong enough to be sure that it would surpass the 5 percent electoral threshold by itself (Győri, 2015, p.25). Furthermore, the agreement by the three parties to negotiate a new deal and, by implication, to have a joint candidate for prime minister did not mean that they were in consensus on a name. Following the declaration of his party, Együtt-PM leader Bajnai stated that he would not be seeking the nomination. However, the emphasis of the declaration that "everyone must make sacrifices" was interpreted that the Együtt-PM did not want MSZP leader Mesterházy to be the joint candidate for prime minister either, reminding everyone of the disagreement between the two leaders back in August 2013 ("Így borul össze," 2014).

Nevertheless, despite the signals of another round of "Prime Minister casting" ("Miniszterelnök," 2014), the MSZP and the Együtt-PM agreed on Mesterházy's joint candidacy for prime minister and inviting the DK to the alliance ("Közös lista lesz," 2014). Admitting that Gyurcsány is "the most divisive politician" in Hungary, Mesterházy believed that he could bring more to the alliance than take from it considering how devoted his followers are to him personally (A. Mesterházy, personal communication, April 14, 2022). So, the only question that was pending to be resolved was whether Ferenc Gyurcsány would run in the alliance's joint list. As the MSZP was no longer objecting to Gyurcsány's presence in the list with Mesterházy's joint candidacy approved by all parties, it was only the Együtt-PM that was overtly skeptical about it ("Szanyi Bajnai bírja," 2014). Finally, on January 14, Bajnai gave his party's consent about Gyurcsány's third place in the joint list and three parties reached an agreement on the tripartite distribution of the single member districts ("Itt az új kerületi," 2014) and the joint national list led by MSZP leader Attila Mesterházy as the alliance's candidate for prime minister ("Új sorrend," 2014).

In sum, after months-long negotiations the MSZP, the Együtt-PM and the DK finally managed to form an alliance. This was, however, far from being a broad-based opposition alliance, as it did not have the far-right Jobbik and the LMP in it. The far-right Jobbik was not invited at all due to ideological reasons and, as underlined above, the LMP declined several times the invitations coming from the Együtt 2014 and the MSZP due to its reluctance to be a part of "the old order" ("Az LMP tárt," 2014). Therefore, this alliance can be called a leftist opposition alliance, whereby with the exception of those from the PM, all the leading figures had been a part of the ruling elite of the MSZP during the 2000s.

For the components of the Együtt-PM, which believed in the need for a new opposition and thus had the claim to be "a new central platform" for the anti-Orbán opposition coalition, it was by definition not easy to accept to be part of an alliance led by the leader of the MSZP and with Ferenc Gyurcsány as a partner. Some influential founding figures of the party, such as Péter Juhász, who rejected the idea to be in such an alliance even wanted to resign from their positions, arguing that the Együtt-PM made too much compromise ("Gyurcsány ellenzékéből," 2014). However, when the country was only three months away from the 2014 General Elections, the Együtt-PM was no longer strong enough to be in a position to shape the alliance in line with its ideals, particularly due to the realities imposed by the new electoral law. Thus, Bajnai said that this was a sacrifice that they had to make for the sake of the bigger goal to change the government ("Mesterházy csak 400," 2014).

On January 15, the MSZP, the Együtt-PM and the DK formed a joint commission to lead the campaign of the alliance ("Ők vezetik a közös," 2014). If for the above elaborated reasons, the Együtt-PM was relatively the losing party of the alliance, the MSZP under Mesterházy und the DK under Gyurcsány were the clear

winners (Győri, 2015, p.26; “Az E14 vesztett,” 2014) Particularly, with his new party as a recognized member of the opposition alliance, Ferenc Gyurcsány officially recovered from being the persona non grata of the Hungarian left and was finally given a seat at the table. This was utterly a critical juncture for Gyurcsány’s political career. Had he not been accepted to the alliance, he would have most probably stayed out of the parliament, which would have meant end of politics for him.

The alliance that had been named “Unity” (Összefogás) after the agreement on January 14 changed its name to “Change of Government” (Kormányváltásra) on March 6 in order not to be confused with another political party named Unity.

5.1.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

As the largest political bloc against the ruling Fidesz-KDNP, the left-wing opposition alliance “Change of Government” under the leadership of MSZP leader Attila Mesterházy developed a two-pillar election strategy: First, the bloc would reveal the deficiencies of the Orbán Government and declare its projects and plans to solve the problems facing the country. On March 8, 2014, Mesterházy declared a joint program of the alliance consisting of eight promises to be realized if it came to power. The joint program vowed to overcome the deficiencies of the economic measures taken by the government (“Unity pledges modern,” 2014) and included important promises such as creating jobs, raising the minimum wage, reducing the price of basic food, feeless entry to the university and eradication of child hunger (“Íme a nyolc,” 2014).

Second, in its campaign trail, the alliance also strategized to draw people’s attention to the high stakes of the elections by underlining that a second consecutive Orbán-led government would bring Hungary closer to Putin’s Russia and thus further alienate it not only from the West but also from democracy and rule of law. All party

leaders of the left-wing opposition alliance made similar statements presenting the elections as an important turning point for Hungary's future orientation. The joint prime minister candidate of the alliance Mesterházy, for instance, said in a rally:

> Orbán wants to build a new party state in Hungary, but you will not allow it, because you want a modern, European Hungary ("Mesterházy megint," 2014).

In another rally organized by the alliance, Gordon Bajnai, the leader of the Együtt-PM took a step further, referred to an "imaginary iron curtain" and said:

> The choice depends on whether Budapest ends up on the western or eastern side of the imaginary Iron Curtain ("A választásnak," 2014).

Similarly, the DK leader and the former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány also stated:

> At stake in the election is not simply what happens to taxes, wages, health care or schools. We will decide whether we want an oriental arbitrariness or to be a part of the free world? East or West (Ibid.).

The opposition always considered the institutional reforms that Hungary had been through since 2010 as steps taken by the government to autocratize the country and vowed to reverse them, should they defeat Prime Minister Orbán in the elections. The opposition also strongly criticized Hungary's strategic rapprochement with Russia ("Miért hallgat," 2014), saying that in the elections the Hungarian people would choose between Moscow and Brussels ("A választásnak," 2014). By frequently referring to such binaries, like East-West, Moscow-Brussels and democracy-autocracy, the opposition wanted to show that this was not an ordinary election and the reelection of Orbán would put Hungary's future in jeopardy.

Nevertheless, the opposition failed to persistently pursue this strategy, as the developments during the campaign and the strategy of the ruling bloc continuously

forced them on the defensive. Two corruption issues broke out during the campaign: First, in early February 2014, it was revealed that Gábor Simon, the deputy chair of the MSZP, had undeclared assets worth more than 750 thousand euros in an Austrian bank ("Simon Gábor százmilliói," 2014). Simon did not deny the news and resigned from his positions at the MSZP ("Simon Gábor megtörten," 2014). It was reported that it was so frustrating for the MSZP that its leader Mesterházy was advised in the mid of the campaign not to show up for a while ("Mesterházyt kivonták," 2014). However, the issue was not forgotten when Mesterházy came back to the campaign. In his tour around the country at the beginning of March, he was frequently asked about the Simon case, and he said that the party had no idea about it but still took a very quick action and dismissed him ("Simonról kérdezték," 2014). Mesterházy was even called to testify by the parliamentary National Security Committee that investigated the case a couple of days before the election day ("Mesterházy levelet," 2014).

The second issue was about a book written by János Zuschlag, a former MSZP politician, which would allegedly expose the corruption undertaken during the MSZP rule in the early 2000s ("Janos Zuschlag tells," 2014). Both Ferenc Gyurcsány, the Prime Minister of the day, and Mesterházy rejected the allegation, arguing that Zuschlag was a criminal who was paid to lie ("Simonról kérdezték," 2014).

Regardless of their plausibility, these allegations significantly undermined the campaigning capability of the left-wing opposition alliance and reinforced the strategy of Prime Minister Orbán. During the campaign, the ruling bloc continuously referred to the "dark times" under socialist governments and presented itself as the government that saved Hungary and gave Hungarian people their country back

(“Orbán Viktor leverte,” 2014). By constantly reminding the people of the crises in early 2000s, Prime Minister Orbán not only managed to undermine the credibility of the left-wing opposition alliance but also increase his about the promises that he gave for the future. In a rally organized by his party in the city of Győr, Orbán said:

> I do not want to waste too much of my time talking about the opposition. How many times did they raise utility costs when they were in power? Fifteen times! Did they increase the pensions? No! So, why should we believe them that they would do so now (“Kuncogó gimis,” 2014)?

The polarization strategy of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance was based on the conventional left-right division, which became deeper at the expense of the left following the crises under Socialist-led governments in the early 2000s. By using such an anti-left discourse, Prime Minister Orbán and his bloc persistently pointed to their strong reelection as the only way to block the danger of a leftist comeback, which they propagated would get the country back to the years of crisis. In a rally organized by his party in Debrecen, Orbán listed what the socialists had done and said: “If they were to come to power again, they would continue the destruction in the same way” (“Orbán a kommunisták,” 2014). In order to mobilize his voters for the “strong win” (“Orbán begyújtja,” 2014) that his block needed and encourage them to get out to vote on the election day, Orbán even called the opposition voters “Communists” and said: “The communists will all be there, so let's be there too” (“Orbán a kommunisták,” 2014). So, through this polarizing anti-left discourse, Orbán associates the left-wing opposition alliance with the traumas of not only the early 2000s but also somewhat of the Soviet era.

The left-wing opposition alliance defended itself by mainly saying that the corruption allegations were a result of a smear campaign carried out by the government and that such attacks would only strengthen the alliance. In the big

opposition rally in Budapest organized by the left-wing opposition alliance, MSZP leader Mesterházy said:

> Every day in the campaign, Fidesz came up with something to try to break our unity. But the more they attacked, the stronger our alliance became ("Mesterházy köszöni," 2014).

However, it was almost inevitable that the left-wing opposition alliance was so much attributed with the years of crisis in the early 2000s. After all, the alliance was led by the MSZP, the ruling party of the day, and joined by two former prime ministers that served during those very crises. It was probably for this reason that in the later stages of the campaign the alliance started voicing the argument that they could only replace the government as the largest opposition bloc and supporting other opposition parties would play into Orbán's hands. In the big opposition rally in Budapest organized by the left-wing opposition alliance, Együtt-PM leader Bajnai said:

> Those who stay at home on the election day vote for Orbán, those who do not vote for the Change of Government Alliance also vote for Orbán ("Bajnai Orbánra szavaz," 2014).

In Orbán's campaigning discourse the opposition was certainly not the only "enemy" of the Hungarian people. He persistently referred to the EU as an external power trying to damage Hungarian national interests and presented his bloc as the defender of these interests unlike the Socialist governments before 2010 (Ibid.). In a rally in Dombóvár, Orbán said:

> We have to be there to fight for Hungarian interests. There will always be multinationals, there will always be the financial world. It is easier to fight them inside rather than outside the EU ("Orbán Viktor azt üzente," 2014).

By means of this anti-EU discourse, Orbán not only presented his government as the defender of Hungary's national interests against external powers

but also warned his voters against radical and “emotional” proposals, such as those of far-right Jobbik, to leave the EU by claiming that being outside would make it harder for Hungary to defend its interests. In the Debrecen rally, he said:

> The challenge might come from the other direction (referring to far-right Jobbik) as well. If anyone understand young people, it is them. But there is no room for irresponsibility here. Declaring that we should leave the EU is a gamble and it would be followed by economic collapse. We should not let our emotions guide us here. If you are not sitting at the table, do not be surprised if you end up on the menu (“Orbán a kommunisták,” 2014).

Thereby, Orbán also wanted to make sure that maintaining the anti-EU discourse would not push his voters further to the extreme right, namely the Jobbik. In the big rally called Peace March organized by his party, Orbán gave a clear warning against the “division of the votes”, saying: “Breaking the unity would be a gamble. One flag, one camp!” (“Orbán rajtunk,” 2014).

In sum, the left-wing opposition camp could persistently pursue neither of the pillars of its electoral strategy. First, it could not effectively focus on its projects in its campaign mainly due to the defensive position that the attacks from the ruling bloc forced it to take. The corruption scandals and the continuous attempts by the Orbán Government to rake up the past prevented the Change of Government Alliance to effectively focus on communicating its vision during the campaign.

Secondly, the strategy of the opposition to present the elections as a historical turning point, where Hungary was to choose between the East and the West and the EU and Russia, in a way reinforced the nationalist discourse of the ruling bloc rather than offering an alternative to it. Even though the opposition probably chose this axis to persuade voters, who would not like Hungary to become an autocratic state like Russia, Orbán’s discourse portrayed the picture as if the opposition and the EU were on the same side against Hungary’s national interests.

5.1.3 Concluding remarks

The “perfect storm” in the 2010 General Elections gave Viktor Orbán and his bloc a landslide electoral victory along with a big majority in the Hungarian Parliament. Prime Minister Orbán used this majority to change the state institutions from top to bottom in a way to significantly autocratize the political regime and to make sure that he would not easily get unseated and need to wait for another perfect storm to reclaim power.

As elaborated above, the use of the “Blitzkrieg tactics” by Orbán while transforming the state and autocratizing the regime created a reaction and social mobilization in the Hungarian society. When newly emerging social movements reached the peak of their power in 2012, the ruling bloc did not seem to have the large majority support that it had got back in 2010 (Van Til, 2015, p.373). The reaction that generated this civil dynamism was not only directed towards the Orbán Government but also to the established opposition parties that had been ruling the country before Orbán defeated them in 2010. It stood for a new opposition, whose objective was not to go back to pre-2010 period but to build a new Hungary against all elites of the establishment. The Együtt 2014 was a product of this process.

It would never be easy for the Együtt 2014 to turn the existing social dynamism into an opposition bloc and keep it as vibrant. The once ruling MSZP and all the figures that had been influential in the pre-2010 period were all there in the opposition, not going anywhere anytime soon. Forming a single opposition front would sooner or later require talking with them. The Együtt 2014 would rather do this later than earlier in order to first solidify its position as a new center of attraction for the joint anti-Orbán electoral bloc. Therefore, the Együtt 2014 first reached out to the LMP, the only opposition party back then that could be considered new and

outside the political establishment. Should the LMP accept Együtt 2014's invitation to join forces, the "Együtt-LMP" would have been a real center of attraction. However, as elaborated above, the LMP rejected the idea from the beginning.

The rejection of the LMP caused a significant loss of strength for the Együtt 2014 because it automatically increased the relative importance of the established figures in the opposition, when the Együtt 2014 would ultimately negotiate with them. All these factors and the subsequent negotiations between the Együtt-PM and the MSZP significantly absorbed the synergy that had once been created by the social mobilization. At the end, the two parties failed to agree on the formation of a joint opposition bloc mainly because of their disagreement on who would lead the bloc as the joint candidate for prime minister. This failure brought about a further frustration among the bases of the opposition parties, which lasted for months spent for inter-party negotiations behind closed doors. Meanwhile, the Együtt-PM reconsidered its position in the polls and reached the conclusion that it might have trouble crossing the 5 percent electoral threshold three months ahead of the elections. So, in January 2014 the two parties finally decided to incorporate the DK and revise the August agreement in a way to have a single national list led by a joint candidate for prime minister.

The agreement on the formation of a bloc with broadest base possible was indeed good news given the frustration about the August agreement. However, almost a year of rather tedious and untransparent negotiations had almost completely exhausted the synergy for change and the momentum that had been in its peak point in 2012 was lost (Bozóki, 2015, p.9; Petőcz, 2015, p.225-228). Furthermore, Együtt-PM's desperate decision to join forces with the MSZP and the DK of Ferenc Gyurcsány was considered against the raison d'être of the Együtt-PM, which resulted

in resigns of some of the most influential figures from the social movements that made up the platform ("Gyurcsány ellenzékéből," 2014). After all, it was the new electoral system that forced the opposition parties to come together in such an unprecedented pre-electoral alliance. If the LMP had acted cooperatively, the picture would have been entirely different. That was, however, not the case and, consequently, neither could full cooperation in the opposition be realized nor was the long-awaited opposition alliance in its final form able to present itself as a new actor against Orbán.

In sum, while the institutional enabling factors such as the majoritarian election system and the electoral threshold incentivized the opposition actors to come together, intra-opposition fault lines nd the leadership ambitions of Mesterházy and Bajnai played a disabling role for the deepening of the opposition cooperation.

The challenges related to the cooperation strategy of the opposition had also a negative impact on the capability of the left-wing opposition alliance to organize a mobilizing campaign (Boris & Vári, 2015, p.205). Before even announcing its joint program, the alliance had to deal with two corruption scandals and exhausted most of its energy to defend itself. In all this mess, it was only a month ahead of the elections that Mesterházy, as the nominee for prime minister, announced the election manifesto of the alliance.

In order to clear the air in its favor, the left-wing opposition alliance used two instruments in the later stages of its campaign. First, they argued that this would the last elections before Hungary turned into a Russia-like autocracy if Orbán won another election by continuously saying that while casting their votes, the Hungarian people would choose between East and West, Moscow, and Brussels. However, this discourse reinforced the image propagated by the ruling bloc that the opposition were

the collaborators of the EU and other foreign powers and that it would never defend the Hungarian national interests against them the way that the ruling bloc under the leadership of Prime Minister Orbán would do. So, this discursive instrument strengthened the anti-EU nationalist axis imposed by the incumbents rather than offered an alternative to it. Second, the left-wing opposition alliance also argued that due to the new majoritarian electoral system every vote cast for the other opposition parties outside the alliance would go down the drain and that it was thus the one and only viable option to the ruling bloc under the circumstances. Although this might be arithmetically a relevant argument, it also in a way revealed the desperation of the alliance. After all, forming a single front against the ruling bloc was obviously the only way to have the slightest shot at winning the elections and the failure of the opposition to do so in a way obliged different actors within the opposition to discredit each other, thereby preventing them from concentrating their energy on opposing to the incumbents.

In sum, for all these reasons elaborated above, the opposition was unable to overcome the fault lines that kept them divided, form a solid and strong unity and to offer a new axis of politics, other than being anti-Orbán, which would have helped it mobilize an electoral majority against the ruling bloc (Van Til, 2015, p.375; Batory, 2015, p.285-288). Nonetheless, despite all these deficiencies, the 2014 General Elections provided a valuable precedent for the difficulties of opposition cooperation against an autocratizing ruling bloc and, with its pluses and minuses, it was an important experience for the opposition actors.

5.2 The 2018 General Elections

5.2.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

After winning another two thirds majority in the parliament, the Fidesz-KDNP alliance consolidated its position as the dominant power in Hungarian politics after its victories in the subsequent elections for the European Parliament (EP) and the local elections in 2014. The left-wing opposition alliance collapsed following its defeat in the 2014 General Elections and the end of cooperation led to a "internecine struggle" on the left (Győri, 2015, p.13). Ultimately, the divided opposition could prevent the Fidesz-KDNP alliance under prime Minister Orbán from emerging victorious in neither of the elections after April 2014. In the local elections, particularly, despite certain achievements in the constituencies where left-wing parties ran jointly, the Fidesz-KDNP alliance managed to keep its majority in almost all county assemblies and retained control of all major cities including Budapest.

The results of the three elections in 2014 brought about some important consequences that would significantly shape the political landscape during the new four-year term for Viktor Orbán as prime minister. The humiliating defeat of the left in April 2014 and the subsequent rivalry between the formerly allied parties not only ended the MSZP's position as the clear leader of the bloc but also made it possible for the far-right Jobbik to present itself as the only real alternative to an Orbán-led government. Pursuing a new communication strategy, whereby it significantly decreased its radical tone, and addressing new issues outside its conventional area of interest, the Jobbik could get over 20 percent of the votes in the 2014 General Elections. Despite losing some of its voters in the EP elections in May 2014, the party was able to finish second with the left-wing parties running separately at the race. At the end of the year, the Jobbik seemed roughly as large as the entire left-

wing bloc and was thus certain that its electoral scores throughout the year reaffirmed its claim to be the second largest political group in Hungary (Győri, 2015, p.36).

In early 2015, the Jobbik continued to rise at the expense of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance following a series of corruption allegations against prominent figures of the ruling bloc and Prime Minister Orbán's conflicts with RTL Klub, Hungary's largest TV channel, and Lajos Simicska, one of the richest businesspersons in Hungary who used to be a Fidesz ally. Consequently, the ruling bloc lost its invaluable two-thirds majority in the parliament following two by-election losses in Veszprém in February ("Kész Zoltán kiütötte," 2015) and in Tapolca in April ("A Fidesz elismerte," 2015). Despite emerging victorious in the Veszprém by-elections, the left was unable to turn the seemingly declining power of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance into a real advantage because it continued to be split into so many parties competing over the same voter base and thus failed to concentrate on appealing to new constituencies and expanding their support. The Jobbik, on the other hand, consolidated its winning image after the victory in Tapolca and presented it as a major challenge to Prime Minister Orbán in the 2018 General Elections. In his party victory speech, party's leader Gábor Vona said:

> It is not necessary to explain the victory. Today's election is significant for the entire country. The results in Tapolca proved that there is a power to change the government in Hungary ("Vona van kormányváltó," 2015).

Coincided with the decline of Fidesz-KDNP, the attempts of the Jobbik to mainstream itself as a real alternative to the ruling bloc seemed to be succeeding until the second half of 2015. The idea behind this strategy was to increase its ability to appeal to a larger group of electorates for the Jobbik. However, as much as it made good sense, this strategy also included an inherent dilemma that would be difficult to

manage. If in its march towards the center right the Jobbik took moderate stances on issues of national importance, it would risk losing its actual voter base either to a probably new hardliner political party or to the Fidesz-KDNP alliance itself (Győri, 2016, p.15).

This very risk for Jobbik materialized, when the ruling alliance under Prime Minister Orbán started focusing on the refugee crisis. Using a demonizing discourse from the beginning of 2015 onwards ("Gyűlölethadjáratot indított," 2015), Orbán portrayed the refugee crisis as an urgent issue to be dealt with and announced serious precautions such as construction of a giant border fence ("Huszonkétmilliárdból építi," 2015). Through this new strategy, Prime Minister Orbán not only reversed his bloc's decline amid corruption allegations and in-party conflicts by mainly presenting his government as "problem-solver" but also managed to outmaneuver the opposition, particularly the Jobbik. Using a harshly polarizing discourse on the refugee crisis, Orbán successfully polarized the political sphere along the pro-national – anti-national fault line and pushed the entire opposition to the latter pole (Juhász et al., 2015, p.6-7). While the left-wing opposition parties utterly criticized the approach of the government to the crisis ("Gyűlölethadjáratot indított," 2015) and were thus accused by the Fidesz-KDNP alliance as an enemy to national interests, the Jobbik spoke up on the matter only after Orbán had already hijacked it (Ibid., p.24). At the end of 2015, mainly because of how he instrumentalized the refugee crisis, Prime Minister Orbán not only recaptured his popularity at home but also managed to build an image of a tough politician abroad (Győri, 2016, p.19).

In 2016, the refugee crisis was largely faded out, as Central and Eastern Europe ceased to be on the main road of the refugees and subsequently the number of illegal migrants drastically started to drastically fall as of late 2015 (Rendőrség,

2015). This was not good news for Prime Minister Orbán since it was mainly thanks to the refugee crisis that his ruling bloc was able stop its decline amid corruption allegations and domestic policy failures (Győri, 2017, p.13). Thus, the ruling Fidesz-KDNP alliance felt somehow obliged to keep the refugee issue at the top of the national political agenda. Meanwhile, the EU was on the brink of reaching an agreement with Turkey on refugees, whereby the EU was asked to admit a certain number of refugees in return of Turkey's commitment to stop further flows of illegal migrants. The main question that was being discussed by the EU was how these refugees would be distributed to EU member countries, should the EU accept them even in relatively small numbers. The main proposal that the EU institutions came up with was to introduce mandatory quotas to all member states and distribute the migrants accordingly ("Aláírást gyűjt," 2015). Prime Minister Orbán strictly opposed to the plan and even challenged the decision in European Court of Human Rights ("Hungary files," 2015).

In line with his willingness to make the migrants once again a central issue in public discourse, Prime Minister Orbán announced in February 2016 that a referendum would be launched to decide whether Hungary should accept refugees on the basis of a compulsory quota imposed by the EU ("Orbán bejelentette," 2016). So, rather than rejecting the EU decisions as the government, Prime Minister Orbán wanted the rejection to come from the Hungarian society so as to keep the issue central to the public debate and to be able to object the EU proposals from a stronger position.

Having realized what Prime Minister Orbán was up to (MSZP, 2016), the opposition argued that such a referendum would be senseless, since almost the entire parliament was behind the government on any instance, in which the EU would

impose Hungary the settlement of migrants without its consent (Győri, 2017, p.13). However, the referendum was nevertheless scheduled for October 2, 2016. While all left-wing opposition parties called for a national boycott of the referendum ("Totális káoszba," 2016; "Mindenki maradjon," 2016), the Jobbik felt obliged to call its supporters to say no to EU-imposed quotas in the referendum despite its reservations about whether the referendum was the strongest way to object to the EU ("A Jobbik a betelepítési," 2016).

In order for the referendum to be considered valid, at least half of the registered voters should turn out, which was a provision introduced by the ruling bloc as part of its institutional reforms following its election victory in 2010. The government spent a huge amount of money for its "No" campaign to make sure that the turnout would be above the validity threshold ("10 milliárdnál," 2016). However, considering the average election turnout in Hungary and the boycott of the opposition, the risk of an invalid referendum was not negligible before the referendum.

On October 2, the referendum was held. The turnout was 44 percent and thus the referendum was not considered valid. The left-wing opposition declared the results as a victory and a loss for Prime Minister Orbán. The DK leader Ferenc Gyurcsány said that the referendum was the proof for vincibility of Orbán at the ballot box and that the opposition should immediately begin the "constructive and responsible talks" for an election cooperation ("Érik az új," 2016). The Jobbik called the results a "gambling loss" for the government ("Jobbik Orbán egyet," 2016). On the day after the referendum, Jobbik leader Gábor Vona said in a parliamentary session:

> The government has weakened Hungary's positions in Brussels on the issue of quota system with the failed referendum. You (referring to Orbán) used

> this undoubtedly national vital question for your own domestic political purposes, while we had instead proposed a constitutional amendment (to reject any quota) without political risks. We always rejected the quota system, that is why I am angry with you (referring to Orbán) and that is why I think you need to step down as Cameron did following the Brexit referendum in the UK (Vona Orbán Viktor bukott, 2016).

The government, on the other hand, considered the referendum also as a "overwhelming victory" and said that the referendum was politically (if not legally) valid ("Gulyás Gergely elsöprő," 2016), pointing out the fact that more than 3.3 million voters went out to vote "No" and upheld the position of the government.

All in all, the instrumentalization of the refugee crisis was the only factor that helped Orbán stop and reverse his government's decline. Taking this into consideration, the government was aware that it had to somehow continue to base its politics on the promise of protecting Hungary from foreign influences and enemies. In 2017, the ruling bloc utterly added George Soros, a Hungarian-American businessperson and philanthropist, to its list of foreign enemies. The way that the government portrayed Soros made it very clear that his name would be one of the key campaign materials for Fidesz-KDNP ahead of the 2018 General Elections. In his speech at the European Parliament, Orbán said:

> It is one thing how many of us believe that George Soros is a philanthropist. But no one can dispute one thing, which is the starting point of everything: We are talking about an outstanding, international financial speculator, because of whom millions have become poor so that he can make profit (…) I just want to record the fact: he makes money by ruining millions ("Orbán Soros milliók," 2017).

At the end of 2017, Orbán went a step further and called Soros a matter of national security for Hungary. Constantly drawing attention to his good ties with the European institutions, Orbán was building a connection between his anti-Soros, anti-Brussels, and anti-refugee campaigns:

> The Soros network has an extensive sphere of influence in the European Parliament and other institutions of the European Union. Its goal is to create a Europe with a mixed population and to condemn the Hungarian government that opposes it on the migrant issue ("Orbán nemzetbiztonsági," 2017).

Since the opposition, which was divided between the left-wing parties and far-right Jobbik, could not present a common front against the government on these issues, Prime Minister Orbán could easily label them "unpatriotic" and "radical", respectively, and portray itself as the only political force that was capable of protecting Hungary from all these foreign enemies (Győri, 2018, p.16).

When it comes to issues related to the economic hardship, however, it was much easier for the opposition to target the ruling alliance from a similar perspective, if not in a common front. Therefore, Orbán Government did not restrict its policies ahead of the elections to fearmongering and the promise of protection from foreign enemies but also incorporated some very important economic policies including subsidizing housing, lowering the VAT and some other taxes, and increasing the minimum wage (Győri, 2017, p.16-17; Győri, 2018, p.9-13).

5.2.2 Description of the opposition strategy

Ahead of the 2018 General Elections, the Hungarian opposition parties were much more experienced about what kind of strategy they had to pursue in order to have a chance against Orbán's bloc. In fact, it was quite advantageous for the ruling bloc that the opposition was divided between two irreconcilable blocs, as they were very unlikely to join forces and form a common front against it. So, even if the ruling bloc were to lose the support of the majority, it would not mean an electoral defeat under the circumstances.

Even though the Jobbik was the largest opposition party and thus often presented itself as the only real alternative to the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, there was a common wisdom that if all parties in that bloc join forces, the leftist/liberal opposition bloc would be larger than the Jobbik. Therefore, one of the most important questions ahead of the campaign trail was what kind of cooperation the Hungarian left would make for the elections. With the formation of new parties like the Momentum, the competition and fragmentation among the left were more intense than ever. However, like in the previous elections, cooperation was indispensable for the leftist/liberal opposition parties given the highly majoritarian electoral system.

Despite the awareness among the Hungarian left about the indispensability of cooperation, no meaningful step was taken until a couple of months away from the elections. Rather, as the largest party in the leftist/liberal camp, the MSZP nominated László Botka, one of its popular mayors, as its candidate for prime minister and authorized him to manage the entire electoral process. Botka resigned from the candidacy in October 2017 after his preconditions were not accepted by other leftist/liberal opposition parties, which continued down the road without a joint leader. As no one from the MSZP was willing to take up the challenge, Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Zugló and the co-leader of the PM, became the nominee for prime minister of the MSZP-PM alliance.

In January 2018, the only cooperation that was made by the opposition ahead of the 2018 General Elections was the MSZP-PM alliance and the sharing of 106 single member districts between the MSZP-PM and the DK. Apart from that, all the opposition parties were running separately with their own candidates and lists. This fragmentation undoubtedly affected the campaigns of the opposition parties. Despite their apparent convergence on many issues, such as socio-economic problems of the

country and the state of the democratic institutions, the opposition parties failed to bring about a common policy platform against the Orbán Government.

After the by elections in Hódmezővásárhely that was won by Péter Márki-Zay, the independent candidate for mayor supported by all opposition parties from the MSZP to the Jobbik, the opposition thought that they finally found the key to defeat Orbán and decided to deepen their cooperation ahead of the general elections. Even though the division between the right and left wings of the opposition did not formally break down, the leftist/liberal camp made significant progress in decreasing the number of candidates in the single member districts by means of reciprocal withdrawals. However, the deepening cooperation did not include the formation of a common policy platform.

5.2.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

Since the 2014 General Elections, the Hungarian opposition was divided into two almost equal-sized camps: The left-wing parties and the Jobbik. This was indeed perfectly ideal for the ruling bloc since it was virtually unthinkable for both camps to join forces and form a common anti-Orbán front (Győri 2015, 27).

The left-wing opposition parties could not take a meaningful step to overcome their fragmented structure after 2014, although they knew that in that case Jobbik would eventually come out as the largest opposition group and, by implication, the real alternative to the ruling bloc. So, it was clear that the left-wing opposition parties would eventually cooperate at least for the single member districts. When it came to a possible joint list with a joint candidate for prime minister, the idea of a US-like primary was raised to prevent long, contentious, and often counter-

productive negotiations. However, it did not go beyond mere talk (Győri, 2017, p.23).

Meanwhile, the leadership of the MSZP took an important step and select the mayor of Szeged, László Botka, as the prime minister candidate of the party in January 2017. With this decision, Botka was also given full authority to conduct cooperation negotiations with other parties, particularly the DK ("Botka László teljhatalmat," 2017). Well-known and popular as a successful mayor, Botka wanted to redefine the platform of the MSZP and shift the party further leftwards (Győri, 2018, p.22). However, in order to accept the position, Botka set three additional preconditions: a joint left-wing list led by him, the selection of "the most qualified candidate" in each of the 106 single member districts irrespective of his/her party affiliation and the exclusion of the DK leader Ferenc Gyurcsány from the alliance ("Ellehetetlenítik Botka," 2017).

Botka was undoubtedly one of the very few politicians from the Hungarian left, whose popularity could really take on that of Prime Minister Orbán ahead of a general election. Thus, his candidacy would be quite powerful against the ruling bloc. Nevertheless, his preconditions were not easy to be agreed for other opposition actors whatsoever. Particularly for the DK that considerably improved its support level after the 2014 General Elections and became the second largest left-wing party in Hungary, an election alliance without their leader was unthinkable. After all that happened during his premiership before 2010, Gyurcsány was clearly one of the least popular politicians in the whole country. Paradoxically, however, any opposition alliance would desperately need his loyal voter base in order to have the slightest chance to deprive Orbán of his majority in the parliament. In February 2017, 98 percent of the party members elected Gyurcsány as the leader of the DK ("Botka

halálra," 2017), two days after Botka had called him a "liar" and a "burden" for the opposition, who must disappear with Orbán ("Botka Gyurcsány hazudott," 2017).

The stalemate between Botka and Gyurcsány continued amid reciprocal accusations, as Botka accelerated his campaign through the spring in 2017. During that period, Gyurcsány publicly called on Borka several times to sit down at negotiating table, which he left apparently unanswered ("Gyurcsány finoman," 2017). For Botka, the DK had to be in the alliance but without the former Prime Minister ("Gyurcsány felhívta," 2017). Gyurcsány, on the other hand, responded by calling on Botka to give up using Orbán's methods and come to negotiating table ("Gyurcsány orbáni," 2017).

In September 2017, Botka finally came up with a proposal that included Gyurcsány as a part of the alliance. He suggested that the solution for the stalemate between two parties could be resolved if former Prime Minister Gyurcsány would not be in any joint list but rather run in a single member district, arguing that no one could object to his election to the parliament if it is directly decided by the voters of a constituency ("Botka lépéskényszerbe," 2017). However, the DK leader rejected the proposal and insisted to be a part of the joint list, saying that he would like to represent all the voters of his party as its leader and not only a constituency ("Gyurcsány elindul," 2017). So, the failed efforts to break the stalemate once again gave way to reciprocal accusations ("Gyurcsányék dühös," 2017; "Botka Gyurcsány elvtelen," 2017).

As no meaningful progress could be made towards the goal of a joint left-wing electoral bloc and time was running at the expense of his plans, Botka made a special call for all opposition parties except Jobbik and made a generous offer by vowing to grant them half of all places in the joint list, if they agreed to form one

under his leadership as prime minister candidate ("Botka új ajánlata," 2017). However, this proposal revealed that there were more problems in the opposition camp than merely former Prime Minister Gyurcsány's political fate. The LMP, the Együtt and the Momentum did not seem sympathetic to the idea of a joint front with the MSZP and the DK either (Ibid.). At the end of September, the DK announced that they could not wait anymore and take action to prepare their own list to be led by party's leader Gyurcsány ("Gyurcsányék nem várnak," 2017).

As time passed by, Botka saw that the left-wing opposition parties were quite far away from fulfilling the preconditions that he had set to remain the joint candidate for prime minister including his own MSZP, in which there were also serious disturbances about his headstrong leadership ("Botka László szorongatja," 2017). So, he finally decided to resign from his position as MSZP's candidate for prime minister on October 2, 2017, with a vitriolic statement:

> I announced a new strategy, which I believe is the only way to victory: joint action of opposition. Unfortunately, I made a mistake, because I never thought that the opposition parties would not want to win in 2018. Apparently, their goal is only to gain a few opposition seats in the Orbán regime's parliamentary benches (…) I also had no idea how much the political mafia had ensnared the democratic opposition, unfortunately including my own party ("Botka László kiszállt," 2017).

As much as it was disappointing for the MSZP to lose a popular candidate for prime minister, Botka's resignation, in fact, did not come as a shock. The preconditions that he had set were very difficult for the opposition to fulfil and Botka did not have a contingency plan in case of a rejection from other parties. Despite his apparently generous offer of granting half of the joint list, what Botka proposes other opposition parties was basically his headstrong leadership rather than cooperation on equal terms, which they – the DK, the LMP and the Momentum – publicly declined. If with the leadership of Botka the support level of the MSZP had increased to a

certain level, the other parties would have felt obliged to cooperate. However, that was not the case either ("Sokan örülhetnek," 2017).

Botka's resignation as the top candidate of the MSZP unsurprisingly pleased the DK and former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány ("Gyurcsánynak nagyon," 2017), which, however, did not bring the stalemate between the MSZP and the DK to an end ("Szintet lépett," 2017). While the negotiations between the two parties were continuing amid tensions, the MSZP was in search for a prime minister candidate. In December, Gergely Karácsony, the mayor of Zugló and the co-chairperson of the PM, announced that he would be ready to be the prime minister candidate of the MSZP and the party presidium backed his candidacy ("Karácsony Gergely felajánlotta," 2017). In fact, it was not quite sensible that as the largest and the most organized opposition party with big resources and experience, the MSZP had to support someone from outside of the party as party's top candidate ahead of general elections. However, with Botka's departure the party was deprived of a potential candidate that could take on Orbán and despite his party's lack of organization and resources Karácsony was one of the most popular politicians in the opposition (Győri, 2018, p.23). So, against this backdrop the MSZP and Karácsony were complementing each other, which made it logical for the party to back his candidacy at a time when there did not seem to be a more reliable option.

Nevertheless, Karácsony's candidacy did not solve the existing problems as to in what setting the left-wing parties will compete in the elections. The negotiations between the MSZP and the DK were still going on, but it was only the MSZP that was calling on others for a joint list to be led by a joint candidate for prime minister. Karácsony also stated that his candidacy aimed to lead a joint list, saying: "If the MSZP wants to run separately, independently, why would they need me?"

("Karácsony Ha az," 2017). However, the opposition parties in the left of the center did not seem ready to form a joint front with the socialists. The DK was in preparation of a separate list led by its leader Ferenc Gyurcsány months ago and thus wanted to keep a possible cooperation with the MSZP limited to sharing the 106 single member districts.

As for smaller and relatively new parties, their approach was not suitable for a joint strategy with the MSZP and the DK either ("A baloldal nem," 2017). Despite the change in leadership, the LMP seemed to stick with its strategy of non-cooperation with other opposition parties. The Együtt, on the other hand, was constantly talking about forming "a new pole" with the parties that were not in government in pre-2010 period, but none of these parties seemed to lean towards this proposal. Finally, the newly founded Momentum was also not open to cooperation proposals, as it was quite concentrated on putting forward its political platform and considered running separately in its first general elections as the most logical strategy for itself. Finally, the MSZP and the DK reached an agreement on December 19 and shared the 106 single member districts ("Megállapodott a," 2017). As expected, the agreement did not include anything regarding a joint list. In January 2018, the MSZP-PM list with Karácsony at the top as the prime minister candidate was declared ("Az MSZP-Párbeszédnek a 10," 2018).

So, until nearly a month and a half before the elections, the only cooperation that the left-wing opposition managed to make was the joint list of the MSZP-PM and the coordinated nominations in the single member districts by the MSZP and the DK. However, by-elections for the mayoral seat of Hódmezővásárhely, a small town widely known as a Fidesz stronghold, changed everything. The mayoral race of the town that always had right-wing mayors since regime change in 1989 was won by

the independent candidate Péter Márki-Zay, who was supported by all opposition parties, on February 25 (“A baloldal-Jobbik,” 2018). The formation of a single, broad and cross-ideological bloc by all against the ruling bloc by all parties from the MSZP to the Jobbik was an unprecedented strategy to be pursued by the opposition and it granted the independent candidate Márki-Zay a big victory by 57 percent of the vote against the Fidesz-KDNP alliance in its own stronghold. Following the Hódmezővásárhely victory, the opposition utterly had an epiphany about the vincibility of Orbán’s powerful election machine and the need to extend their cooperation. The prime minister candidate of the MSZP-PM Gergely Karácsony said:

> If Fidesz can be replaced in Hódmezővásárhely, then it can be replaced anywhere. If there is an alliance, there is a victory. So, we must sit down again with the democratic parties to discuss the individual districts (“Hódmezővásárhely az egész,” 2018).

Similarly, DK leader Ferenc Gyurcsány also said:

> Márki-Zay's victory shows that there are more things that unite the democrats in the fight against Orbán than what separates them. This way we will be able to win in April (referring to the general elections) as well. There is a fight without a bargain (Ibid.).

The victory of in Hódmezővásárhely apparently led the opposition parties to extensively reevaluate their approach to electoral cooperation and moderated, if not resolved, two interactable fault lines within the greater opposition camp: First, the conventional left and the new leftist/liberal parties overcame their stubbornness and engaged in talks on how they could cooperate in single member districts. The DK declared on the day after the by-elections in Hódmezővásárhely that the opposition should extend its cooperation by including other parties such as the LMP and that they were ready to withdraw their individual candidates if necessary (“Gyurcsány

koordinálna," 2018). Thereafter, the LMP started negotiating with the MSZP-PM ("Jól haladnak," 2018) and subsequently the DK unilaterally withdrew its candidate in the constituency of Bernadette Szél, co-chair of the LMP ("Gyurcsány visszalépteti," 2018). Likewise, the MSZP and LMP also withdrew some of their candidates in favor of each other following rather long negotiations ("Még egy LMP-s," 2018; "Megint teljes," 2018). Subsequently, smaller parties like Együtt and Momentum also joined the process by withdrawing their candidates in favor of larger parties ("Karácsonynak érdemi," 2018). As a result of inter-party negotiations that lasted all the way until the day before the elections, the left-wing candidates withdrew in favor of each other. Considering the fact that before the victory in Hódmezővásárhely there was utterly a chaos within the left-wing camp ("Azt könnyű kiírni," 2018), whereby the parties were constantly accusing each other, this level of cooperation was undoubtedly a significant achievement ("Tucatnyi helyen," 2018).

Second, the cooperation between the left and the Jobbik that was hitherto perceived as unthinkable for both sides became utterly a matter of public debate for the first time since the regime change in 1989. Péter Márki-Zay himself, who won the historic victory in the mayoral race in Hódmezővásárhely, stated that the only way to oust the current government is the unity of all opposition parties from the MSZP to the Jobbik ("Márki-Zay: A Jobbiktól," 2018). As a result, the LMP, the DK and the Momentum said in separate statements that they would be open to sit down with the Jobbik if necessary ("Növekszik a nyomás," 2018).

In fact, there was neither enough openness nor adequate time to produce a cross-ideological alliance joined by the left and the Jobbik, when the 2018 General Elections were only weeks away. Neither the left-wing parties nor the Jobbik were

ready for such a step. The prime minister candidate of the MSZP-PM Gergely Karácsony said in an interview:

> I do not see how Jobbik would be an alternative to Fidesz. The Jobbik people themselves complain that Fidesz has implemented a frightening amount of the 2010 Jobbik program in recent years. We see where this led. The hatred that poisons this country day after day was released from the bottle by Jobbik. I am glad that Vona (referring to Gábor Vona, the leader of Jobbik) is now trying to put this genie back in the bottle, but it is not working. Since I think that Fidesz, which has become a far-right party in competition with Jobbik, we need to pull the country's cart out of the pit to the left. Jobbik is not the solution to this ("Egy baloldali-Jobbik," 2018).

However, when asked whether he would be willing to conduct a coalition government with Jobbik if that were the only way to unseat the ruling bloc, Karácsony said:

> I can hardly imagine (a coalition government with Jobbik). If the voters decide this way, then a national crisis management government is needed, which neither I nor Gábor Vona can lead. (I see this) only as a theoretical possibility since there are no conditions for this. But it is better than the current system remaining (Ibid.).

The Jobbik, on the other hand, did not seem to have any change of mind after the victory of in Hódmezővásárhely regarding the cooperation with the left. The leader of the party Gábor Vona had said in an interview:

> We did not run a candidate in Hódmezővásárhely. I think this shows what Jobbik thinks is right in this situation. However, the situation is different nationally. There are several reasons why we do not want to establish electoral cooperation with the left. On the one hand, it is a moral-political difference, which is mutual. The left-wing parties say that we do not belong to the democratic opposition, we say that they, especially the MSZP-DK couple, are responsible for the past 28 years, and we do not want to bring them back. We owe Viktor Orbán essentially to Ferenc Gyurcsány; his failed government gave birth to two-thirds of Fidesz ("Meglepetésre számítok," 2018).

When asked with whom cooperation would be imaginable for Jobbik, Vona said:

> As I have already said, the LMP and the Momentum. Although there is a big difference of opinion between us on several serious issues, we are open to

> this for the sake of the country, because we are new parties. I have the hope that we can give this country much better than the current government (Ibid.).

As a matter of fact, the Jobbik did not change its mind and made it clear that it would have its own candidates in all the 106 constituencies in the 2018 General Elections ("A Jobbik közleményben," 2018). However, although these parties did not manage to openly cooperate, they took an unprecedented step by starting to talk to each other and to imagine, even if only hypothetically, what a left-right coalition government would look like after the elections. All these led the opposition parties to ask their voters in all constituencies to act tactically by voting for the candidate that had the best chance to win against the Fidesz-KDNP candidate ("Molnár Gyula arra," 2018). This was quite a big step for the hitherto fragmented Hungarian opposition, which would eventually pave the way for open cooperation between these parties during subsequent elections.

5.2.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

The refugee crisis in 2015 was quite timely for the ruling bloc under Prime Minister Orbán, who support level was in serious decline amid corruption allegations and in-party conflicts. Orbán utterly instrumentalized the issue and managed to present his rule as the only force that could protect the country in time of crisis. When the ruling bloc started to dwell on the "Soros plan" in 2017 as one of the most serious dangers that Hungary faced, it was already expected that Orbán's campaign for the 2018 General Elections would mainly be about refugees and George Soros.

It was indeed exactly how the campaign of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance started in February 2018. The most conspicuous campaign material of the alliance that appeared everywhere around the country was a poster featuring George Soros arm-

in-arm with the leaders of all opposition parties from the MSZP to the Jobbik with fence-breaking tools in their hands ("Telefonon tájékoztat," 2018). The poster had two messages: First, it claimed that George Soros was after a new government in Hungary that he could keep under his control and enforce to accept as many refugees as possible. Second, despite all their differences the opposition leaders were allegedly the puppets of Soros, who would undo everything that the Orbán Government did to protect Hungary from all kinds of external dangers and, particularly, the refugees. In his annual speech, Orbán said: "Our independence must be protected and not be left to the internationalists", and utterly accused the opposition of not supporting his bid to protect the independence of the country:

> There is no other choice but Fidesz. The opposition is in a hopeless situation. They supported neither the quota referendum nor the constitutional amendment. Hopelessness breeds hatred, which emanates from the opposition ("Orbán feltűnően," 2018).

The border fence installed by the government was one of themes central to the campaign of the ruling bloc. Here, as implied by the campaign posters, the main allegation was that the opposition would remove the fence should they come to power. To support this claim, for instance, State Secretary Csaba Dömötör published a photo in his official Facebook account, in which the MSZP MEP István Ujhelyi was seen holding a fence cutting tool in his hand, and wrote:

> In this photo, you can see Socialist representative István Ujhelyi. He is holding a fence cutter, which he handed over to the president of the MSZP at that meeting. He asked that the border fence be dismantled together. Well, that is all about what the MSZP's real position is on border protection ("Az államtitkár," 2018).

However, the photo was not up to date. So, Ujhelyi wrote the following answer to Dömötör's post:

> Mr. State Secretary, you are lying. The photo in question was taken at the MSZP party conference in 2014, when there was no mention of a border fence at all. I was talking about the symbolic dismantling of the ideological iron curtain between Orbánistan and Europe, which, by the way, was taken from my open letter. But obviously you did not have time to do anything other than what you were instructed to do (Ibid.).

In fact, the ruling did not seem to have any tangible election manifesto, a vision, or a list of promises ("A Fidesz választási," 2018). The only things that they were talking about were the refugees and the so-called Soros plan. The opposition, on the contrary, started their campaigns mainly by promising significant improvements in the socio-economic lives of the Hungarians. The prime minister candidate of the MSZP-PM alliance Gergely Karácsony, for instance, vowed to make the pension system fairer by introducing the 13th monthly pension ("Karácsony 13. Havi," 2018) and proposed an extraordinary parliamentary session to do it before the elections ("Karácsonyék rendkívüli," 2018). Karácsony also vowed to increase the wages in the health sector by 50 percent for all doctors and nurses, who he said left the profession due to low salaries and bad working conditions ("Ötvenszázalékos béremelést," 2018) and promised particular price cuts in the utility costs for families and small enterprises ("Karácsony Gergely: –30," 2018). Likewise, the DK also promised increasing subsidies for the social security expenses and the utility consumption up to a certain level for lower classes as well as a gradual cost increase for compensation ("Gyurcsány: Ma sokan," 2018). Other parties, too, had promised significant improvements in the socio-economic life. The Jobbik, for instance, promised round-the-clock treatment for cancer patients ("A Jobbik éjjel-nappali," 2018). Similarly, the LMP promised a bigger budget for education ("Az LMP megszüntetné," 2018) and vowed to de-politicize the governance of the education and the health sectors ("Az LMP megszüntetné a politikai," 2018).

Nevertheless, mainly due to its fragmented structure, the opposition was unable to turn the campaign on socio-economic issues into an alternative axis of politics to that created by the Orbán Government based on refugees and the so-called Soros plan. The only opposition cooperation that could be made until the end of February 2018 was the sharing of the 106 single member districts between the MSZP-PM and the DK. Apart from this, the opposition was totally fragmented by two main fault lines: First, the left-right division between the Jobbik and other left-wing/liberal parties and, second, the so-called old-new division between the MSZP/DK that had been in government before 2010 and the remaining new parties including the Jobbik, the LMP and the Momentum. These two fault lines prevented the opposition from creating a congruous image and giving the impression that they could govern together, which was quite visible in the debates joined by the opposition parties' candidates. In the debate joined by the individual candidates of the opposition for the first constituency of Budapest, for instance, the LMP candidate Antal Csárdi said the following:

> What kind of a government would it be with an interior minister from the DK and a foreign minister from the Jobbik. It is not only that it will not work but I think it would result in a complete chaos, after which Fidesz would come back even stronger than it is now ("Nem zárkóznak," 2018).

Similarly, during the debate joined by individual candidates of the opposition for the first constituency of Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, the Jobbik candidate Máté Lengyel said:

> Fidesz and the MSZP are only playing theater at the national and local levels. They look like they argue but, in the background, they are in agreement. Those who vote for the MSZP vote for Fidesz ("Azt könnyű kiírni," 2018).

So, while the ruling bloc was relentlessly telling people how Soros-friendly and pro-immigrant a new government would be, the opposition parties were unable to overcome the fault lines that divided them and put forward the issues that they agreed on. Without a discursive congruence, it was a mission impossible for the opposition to capture the power of agenda-setting and eliminate the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, which had the entire state apparatus at its disposal.

Therefore, it was not a coincidence that the ruling bloc chose the refugee crisis as the main question of the elections, as this was one of the issues dividing the opposition. The left-wing parties, on the one hand, failed to create the image that they had a clear stance on the issue of immigration. Although they did not take a pro-immigrant stance, they only criticized the government of abusing the issue rather than clearly setting forth what they would do differently, which made them vulnerable to the claims of being pro-immigration. The Jobbik, on the other hand, could have been the main actor to raise the issue of migration and use it against the government. However, amid its attempts to change discourse and become a mainstream center-right party, the Jobbik was outmaneuvered by the Orbán Government that hijacked the issue. Consequently, the opposition was unable to put forward a common policy platform, not even regarding the issues that they could have easily agreed on and set the agenda against the ruling bloc.

The victory of the opposition in Hódmezővásárhely by-elections on February 25 was a critical point not only for the opposition but also for the ruling bloc. The candidate endorsed by Prime Minister Orbán was defeated in one his strongholds in such an unexpected way by a political outsider supported by all opposition parties. In his reaction to the by-election results, Orbán seemed to have understood how critical the defeat was for his bloc:

> We never won an election just by chance, or luck, or due to the weakness of others. If we wanted to win, our community had to mobilize two or three times as much energy as our opponents. This is still the case now, we have to work with redoubled strength, this is the lesson and we will work on it ("Orbán Hódmezővásárhelyről," 2018).

Consequently, the ruling bloc decided to work harder in the last month of campaign ahead of the elections and aimed at "total mobilization" ("Orbánék úgy készülnek," 2018). Right after the Hódmezővásárhely defeat, the ruling bloc was expected to reconsider its campaign around George Soros and turn it into a positive campaign. András Bencsik, one of the organizers of Orbán's Peace March, for instance, said:

> I think that we should stop this elementary school-level level campaign, for example, Stop Soros, and others. They are good-natured, but Hungarian society is more intelligent than that ("A Fidesz lejjebb," 2018).

However, according to the evaluation of the results by the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, the solution was not to moderate the campaign. The ruling bloc reached the conclusion that the defeat in the Hódmezővásárhely was more related to the persona of Péter Márki-Zay than to the opposition parties ("Orbánék úgy," 2018). So, the polarizing campaign against the opposition continued with increasing intensity mostly on the issue of immigration. Szilárd Németh, the vice-chair of Fidesz, for instance, said in a campaign meeting the following:

> If the opposition wins, migrants will come and there will be no money left for health care, education, or development. First, they occupy the apartments, streets, workplaces, schools, then our churches, and finally the whole city. In London, the mayor is no longer British, the story is irreversible (…) They will commit acts of violence like in Paris, Brussels, Berlin or most recently in Vienna. Whichever opposition prime minister candidate comes to power, his task is to implement the Soros plan ("Halálbüntetést kértek," 2018).

With increasingly harsh and polarizing statements from the Fidesz campaign regarding "the danger of immigration", it was also often proclaimed that the

Hungarian identity was at stake in the elections. Prime Minister Orbán, for instance, said in an interview:

> The election on April 8 is not only about the protection of Christian culture and national independence, but also about the country's economic future ("Orbán: migráns!," 2018).

Similarly, László Kövér, the speaker of the parliament, said in a campaign meeting:

> This election is about whether Hungary will remain a Hungarian country. Will we throw away the blood sacrifices and struggles of five hundred years for our identity, our independence, our culture, and our faith? ("Kövér László: a választás," 2018)

Towards the end of his campaign trail, Prime Minister Orbán explicitly said that all opposition parties were being controlled by external powers like the EU and George Soros and a government to be formed by these parties would realize the plans of these external powers:

> Hungarians have only one country. One wrong step is enough and there is no stopping the slope and our destiny is not anymore in our hands (…) Ten million people are preparing to leave from the Middle East, Africa, and all of them are heading for Europe. What has happened so far was only the stress test, more is to come. We consider the safety of Hungarians to be the most important issue. If there is no security, there is nothing (…) Migration in Hungary is the first threat to Budapest and the people of Budapest. Whoever chooses the opposition's candidates chooses the path leading to the everyday life of the immigrant country ("Orbán üzent," 2018).

> The opposition parties are dangerous because they fight as mercenaries of their foreign clients, and this is a serious source of danger. If they come to power, these parties would carry out their orders in accordance with the interests of the international forces behind them. The future will be decided in Sunday's election (…) (Referring to the Jobbik) Those who burned the EU flag a few years ago have now become Brusselsists. It is not about anything but money and power ("Orbán: Nem lebecsülendő," 2018).

As for the opposition, too, the Hódmezővásárhely victory was a critical point. As underlined above, the victory moderated the two fault lines within the opposition bloc and made the cross-ideological opposition cooperation joined by all parties at least thinkable. Besides, all opposition parties called on their voters to pick the

candidate that was most likely to win against the candidate of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance. That is to say that after the February 25 victory in Hódmezővásárhely, the opposition parties started to focus more on what they unite rather than divide them. Bernadett Szél, LMP's candidate for prime Minister, said in an interview:

> Although there is no community of values with the other opposition parties, everyone must see that there is indeed a community of destiny. It means that there is no way but the opposition agreement. This is what the majority of voters want, as the numbers show that the majority of voters also want a change of government ("Ne legyenek illúzióink," 2018).

As elaborated in the previous section, all leaders of the opposition made similar statements regarding the need to deepen cooperation among the opposition. However, this only led to a quite long series of negotiations between the parties and the opposition failed to create a new synergy out of the Hódmezővásárhely victory. As András Fekete-Győr, the leader of the newly founded Momentum put it, this period was full of "protracted, fruitless negotiations and communication bluffs" ("A Momentum három," 2018), which, as underlined above, lasted until all the way to the election day. At the end, although the cooperation was deepened through reciprocal withdrawals by opposition candidates in favor of each other in single member districts, the new anti-Orbán axis that initially seemed to motivate the opposition to join forces could not be turned into a platform of a common post-Orbán vision for Hungary. Rather, the negotiating parties seemed to assume that the Hungarian people already decided to oust Orbán and that they just had to copy the model that worked in the Hódmezővásárhely by-elections to win a similar victory at the national level. This was evident in a statement made by Péter Márki-Zay, the new mayor of Hódmezővásárhely, while he was campaigning in favor of the opposition:

> In fact, Orbán united the nation against himself, so the opposition has a great responsibility to take advantage of the opportunity and not be satisfied by

depriving Fidesz of its two-thirds majority but struggle to obtain the majority ("Volt fideszesek," 2018).

In sum, the February 25 victory in the Hódmezővásárhely by-elections motivated the opposition to partly set aside their differences and put forward the anti-Orbán axis of politics, thereby prioritizing their willingness to change the government. This apparently led them to deepen their cooperation by means of reciprocal withdrawal of candidates in favor of each other and, perhaps more importantly, to discuss deeper cooperation options that had been unthinkable before February 25. However, neither the deepening of the cooperation that mainly happened at the formal level nor the anti-Orbán axis paved the way for the formation of a joint political platform in issues discussed during the campaign trail.

5.2.3 Concluding remarks

In the 2014 General Elections, thanks to the new provisions in the electoral law, Prime Minister Orbán and his ruling bloc was able to secure the two thirds majority in the parliament even though they got way less than half of the popular vote. If there had been a solidly united opposition running against it, the same vote share would have meant a defeat for the Fidesz-KDNP alliance. Thus, the fragmented structure of the opposition made up two irreconcilable parts of roughly equal size, the Jobbik on the one hand and the leftist/liberal camp on the other, has always been a huge advantage for the ruling bloc.

Under the circumstances of the new electoral system, everyone would agree that a united opposition bloc would be the best strategy against Orbán's ruling alliance. However, neither Jobbik nor the leftist/liberal camp was ready for such a move ahead of the 2018 General Elections. Thus, there was an unsurprising

competition between these two blocs, both of which claimed to be the real alternative to the ruling alliance. The problem for the leftist/liberal camp was that it was not a united bloc within itself either. However, if they somehow manage to join forces, their bloc might challenge Jobbik for being the largest opposition group and, by implication, the real alternative to the ruling alliance.

While the 2018 General Elections were approaching, every actor within leftist/liberal camp was aware of the fact that some kind of an alliance would be required in order to have a chance against the ruling bloc. However, no concrete actions were taken to that end until the second half of 2017. Instead, the parties were in a tough competition with each other. This competition within the leftist/liberal camp was twofold: First, the competition between the MSZP and the DK over the position of leadership of the left. Despite its political weariness, the MSZP was the main opposition party with largest sources and organization. The DK, on the other hand, was no longer a new political party and enlarged its voter base since the 2014 General Elections. The main problem for the DK was its leader and former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. Gyurcsány was very popular among his party's voter base but at the same time allegedly the most hated politician in the eyes of the general public. This was a big dilemma for the leftist/liberal camp because the voter base of the DK was too big to neglect but, on the other hand, the inclusion of Gyurcsány would be a burden for any electoral alliance. Although Gyurcsány never utterly said that he would be willing to be the leader of the opposition, he was also not open to alliance options, whereby he would not be recognized as a respected member.

Second, as elaborated above, there was also a clear fault line within the leftist/liberal camp between the parties of the so-called socialist establishment, the

MSZP and the DK, and the new parties that were found as a reaction to it, the LMP, the Együtt and the Momentum. Despite their awareness of the need for a broad coalition, the so-called new parties were utterly against the cooperation with the MSZP and the DK as they thought that the Orbán regime was a result of these parties' past mistakes and that a cooperation with them would be against their own raisons d'être.

The competition along these two fault lines within the leftist/liberal camp prevented the political parties of this camp from doing what it took to build a united electoral bloc. Instead, the MSZP nominated László Botka, one of its few popular politicians, for prime minister and assigned him to deal with the negotiations with other opposition parties. Botka wanted a single leftist/liberal bloc under his leadership without Ferenc Gyurcsány. In order to attain this rather difficult goal, Botka had to win both competitions along two mentioned fault lines: He had to persuade, first, the DK to come on board without its leader and, second, the new parties to accept his absolute leadership. However, he failed eventually on both fronts. In other words, Botka's popularity was apparently not sufficient to resolve the stalemate of the leftist/liberal camp ("Sokan örülhetnek," 2017). After Botka's resignation, the MSZP and the DK came together and shared the 106 constituencies but otherwise the parties in the leftist/liberal camp kept on campaigning separately until February 25.

In the Hódmezővásárhely by-elections, something that was hitherto unprecedented for the opposition was tried and all opposition parties supported Péter Márki-Zay. The victory of Márki-Zay was probably a lot to with his profile as a political outsider, his independence from all the opposition parties despite their endorsement and his self-definition as a conservative and a frustrated Fidesz voter.

However, the opposition parties apparently overlooked the specificity of his victory and rather easily reached the conclusion that the same strategy would bring the victory at the national level. The defeat of Orbán in one of his strongholds clearly created the perception that he could be defeated anywhere. However, given the two rather deep fault lines within the larger opposition camp, the pursuit of the same strategy was not possible whatsoever in the general elections that would be held in a month. At the end, significant progress was made regarding the cooperation within the leftist/liberal camp and the dialogue between this camp and the Jobbik. So, the Hódmezővásárhely victory made the opposition parties finally imagine what was hitherto unimaginable for them: a cross-ideological alliance of the left-wing and right-wing opposition parties.

Nonetheless, all the epiphany that the opposition had after the Hódmezővásárhely victory did not lead the opposition to develop a common vision for the post-Orbán period. All the attempts to deepen the cooperation after February 25 aimed to have only a single leftist/liberal candidate in single member districts. However, reciprocal withdrawals to have a single candidate in a constituency did not bring about joint candidates promising a future based on a joint vision. As Bernadette Szél, the prime minister candidate of the LMP, put it:

> The problem with candidate withdrawals is basically that the message is loss minimization. While we could all have sent a very positive message with broad coordination ("Orbán Viktor börtönbe," 2018).

The Hódmezővásárhely victory created a big synergy for the opposition, breaking the perception that Orbán was invincible. However, that synergy could not be turned into a political project and the opposition cooperation did not go beyond the arithmetic necessity of reducing the number of candidates running against those of the ruling bloc (A. Mesterházy, personal communication, April 14, 2022).

In sum, while institutional enabling factors related to the electoral system and learning from past experiences, particularly from the experience of the Hódmezővásárhely by elections, incentivized the opposition actors to converge (B. Bárány, personal communication, May 3, 2022), which was evident in the last-minute withdrawals in the single member districts, the mentioned intra-opposition fault lines prevented a full-fledged opposition cooperation. Besides, as elaborated above, the leadership ambitions of Botka and Gyurcsány as well as the unsuccessful experience of the 2014 General Elections complicated the cooperation negotiations even within the leftist camp (A. Mesterházy, personal communication, April 14, 2022), where there is no real fault line.

5.3 The 2019 Local Elections

5.3.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

Prime Minister Orbán and his ruling bloc won once again a decisive victory in the 2018 General Elections. Before the elections, there was little doubt that the Fidesz-KDNP alliance would win the majority of the seats in the parliament. However, whether it would again have a two thirds majority was completely dependent on how much the opposition would manage to cooperate, particularly in the single member districts, to have a single viable option vis-à-vis the Fidesz-KDNP candidate. Despite the negotiations that lasted up until the day before the elections, the leftist/liberal camp did not manage to join forces in many constituencies, where a united opposition had a real shot at winning. Considering that the ruling bloc did not get the majority of the popular vote nationwide, the failure of the opposition to join forces played a significant role in the win of the two thirds majority by the ruling bloc

(Győri, 2019, p.11). As a result, except for the DK and the newly founded Momentum, the leaders of all opposition parties resigned after the election loss.

Despite the peculiarities of the election victory in Hódmezővásárhely against the ruling bloc, the common wisdom among the opposition ahead of the two important elections in 2019 was that this victory gave the recipe for defeating the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, which was a united opposition front ("Karácsony nekünk," 2018). In the elections for the European Parliament, there was no need for opposition cooperation as those elections were carried out by the principle of proportional representation. However, in the local elections that would be held in October 2019, the strategy of having single contenders vis-à-vis the candidates of the ruling bloc was the only way for the opposition to have the slightest chance of winning.

5.3.2 Description of the opposition strategy

5.3.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

The fiasco in the 2018 General Elections was widely attributed with the failure of the opposition to adequately adopt the so-called Hódmezővásárhely strategy, despite the fact that the victory in those by-elections was not only a result of the full-fledged opposition cooperation but also several peculiarities arising from rather local dynamics. Therefore, ahead of the two elections in 2019, there was a recognizable pro-cooperation approach among the opposition parties ("Új irányba indul," 2018). Although it could be achieved merely in a small minority of the constituencies, the need for cooperation was understood by the leftist/liberal opposition camp already before the elections in April 2018. After the elections, however, the leftist/liberal opposition parties, which had been quite skeptical towards cooperation with Jobbik, declared one after another that they no longer ruled out this option for the local

elections (“Az MSZP részéről, 2018; “Óriási lehetőséget,” 2018; “Gyurcsány nem zárta,” 2018)

According to the cooperation strategy widely accepted by the opposition, there had to be single mayoral candidates to be nominated by the opposition against the Fidesz-KDNP alliance in as many constituencies as possible. In some constituencies, the rather difficult task to agree on a joint candidate could be carried out by inter-party negotiations that would be made in the light of local dynamics, while in others primary elections could be organized to elect the joint candidate. For the mayoral race in Budapest, for instance, the idea was to hold primaries in June 2019 and let the residents of the city decide who should run as the joint opposition candidate for mayor against István Tarlós, the candidate of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, who had been the sitting mayor of the town since 2010. To that end, first, the MSZP, the DK, the PM and the Solidarity Movement decided to hold a primary election among each other to elect the candidate of their leftist bloc, who would then compete in the final round of the ordinary elections with the candidates of the other opposition parties, that is the LMP, the Jobbik and the Momentum (“Left-wing opposition,” 2018).

In the first round of primaries that were held between January 26 and February 4, 2019, in Budapest, the candidate of the PM, Gergely Karácsony, who was also the candidate of the MSZP-PM for prime minister in the 2018 General Elections, run against the candidate of the MSZP, Csaba Horváth and Karácsony won the vote by over 80 percent of the 34,133 valid votes that were cast during the week-long ballot (“A baloldal már,” 2019). So, as the winner of the first round of primaries, Karácsony would take on the other candidates in the final round of the

primaries, in which the joint opposition candidate for Budapest mayor would be elected in June 2019 (“LMP Puzsér Róberten,” 2019).

In April 2019, all the opposition parties except for the Jobbik came together in negotiate the joint candidates for the mayoral seats of the 23 districts of Budapest. During the negotiations, no consensus was reached regarding the participation of the Jobbik as Budapest was not among the party’s strongholds. At the end, the LMP rejected to be a part of the agreement and the remaining four parties, namely the MSZP, the DK, the PM, and the Momentum, made a deal about the joint candidates of the 23 districts of Budapest (“Félösszefogás: velük,” 2019). Róbert Puzsér, the independent candidate for Budapest mayor who was also supported by the LMP and the Jobbik, harshly criticized the deal between the four parties and, subsequently, decided not to take part in the primary elections that would be held in June 2019 (“Puzsér Róbert borít,” 2019). Upon his decision not to participate the primaries, the LMP withdrew its support from Puzsér (“Puzsér nem vesz,” 2019) and declared that it would fully support the winner of the primaries in Budapest (“Az LMP teljesen,” 2019).

While they were negotiating their alliance for the local elections, the results of the European Parliament elections in May 2019 substantially changed the balance of power between the opposition parties. According to the results, the DK became the largest opposition party with over 16 percent of the vote followed by the newly founded Momentum with 10 percent of the vote. Each of the two leading opposition parties in the 2018 General Elections, the Jobbik and the MSZP, drastically fell behind and received around 6 percent of the vote (Győri, 2020, p.12).

The unexpected results of the EP elections had apparently a direct impact on the ongoing negotiations of the broad-based opposition alliance for the local

elections. The two winners of the elections, the DK and the Momentum, decided to nominate their own candidates for Budapest mayor to run in the final round of the opposition primaries to be held in June 2019 (“Izzadva értettek,” 2019). The losers, on the other hand, namely the LMP and the Jobbik that were widely taken to be punished by the electorate due to their reluctance to cooperate in the previous general elections (Kovarek & Littvay 2022, 385), were in a way forced to declare that they would respect the results of the opposition primaries in Budapest (“Elfogytak a Puzsért,” 2019). Consequently, all the six opposition parties vowed before the primaries that they would not nominate a candidate against the winner of the primaries (“Minden amit,” 2019).

Finally, Gergely Karácsony, the candidate of the MSZP-PM, won the final round of primaries for the joint opposition candidate for Budapest mayor with over 48 percent of the 68,240 valid votes, defeating Olga Kálmán, the candidate of the DK, who received 37 percent of the vote and Gábor Kerpel-Fronius, the candidate of the Momentum, who received 14 percent of the vote (“Karácsony Gergely nyerte,” 2019). After the victory of Karácsony, the Jobbik stated that it respected the results of the primaries and would not support any other candidate for Budapest mayor. The statements was as follows:

> Jobbik took part in the organization of the opposition municipal primaries in the capital because we consider it important that in the whole country - including Budapest – a single opposition candidate will stand against the ruling bloc. Gergely Karácsony is the candidate for mayor of the left, so Jobbik will not take participate in the campaign to promote him. However, we accept the results of the primary election and do not support any other candidate (“A Jobbik nem támogat,” 2019).

The cooperation among the opposition parties was not limited to Budapest. In fact, there was a rather strong commitment to the common goal of nominating single candidates to be backed by both the leftist/liberal opposition parties and the Jobbik

vis-à-vis the candidates of the ruling bloc in as many constituencies around Hungary as possible. The opposition parties most preferred to attain this common goal by means of negotiations between their local branches and, if negotiations somehow fail, then they consider conducting primaries to elect the candidate like, for instance, in Ferencváros, where the six opposition parties had committed to support the winner of the primaries as their joint candidate ("Baranyi Krisztina nyerte," 2019).

In some instances, where the opposition parties initially fail to reach an agreement, they did not immediately resort to primaries but insisted to keep negotiating to work out their disagreement. In Szolnok, for instance, the opposition camp that was divided between the supporters of two candidates kept on negotiating and finally reached a consensus ("Lukácsi visszalépett," 2019). However, in cases, where the disagreements cannot be easily overcome, the opposition parties acted carefully not to damage the opposition coordination. In Pécs, for instance, the LMP declared that it would not support the joint candidate of all other opposition parties, Attila Péterffy, for reasons related to his background, and nominated someone else for the mayoral race in the city. The LMP did not hesitate to do this, as Péterffy had a reasonable shot at defeating the Fidesz-KDNP candidate even without its support ("Eldőlt Pécsen," 2019). Similarly, in Csepel the Momentum decided to pull out of the alliance due to a disagreement between its local branch and that of the MSZP but sill continued to support the joint candidate of the opposition in order not to decrease its chances against the sitting mayor and the current candidate of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance ("Kiszáll a Momentum," 2019).

In sum, as per their cooperation strategy ahead of the 2019 Local Elections, the opposition parties substantially prioritized the common goal of defeating the ruling bloc in as many constituencies as possible and largely avoided any major

action that would diminish the chances of the local alliances to attain this common goal. In cases, where they simply failed to work out their differences, the opposition parties clearly took care of keeping the issues local and avoided to magnify them. Consequently, the opposition managed to field joint mayoral candidates in almost all 23 major cities as well as all districts of Budapest.

5.3.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

After 9 years in power, it was for the first time ahead of the 2019 Local Elections that Viktor Orbán was almost absent in the campaign trail of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance. According to the initial information disclosed to the media at the beginning of the campaign, Prime Minister Orbán was said to participate in the country tour that would be organized by his party for the campaign trail ("Ilyen amikor," 2019). However, there was apparently a change in strategy and Orbán did not show up often in the campaign events until the very last week of the campaign. When asked about reason for his absence, Prime Minister Orbán said the following:

> A prime minister should participate in the campaign if he wants to draw people's attention to national issues. This is not the case here and we wanted to keep people's focus on finding suitable candidates for the city councils and electing a suitable mayor. Because the candidates are known locally, the decision should be made much more on the basis of local knowledge and not on the basis of, let's say, my political comments ("Orbán Viktor Miskolc," 2019).

With Orbán's absence, the campaign of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance ahead of the 2019 Local Elections was absolutely not one of its customary campaigns. Unlike those in 2014 and 2018, this campaign did not have a single focus but, as Orbán expressed, there was multiple local foci. The issue of immigration, for instance, which had been practically the single focus of Fidesz's 2018 campaign and, to many, allowed it to win the elections, was not totally abandoned but raised much less

frequently in 2019. In his effort to persuade the electoral during the last week of the campaign, Prime Minister Orbán sent voters a letter, in which he wrote the following:

> This Sunday we will decide whether the Hungarian counties, cities, and villages will have pro-immigration or anti-immigration leaders ("Levélben győzködi," 2019).

Similarly, Lajos Kósa, vice chair of Fidesz, also said during a speech: "The opposition wants to take over the government with the votes of migrants" ("Kósa Nincs," 2019). However, the issue was by no means a central topic during the campaign, which was argued to be an intended result of a change in strategy of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance ("Máshogy migránsoznak," 2019).

The Fidesz-KNDP alliance pursued instead a two-pillar strategy ahead of the 2019 Local Elections: First, the central message of the campaign was apparently that for better municipal services the cooperation between the local authorities and the central government was quite important and that it was thus essential for the voters to support the candidates of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance to make sure that this cooperation continued ("Tényleg rosszabbul," 2019). By means of this argument, the ruling bloc contended that whereas they prioritized the future of the cities through the continuation of the central-local cooperation, the opposition considered the local elections as an opportunity to wage war on the government. In his aforementioned campaign letter, Prime Minister Orbán wrote the following:

> While Fidesz-KDNP offers construction and growth, the program of the repeatedly failed left is to turn municipalities into battlefields. They want to be in a position to go to war with the government, while they can do anything for power and money. For us, the interests of Hungary and the Hungarians come first. That is why we will protect our freedom, our national independence, and our Christian culture in our local communities ("Levélben győzködi," 2019).

Similarly, Gergely Gulyás, the minister of Prime Minister's Office, repeatedly said in his campaign trips around the country that the voters should support those, who are in good terms with the government, and not the opposition, which was ready to use the local governments for its political war:

> The most important thing is that those who are able to govern the local authority for the benefit of the constituency and cooperate with the government are trusted. The opposition wants a national political struggle against the government everywhere in the country, even if it negatively affects their constituencies. (…) Their aim is not to nominate the most suitable people as local leaders and to appoint respected citizens to the representative bodies but, rather, they want to create bridgeheads to attack the government. This is a complete misunderstanding of the stakes and significance of municipal elections. I believe that the good thing about local authorities is that they want to serve their locality regardless of their political background ("Gulyás Gergely elővette," 2019).

> It is necessary to vote for the government party candidates because the government plans to work together with the government party mayors (…) Everywhere the opposition sees the positions of mayor and representative candidates as a war bridgehead and if they win the local communities will be the losers. The ruling parties have the ability to cooperate, but the other side does not ("Gulyás Gergely a kormánypártok," 2019).

> The opposition candidates see the elections as a kind of war bridge resolution, which can give them a chance to fight against the ruling parties in the next parliamentary vote (…) It is not that the government lacks the will to cooperate, but rather that the opposition candidates are conducting a harsh and unfair campaign against the government, from which it is clear that if they win, their goal is not the high-quality management of local public affairs and the prosperity of the community ("Gulyás Gergely azzal," 2019).

> The question of the elections is whether Miskolc chooses the path of peaceful development or decides to elect a person against the government who does not use this position to cooperate for the sake of Miskolc but declares war. We would like to cooperate with the leadership of Miskolc. Cooperation will be possible if Alakszai (The candidate of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance for Miskolc mayor) is elected, because it is good to work with him ("A NER-úthenger," 2019).

In one of the government briefings that he gave, Gulyás also attributed being qualified as a mayor with the willingness to cooperate with the central government

and argued that Gergely Karácsony, the joint opposition candidate for Budapest mayor, did not have this qualification:

> Those who are qualified to be mayor seek cooperation with the government, and those who are unqualified, like Gergely Karácsony, reject the possibility of cooperation and consider the office of mayor as a position of war ("Gulyás a Pikó-házkutatásról," 2019).

In his one of the few campaign trips, Prime Minister Orbán also made it clear that the government cooperation with the local authorities would hinge on the election of the Fidesz-KDNP candidate. During his speech in Miskolc, he said the following:

> It should not be allowed that this city becomes an opposition headquarters and let the work of the previous years fall victim to party battles. If there will be a mayor with whom I can cooperate, then we will certainly make the investments that will make the city not only safe, but also beautiful (…) An opposition mayor from the DK will necessarily be an enemy of the government. If we want to develop, invest, if we want jobs, if we want to implement the already developed plans, then let us work together and let Miskolc try to stay on the winning side ("Orbán Viktor: Miskolc," 2019).

The argument that the municipal services would be better if they are carried out in cooperation with the central government and that the government would only cooperate with the mayors from the Fidesz-KDNP alliance was also dominant in the campaign of the ruling bloc in Budapest. The sitting mayor of the city and the candidate of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance István Tarlós apparently did not come up with a new program for the future of the city but rather built his entire campaign on the promise of continuation of his longstanding program in cooperation with the Orbán Government ("Ígéretszámláló sétálózónát," 2019). Besides, Tarlós repeatedly argued that Gergely Karácsony, the opposition candidate for mayor, was unfit, unsuitable, inexperienced, and unqualified for the mayorship. For him, the opposition cooperation did not aim at a better management of the local government but at destabilization:

> I have been in politics for 30 years, and I do consider this campaign as real a campaign. It is rather a subversion and an attempt at destabilization. The opposition looked for a weak person and Gergely Karácsony is indeed a very weak individual. While we should be talking about the city, the municipal achievements, the results, and the plans, we are talking about a simple government overthrow simulation, which makes no sense ("Tarlós Régi," 2019).
>
> The opposition is running an unprecedentedly false campaign for mayor candidate, full of side talk, and their candidates are also inexperienced. For the past 30 years, I have never experienced such a fake campaign full of slips and side conversations like the current one. Gergely Karácsony, who claims to be the strongest opposition candidate for mayor, practically does not talk about actual affairs of the city and the competences that a mayor must have. If he had them, he would certainly list up his achievements as a mayor. He is in tactful silence ("Tarlós István Hemzseg," 2019).

As it was challenged by a broad-based opposition alliance, the ruling bloc apparently chose Karácsony as the main figure to attack during the campaign and the emphasis on his incompetence was central to their campaign. To politicians from the ruling party repeatedly talked about the incompetence of Karácsony, comparing him with Tarlós, who they underlined was a highly experienced mayor ("A Fidesz új," 2019). Prime Minister Orbán, too, expressed a similar opinion on the matter:

> In my mind, if someone thinks that the municipality is meant to fight with the government, this is a proof of incompetence. Such a person is unfit to be mayor (...) If someone announces the opposite, and I see that the candidate of the opposition in Budapest announced the opposite, he is unfit because he does not understand what the municipality is about, and what is the municipal election about (Ibid.).

In order to emphasize on the competence of Tarlós as mayor of Budapest and discredit other candidates and particularly Karácsony, the ruling bloc started the "Budapest is not a circus" campaign and put up billboards all around the capital, featuring the three candidates for mayor like circus actors with the caption: "Do not entrust the city to them!" ("A Fidelitas plakátkampányt," 2019). The campaign condescending the candidates for Budapest mayor including Karácsony continued up

until the election day and was at the core of the ruling bloc's strategy for the close race in Budapest.

The second pillar of the Fidesz-KDNP strategy ahead of the 2019 Local Elections was to engage with the candidates of the opposition in three distinct ways in order to disconcert the voter base of the opposition: First, co-opting incumbent local politicians of the opposition parties; second, luring the candidates of the opposition parties to retreat before the elections and third, nominating independent candidates in some opposition strongholds (Kovarek & Littvay, 2022, p.386). The co-optation of the opposition incumbents by the ruling bloc ("A Fidesz felkarolja," 2019) would be a working strategy as incumbency was always a strong contribution for the bid of reelection in local elections.

The nomination of and supporting independent candidates was, too, a common strategy pursued by the ruling bloc in the constituencies, where the united opposition was taken to have a real shot at winning. In some instances, the Fidesz-KDNP alliance supported nominated and supported an independent candidate vis-à-vis a powerful opposition incumbent like, for instance, in Szeged, while in others, where the division of the opposition voters was essential, some independent candidates easily collected enough signatures to officially run for office ("Berkikrisztiánosítják," 2019). By either dividing or confusing the opposition voters, the strategy aimed to make sure that the candidates supported by the ruling bloc ended up prevailing.

The enticement of the opposition candidates as a last-minute decision, on the other hand, came as a big shock for the opposition alliance. A couple of days before the elections, four joint opposition candidates from the Jobbik in Győr ("A Borkai-botrány," 2019) and one joint opposition candidate from the LMP in Milkolc ("Újabb

csatatér," 2019) withdrew from the race, both citing disappointments with regard to the opposition alliance. Both the Jobbik and the LMP acted rather fast, declared their allegiance to the alliance and dissolved their local organizations that took these decisions. However, as it was not possible to nominate new candidates in lieu of those who withdrew just before the elections, the candidates of the ruling bloc in these constituencies remained as the sole competitors in the race.

Having managed to form a broad-based alliance in most of the constituencies around the country, the opposition initially built its campaign on the local problems of the cities and vowed to improve the municipal services ("Ígéretszámláló – Önkormányzati," 2019). In Budapest, for instance, unlike the sitting mayor István Tarlós, the team of Gergely Karácsony that was composed of members from all opposition parties came up with a comprehensive joint program on their vision of local governance in Budapest ("Ingyen BKV-t," 2019). The fact that the ruling bloc did not prefer the issues of the national politics to dominate the campaign either, the local issues and candidates' promises were significantly discussed in early stages of the campaign (László, 2019).

Since the opposition managed to have a single candidate against the ruling bloc in most of the constituencies, the elections could turn into an anti-Orbán referendum particularly in large cities. In later stages, therefore, the polemics between the opposition and the local representatives of the ruling bloc also became a significant part of the campaign. For instance, the opposition was apparently eager for one-on-one debates with the candidates of the ruling bloc. In the past elections, where the opposition always took part in a divided structure, the representatives of the ruling bloc could easily refuse to share the stage with the multiple candidates of the opposition and those debates thus often turned into intra-opposition arguments. In

2019, however, the ruling bloc was challenged by joint candidates of the opposition alliance, who made a real alternative to them, and one-on-one debates would thus be much more meaningful. Consequently, in many constituencies including Budapest, the joint opposition candidates for mayor publicly called on their competitors to face them in one-on-one debates ("Vitára hívta," 2019; "Nyilvános vitára," 2019). In Budapest, joint opposition candidate for mayor Karácsony invited his competitor Tarlós by stating the following:

> Here and now I invite István Tarlós to a debate. It can be sitting, standing, lying down, in the morning, in the evening, in Pest or Buda, it does not matter to me. Let there be a debate, because we owe it to the people of Budapest ("Karácsony fekve," 2019).

Tarlós never accepted the challenge without clearly rejecting the invitation. Initially he said that it would be better to wait for better conditions ("Tarlósnak mindenben," 2019) and later he insisted that Karácsony had to first have a debate with the other candidates and that he would be ready to face him one-on-one if he won it ("Tarlós egy olyan," 2019). At the end, the mayoral debate in Budapest did not happen.

As underlined above, the main premise of the Fidesz-KDNP campaign for the 2019 Local Elections was that quality municipal services could only be possible through an effective cooperation between the central and local governments and, by implication, that the people had to vote for the candidates of the ruling bloc as the Orbán Government would only cooperate with them. The opposition responded this campaign by saying that a mayor should be on good terms with the people rather than the central government. Karácsony, for instance, said in an interview the following:

> Tarlós does not have a program. He did not say anything beyond the fact that he would be on good terms with the government. But (…) I think you have to

> be on good terms with the people of Budapest. The damage done in Budapest is a result of the system built by Fidesz because all the problems of the people of Budapest can be traced back to Tarlós and Fidesz in two steps. Why are there rats running in the street? The answer: because Fidesz cheated on public procurement. Why is the garbage not taken out on time? We will get there quickly: because of the suspected corruption deal linked to Fidesz. Why do not hospitals work? Because Fidesz took it from Budapest. Why are subway cars crap? Because Fidesz circles do business with the Russians. In all of them, it turns out that the main problem is that Tarlós is not in control of the situation, and that the city is the victim. Tarlós served this Fidesz system to the fullest extent and was the government's number one advocate against the interests of the people of Budapest. This is the source of all problems (…) Tarlós did not cooperate with the government but served it. In a normal country, the relationship is a partnership, but what is not a partnership is that the government takes away the revenues generated by the city, taking away 98 percent of Budapest's GDP ("Ha van valami," 2019).

So, while the ruling bloc was campaigning for the need for cooperation between the central and local government authorities, the opposition responded by indicating that this cooperation apparently did not work as well as the ruling bloc claimed and argued that "the freedom of self-government" would be a way to solve the problems of the city. In a press conference, Karácsony stated the following:

> They took away the right of residents to determine the fate of their cities themselves. We believe that by representing the will of the people who want change, we will regain the self-government freedom that was taken away from the cities by the politics of the past years. Living with this freedom, we want to make our cities greener and more in solidarity with each other ("Karácsony Gergely visszaszerezné," 2019).

In order to emphasize that the so-called cooperation between Tarlós and Orbán Government did not work well for the city, Karácsony repeatedly said during his campaign that the relationship between the two was not cooperation but subordination. He compared this relationship to the one between a puppet and the puppet master and the campaign message "Budapest is not a puppet theater; you don't need a Fidesz puppet to lead it!" was glued to all the billboards of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance, which state: "Budapest is not a circus" ("Tarlós-ujjbábokkal," 2019).

The message that Tarlós was a puppet of Orbán made sense in the eyes of the people of Budapest, who were dissatisfied with the absence of government support for the large-scale municipal projects (Kovarek & Littvay, 2022, p.395).

The later stages of the campaign ahead of the 2019 Local Elections were rather marked by leakages and scandals both on the government and the opposition sides. First, a secretly recorded and audibly cut speech by the joint opposition candidate for Budapest mayor Gergely Karácsony was leaked, in which Karácsony was talking about the corruption done by socialists, who were his party's partners in the elections, and the threats to his family ("Kiszivárgott felvételen," 2019). Karácsony filed a complaint about the leaked recording, which was later revealed to be made during a meeting of party board in the parliament ("Szabó Tímea A," 2019). The parliament, however, refused to conduct any investigation on the matter, stating that it did not fall under its authority ("Kövér hivatala," 2019). In a TV interview, Karácsony did not deny what he was heard to say in the leaked recording and stated that he did not say anything in that speech that he had not differently said on different occasions in the past:

> Here I am not talking about anything that I have not talked about in a different style before. They are already deploying secret service tools, but they cannot intimidate me (…) It is absolutely clear that the opposition coalition, which was very hard to bring together, but finally came together, is being tried by all means (…) At the end of the day, I am grateful that the recording was made public, because it shows that I have zero tolerance for corruption. I cannot be bought, I cannot be intimidated, I cannot be bribed, that is what my speech is all about ("Karácsony Nem beszéltem," 2019).

As much as the politicians from the ruling coalition tried to make out of the leakage a big scandal, the leaked speech was about the internal issues of the opposition alliance and both parties made it clear that they had already worked out these issues and reached an agreement and that the opposition alliance would

continue its path (“Kiszivárgott felvételen,” 2019). Moreover, Karácsony repeatedly stated during his campaign that he was pleased about the part of the leaked speech, where he said that he had zero tolerance for corruption (Ibid.).

The biggest scandal that left its mark on the final week of the campaign was the video footage of Zsolt Borkai, the incumbent mayor of Győr and a leading politician of the ruling bloc, participating in an orgy on a yacht and consuming cocaine (“Jachton készült,” 2019). Despite the decision of the government and the pro-government media to ignore the scandal, the video quickly became viral. Having changed their mind on how to proceed, the ruling bloc was apparently caught off guard and looked rather unable to manage the crisis (“Rég volt ekkora,” 2019). At first, they tended to downplay the issue by declaring it a matter of private life (“Szijjártó nem,” 2019). However, the opposition did not deal with the issue as an isolated incident not only in Győr but also around the country and particularly in Budapest. Angéla Németh, the opposition joint candidate for mayor of Budapest’s XV. District, stated the following about the scandal:

> If you vote for Fidesz, you vote for Borkai. There are no two Fidesz. The Borkai case actually sheds light on the essential functioning of Fidesz and why it is crucial to protect the local governments and take them back from them. Borkai case clearly showed how seriously Fidesz takes national-Christian morality (…) The mayors of Fidesz can treat their city as their own private property, as long as they do not stand in the way of the superior lords and pay taxes to them (“Új fegyvert talált,” 2019).

Karácsony, too, underlined that the Borkai scandal was not an isolated incident but reflects the general character of the ruling bloc. In his campaign’s final event, he said:

> Do not think that the filth we saw in Győr is an isolated case. (...) They are robbing the country in a conscious and pre-planned way. There are not two Fidesz, there is one Fidesz, and it has deteriorated to the core (…) My goal is to make the city hall unsuitable for theft, because public money is meant to

> serve the public good, not to fill the pockets of friends with it and burn it to increase private wealth ("Karácsony Gergely Nincs," 2019).

Even though the shocking scandal left its mark on the final days of the campaign and started to threaten the chances of reelection for the ruling bloc not only in Győr but also other cities, where a close race was expected, Prime Minister Orbán did not make a comment on it and gave the following answer to the question about who he supported in the elections in Győr:

> I am supporting the people of Győr. They will express their opinion on the issue on Sunday and the I will express mine on Monday ("Orbán előbb," 2019).

Despite Orbán's determined silence on the issue, incumbent mayor of Budapest István Tarlós took a clear position against Borkai, considering the danger that the scandal could pose to his bid for reelection. In an interview, Tarlós called the scandal "unacceptable" and "indefensible" and said the following:

> What Zsolt Borkai did is indefensible, blatant and unacceptable. He became unworthy of his function. I do not know why he has not taken the consequences into consideration. Moreover, as politicians, we should get rid of such people in the future. This is not just an ordinary sex affair. This is clearly about more ("Nem azért küzdöttem," 2019).

The Borkai issue was not the only scandal that shaped the later stages of the campaign, but there were also leakages about and accusations against some opposition politicians as well. However, as they did not have as a central role in the opposition as Borkai had in the ruling bloc, these scandals were clearly overshadowed by the Borkai case in the final week of the campaign.

5.3.3 Concluding remarks

Since the adoption of the majoritarian electoral system, inter-party cooperation was logically considered to be the only way for the opposition to have a chance of defeating the ruling bloc. The victory in Hódmezővásárhely in the February 2018 by-elections and the failure of the opposition to apply the same strategy in the April 2018 General Elections turned it from a logical argument into a political reality. As a matter of fact, the parties that were considered responsible for opposition's failure to form a single front, the LMP and the Jobbik, lost a significant part of their support in the 2018 European Parliament Elections, which was commonly considered as a punishment by the electorate (Kovarek & Littvay, 2022, p.385). All these factors increased the pressure on the opposition to aim at a broad-based alliance, whereby joint opposition candidates would take on the candidates of the ruling bloc in all constituencies, ahead of the 2019 Local Elections.

Besides, in local elections, in which local political dynamics play a bigger role, it might be often less complicated than in general elections to form broad-based, cross-ideological alliances and get behind a single viable candidate, which was exactly the case in the 2018 Hódmezővásárhely by-elections. Considering all these, the opposition acted decisively to get behind joint candidates in 23 larger towns and 23 Budapest districts. Particularly, the opposition ran with a strong mayoral candidate in these elections for the first time since 2006 that voters thought had a chance of defeating the Fidesz-affiliated incumbent (László, p.2019).

Moreover, in some constituencies, the opposition also managed to broaden the anti-Fidesz alliance by building and/or supporting umbrella organizations, organize primaries and, where necessary, getting behind non-partisan but locally respected independent candidates. In the instances, where not all the opposition

parties were able to reach an agreement, they took care to keep the problem local and made sure that it did not have a negative effect the general harmony achieved by the parties in other parts of the country. All in all, the common objective to make the ruling bloc lose in as many constituencies as possible was prioritized by the entire opposition.

Looking at the election results, it is possible to conclude that the cooperation strategy of the opposition worked. The opposition alliance managed to win the lord mayoral seat of Budapest and the majority of the seats in Budapest city council; increased the number of its mayoral seats in Budapest districts from 6 to 14 and won in 10 of the 23 larger towns of the country. These are mostly the constituencies that the anti-Fidesz voters could never make up a majority due to the lack of a broad-based opposition alliance, which always resulted in the intra-opposition competition in previous elections. Therefore, the key to opposition victory was its strategy to motivate and consolidate the anti-Orbán voters rather than any attempt to expand its support base by appealing to that of the ruling bloc. Differently put, unlike in the previous elections, the opposition managed to make the best of its arithmetic advantage in the constituencies, where it had one, by mobilizing an anti-incumbent majority. However, from all these it would still not follow that the Fidesz-KDNP alliance was in decline. In fact, despite significant gains of the opposition, the ruling bloc was able to increase its support not only in rural areas but also in city centers (László, p.2019).

In sum, institutional factors such as the plurality vote played an enabling role for opposition cooperation. The flexibility provided by the local elections, additionally, where there are numerous seats to be contested and shared by the opposition, not only facilitated the cooperation but also helped the opposition keep

the disagreements local. Besides, the experience of the February 2018 Hódmezővásárhely by elections taught the opposition to pragmatically overcome the intra-opposition fault lines. The flexibility of the local elections facilitated this as well.

As underlined above, the ruling bloc deliberately preferred not to raise issues, such as migrants and Soros, which proved to be highly polarizing at the national level, in its campaign and, having drawn lessons from their loss in Hódmezővásárhely, made sure that campaign was about local issues. The key message of the ruling bloc's campaign was that the people should support their candidates for a better cooperation between the central and local governments, which they argued was what could guarantee good municipal services. The opposition, on the other hand, was able to come up with a good response to this message, arguing that this so-called cooperation did not solve the problems of the Hungarian towns including Budapest and that the local governments should be on good terms with the people rather than the central government. Thereby, the voters who wanted the candidates to address local issues were also reached out to by the opposition (László, 2019). Moreover, the opposition also presented the Borkai scandal as a proof for the corruption of the ruling bloc itself in its entire politics, rejecting the argument of the Fidesz that it was an individual case that concerned the private life of a politician. This strategy created an axis of politics that clearly worked for the opposition, particularly in the larger towns, by mobilizing the voters to get behind the opposition candidates (Kovarek & Littvay, 2022, p.390).

To sum up, by using its potential through mobilization and consolidation, the opposition was able to win important victories in the 2019 Local Elections and thereby broke the perception that Orbán was invincible. As a result, the idea that

opposition cooperation was the only way to defeat the ruling bloc became more prevalent ahead of the 2022 General Elections. However, irrespective of whether or not the opposition drew this inference, the local elections also indicated that cooperation did not suffice to have a complete victory over the ruling bloc, which would require the opposition to somehow appeal to their voter base.

5.4 The 2022 General Elections

5.4.1 Background and main issues ahead of the elections

For the ruling Fidesz-KDNP alliance the 2019 Local Elections were a serious setback if not an absolute defeat. Although it increased its vote share in both rural and urban areas around Hungary, the loss of major cities including the lord mayorship of Budapest was a big electoral blow for the ruling bloc, in fact the first one since coming to power in 2010.

The initial reaction of Prime Minister Orbán to his bloc's first election setback in years was quite unflurried. He conceded defeat and offered cooperation to the opposition. In his election night speech on October 13, 2019, he said:

> For nine years, it has been a custom for the government to gift a mayor to the capital. But the people of Budapest decided differently today. We acknowledge this decision and are ready to cooperate ("Orbán Készen állunk," 2019).

Nevertheless, it turned out soon that the cooperative approach that Orbán seemed to take in public was not genuine whatsoever, as it was by no means in the interest of the ruling bloc that the opposition showed its capability of successful governing through its success in the local government (Győri, 2020, p.35). As a matter of fact, soon after the 2019 Local Elections, the Orbán Government proposed passed legislation that significantly reduced the decision-making power of local

governments with regard to the use of its budget and the construction permits ("Durván felforgatná," 2019). Freshly elected mayor of Budapest Gergely Karácsony called it a "breach of agreement" by the Prime Minister ("Karácsony szerint," 2019) but it was clear that the government was decisive in tying the hands of the opposition-led municipalities.

In order not to turn the populations living in the opposition-led municipalities entirely against itself, the Orbán Government was initially not so aggressive in its attack on the power of the local government. It appeared that the government would not prefer to completely prevent the cities led by opposition mayors from operating but still make sure that their hands are so tightly tied that they would never be able to carry out their campaign pledges (Győri, 2020, p.36). However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the ruling bloc did not hesitate to use its emergency powers and took considerably more aggressive actions against the opposition-led municipalities and particularly Budapest. With most of his budgetary power curtailed throughout 2020, Budapest Mayor Karácsony called his municipality's 2021 budget "a budget of survival". In a speech at the Association of Hungarian Municipalities, he said:

> In order to survive 2021, we have to use up our financial reserves almost completely (…) In 2022 either the attitude of the Orbán Government towards Budapest will change, or the government itself will change in the elections. Someone must change, because otherwise the capital will no longer be able to provide public services in 2022 ("Karácsony Gergely A túlélés," 2019).

The Orbán Government exerted its power not only on the local governments but also on the judiciary, the independent media and even the parliament. In December 2019, the parliament passed an omnibus bill that among other things had pivotal changes on the Constitutional Court, the organization and administration of

courts and the legal status of judges (“Közigazgatási bíróság,” 2019). The legislation was a major blow to the judicial independence and increased the already big executive influence on the courts (“Amnesty Mégis,” 2019). In 2020, the Orbán Government declared state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic and started to rule by decree for an indefinite period of time despite its supermajority in the parliament (“Mi az a kihirdetett,” 2020). Meanwhile, the ruling bloc also managed to neutralize the leading online news portal Index, one of the few remaining independent media outlets in Hungary, following a change in its board. The new board fired the editor-in-chief and subsequently more than 70 journalists resigned from the paper (“Búcsúznak az Index,” 2020). Despite the emergence of new alternatives for the Hungarian readers who were critical of the Orbán Government, the fall of Index was considered to be a big blow taken by the independent media in Hungary, whose void could not be immediately filled (Győri, 2021, p.74).

In 2021, the Fidesz-KDNP alliance took a step further in its bid to entirely capture the Hungarian state. The government swiftly made appointments of its loyalists to a variety of public institutions, transferred the management of a vast amount of public goods to the foundations under its control and founded the Regulated Activities Supervisory Authority that would have the authority to oversee a large array of public affairs including gambling, tobacco, the liquidation of businesses and court enforcement (“Az egyetemek, az alapítványi,” 2021). This swift and radical set of actions was commonly evaluated as a contingency plan for the ruling bloc in order to keep control of the critical state institutions in case of the loss of elections in 2022 and tie the hands of a new government (Győri, 2022, p.22).

After successfully passing the test of the 2019 Local Elections, the cooperation strategy was seen sine qua non for the opposition to take on the Fidesz-

KDNP alliance at the 2022 General Elections. After losing many major cities including Budapest to the opposition, the ruling bloc also drew the conclusion that opposition cooperation would continue to jeopardize its bid to remain in power after 2022. So, the government took several actions make it legally more complicated for the opposition parties to cooperate in the general elections. First, through its majority in the parliament the government passed some changes in the Parliamentary Rules of Procedure in 2019, whereby the MPs elected as independent are no longer allowed to join in a parliamentary group and a parliamentary group formed after the elections would not be able to split. With these changes, the government wanted to prevent the opposition from being able to apply creative tactics that would facilitate the cooperation like in the 2019 Local Elections (Győri, 2020, p.36). Second, the government also passed important amendments to the electoral law, according to which a party needs to independently nominate own candidates in at least 50 constituencies in order to put forward a national list ("Varga Judit az éjjel," 2020). With these amendments, the ruling bloc essentially wanted to force the opposition parties to have a joint list, if they wanted to nominate a single candidate in each constituency.

Despite all the barriers placed by the ruling bloc in to further complicate it, the strategy of cooperation remained to be the only viable alternative for the opposition ahead of the 2022 General Elections. As the local elections demonstrated the effectiveness of the strategy of taking on the ruling alliance as a joint front, the Hungarian opposition considered its pursuit as inevitable to have a chance of defeating Orbán in the general elections.

5.4.2 Description of the opposition strategy

5.4.2.1 The cooperation strategy of the opposition

After the introduction of the abovementioned amendments in the electoral law, the opposition parties started to discuss about how they would cooperate in the 2022 General Elections. After long deliberations, the six opposition parties – the MSZP, the DK, the PM, the LMP and the Jobbik – reached an agreement on a joint strategy. According to the joint strategy, the opposition alliance would have a joint national list led by a joint candidate for prime minister as well as joint candidates in each of the 106 single member constituencies ("Közös miniszterelnök-jelöltet," 2020). The six parties also agreed that the joint candidates for the 106 constituencies and the joint candidate for prime minister would be elected by primaries organized by the opposition alliance. Subsequently, the leaders of the six parties also signed a declaration, in which they laid down the basic principles of governance to be respected should the alliance win the elections ("Lefektették a közös," 2021).

The opposition alliance agreed on the election of the candidates for the 106 constituencies in a single round and the joint candidate for prime minister in two rounds vote. According to the agreement, the three top contenders that seek the prime ministerial nomination in the first round of elections would compete in the second round ("Opposition primary election," 2021). The leaders of the opposition also jointly laid down a code of ethics that would be valid for the opposition candidates running in the primaries and their campaigns. Under the code, the parties committed that they would accept the results and support the elected nominees in the general elections. The candidates running in the primaries were also asked to respect the dignity and privacy of their contenders, not to involve their religious affiliation, marital status, or sexual orientation in their campaigns and not to conduct a

discrediting smear campaign against each other ("Az ellenzéki előválasztáson," 2021).

The decision that the joint candidates for the 106 single member constituencies would be elected through single-round primaries resulted in bipartisan negotiations, whereby parties withdraw their candidates in favor of each other ("Előválasztás 2021 a választók," 2021). Consequently, the six opposition parties did not nominate a candidate in all constituencies according to the background deals that they had made with other parties. Roughly two larger blocs and smaller inter-party units emerged out of these bipartisan background deals: First, the DK and the Jobbik, which had harshly criticized each other in the past, agreed to support each other's candidates in nearly a third of the constituencies ("Inkább összefognak," 2021). This large and rather unexpected agreement motivated the formation of a second opposition bloc between the MSZP-PM and the Momentum, which reached an agreement in more than 30 constituencies. Besides, there were also further deals in a considerable number of constituencies between the DK and the MSZP, the LMP and Jobbik, and the Jobbik and the Momentum ("Kevés helyen lesz," 2021).

The opposition parties often considered these background negotiations as part of the democratic game (G. Hanák, personal communication, April 20, 2022; B. Bárány, personal communication, May 3, 2022). Budapest mayor and the prime ministerial candidate of the MSZP-PM Gergely Karácsony said that these negotiations were a natural consequence of singe-round primaries, arguing: "This process is much more democratic than at any time before" (Ibid.). Besides, multiple representatives of the opposition parties also pointed out the importance of mutual withdrawals for the efficient use of campaign resources, which they did want to exhaust against each other in the primaries but keep for the campaign ahead of the

general elections. However, not everyone in the opposition bloc was contended with the background deals between the opposition parties before the primaries. Ákos Hadházy, former co-leader of the LMP, for instance, said in a message the following:

> The primary election is starting to take on the character of a farce in the same way that the Fidesz parliament is a farce (…) One should seriously consider whether it is worth taking a role in this sad game (Ibid.).

Likewise, Péter Márki-Zay, mayor of Hódmezővásárhely and also a candidate for prime minister, was also very critical of the background deals between the parties. He said the following:

> The parties made a big mistake by not allowing voters to decide on individual candidates in two rounds. We are fighting against the one-round procedure created in Fidesz' election system. The one-round election gives enormous scope for agreements between the parties, and in many places the competition is decided already in the zeroth round. I oppose, I disapprove, ask the parties to make the elections two-round (Ibid.).

Consequently, the six opposition parties nominated their candidates to compete, as underlined above, not in all 106 constituencies. The DK nominated 60 constituencies, the Momentum nominated 56 candidates, the Jobbik nominated 47 candidates, the MSZP nominated 42 candidates, the PM nominated 10 candidates and the LMP nominated 6 candidates (“Újabb izgalmak,” 2021). Despite the effective cooperation between the opposition parties, where they endorse each other and celebrate the primaries as a “feast of democracy”, the campaign ahead of the opposition primaries was not without arguments and tension. There were mutual accusations among opposition candidates ranging from collaboration with Fidesz to hate crime against gypsies (“Fideszes kollaborációtól,” 2021), from use of public money for the campaign to voter manipulation (“Skirmishes and controversy,” 2021).

Meanwhile, only five of the contenders managed to collect the required 20 thousand signatures around the country to be able to run in the first round of prime

ministerial primary elections: Gergely Karácsony, Budapest mayor who was supported by the MSZP-PM and the LMP, Péter Jakab, the leader of the Jobbik, Klára Dobrev supported by the DK, Péter Márki-Zay, Hódmezővásárhely mayor, and András Fekete-Győr, the leader of the Momentum ("Five PM candidates," 2021). The five candidates took on each other in the first prime ministerial debate ahead of the first round of the primaries on September 13, 2021 ("Mindenkinek mindenti," 2021).

In the first round of primaries that was concluded on October 1, 2021, nearly 634 thousand votes were cast. Klara Dobrev of the DK came first, getting 34 percent of the vote, followed by Gergely Karácsony, who got 27 percent of the vote and Péter Márki-Zay, who got around 20 percent of the vote ("Az ellenzéki előválasztás főbb," 2021). As a result, Jobbik leader Jakab, who got 14 percent of the vote and Momentum leader Fekete-Győr, who got 3 percent of the vote were eliminated in the first round of the primaries.

Both Karácsony and Márki-Zay were in the same opinion that despite her apparent popularity among opposition voters, it would be impossible to win the elections with Dobrev, mainly because she was the wife of the former prime minister Ferenc Gyurcsány and they thus decided to join forces against her. However, either of them would have to withdraw in favor of the other to make sure that Dobrev would not prevail in the second round. Otherwise, their cooperation would be meaningless ("Karácsony és Márki-Zay még," 2021). Reminding that Márki-Zay had already committed to withdraw in his favor in the second round, Karácsony said that he had to be "hit by a tram" to withdraw ("Neither opposition," 2021), while referring to several polls, Márki-Zay insisted that he would be the best chance of the opposition to defeat Prime Minister Orbán ("Márki-Zay Úgy váltunk," 2021).

Considering the fact that Dobrev would prevail in a second round with all three contenders, Karácsony made a last minute decision and withdrew from the primaries in favor of Márki-Zay. In a joint press conference with Márki-Zay, Karácsony said: "Those who do not make sacrifices are not patriots." In return, Márki-Zay thanked Karácsony and said that even if they did not agree on everything, he would also represent what Karácsony represented ("Karácsony withdraws," 2021). So, it was Dobrev and Márki-Zay, who would enter the ring against each other in the second round of the primaries.

Despite the clear statement of Karácsony that he stepped back in favor of Márki-Zay, a considerable number of leftist politicians, who had been previously supporting the Budapest mayor, declared their support for Dobrev. Márki-Zay reacted rather harshly to these politicians, saying that they betrayed not only Karácsony but also the country. Angered by his remarks, Dobrev said that Márki-Zay crossed a line with his statement, where she believed he clearly resorted to Fidesz-like methods by accusing people in the opposition alliance of betrayal ("Rivalry between," 2021). The issue also came up during the final debate between the two contenders, in which Márki-Zay accused the DK of blackmailing several politicians to support Dobrev and Dobrev totally refused the accusations, saying that these "Trump-type tactics" proved the unfitness of Márki-Zay to become the joint candidate for prime minister ("Opposition PM candidates," 2021). Although the two admitted at the end of the debate that they had a shot against the ruling only when working together and committed to support the winner of the primaries, the tension did not diffuse as Márki-Zay told in a press conference on the day after that the pro-government media was praising Dobrev while in the meantime discrediting him,

which was for him a proof that he had a bigger shot against Orbán in the general elections (“Márki-Zay Fidesz media,” 2021).

Finally, Péter Márki-Zay won the second round of the primary elections on October 18, 2021, by getting around 57 percent of the vote against his rival Klara Dobrev, who got around 43 of the total votes (“Az előválasztás eredményei,” 2021). Despite certain tensions within the opposition, the alliance managed to mobilize its voter base in an unprecedented way through the primaries, having motivated more than a half million people to join in the primaries. At the end, the entire opposition seemed focused on the common objective to topple the Orbán Government in the elections (Z. Enyedi, personal communication, April 11, 2022; B. Bárány, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

Nevertheless, the termination of the primaries did not totally put an end to the tensions within the opposition. Right after his victory in the second round of the primaries, opposition’s joint candidate for prime minister Péter Márki-Zay declared that he aimed at a separate parliamentary group under his leadership after the elections (“Az új világ néppárt,” 2021). As much as it was not surprising whatsoever that as a conservative Márki-Zay would not feel himself “at home” in any of the leftist/liberal parties and prefer to proceed with his own party, the opposition alliance apparently did not lean towards his proposal (“Márki-Zay eyes separate,” 2021). The tension between Márki-Zay and the alliance escalated, as Márki-Zay said in an interview that some parties such as the DK and the Jobbik were against his idea of founding an own political party and that it might be because of their fear of losing their voters to the new party (“Márki-Zay Ha bárki,” 2021). Finally, Márki-Zay sat down with the leaders of the opposition parties in January and after long negotiations

decided to give up his idea of founding a new party under his leadership ("Összeültek az ellenzéki," 2022).

The alliance of the six opposition parties founded a joint campaign committee with the participation of the Márki-Zay's Everybody's Hungary Movement (MMM) ("Opposition parties set up," 2021) and the representatives of the parties regularly made joint press conferences during the campaign. Following protracted negotiations, the alliance also came up with a joint national list ("Election 2022 united," 2022) and a joint program. However, all these tensions created question marks about whether full unity could really be built within the opposition bloc (A Bozóki, personal communication, April 20, 2022). In fact, the tensions between the joint candidate for prime minister and the opposition parties lasted during the campaign as well (A. Mesterházy, personal communication, April 14, 2022; K. Cseh, personal communication, April 20, 2022).

5.4.2.2 The depolarization strategy of the opposition

When the elections were scheduled for April 3, 2022, by President János Áder around 80 days before the day of the ballot, it was still not presumable at all that the invasion of a neighboring country would turn things upside down in Hungarian politics. The war in Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022, was indeed a critical juncture for the 2022 General Elections in Hungary and the campaign trail can thus be analyzed in two distinct phases for both the opposition and the ruling bloc: The pre-February 24 and post-February 24 phases.

In fact, due to its comprehensive cooperation strategy, the campaign trail of the opposition unofficially started far earlier than previous general elections. This also led the ruling bloc under Prime Minister Orbán to start its campaign preparations

earlier than usual. Closely following the cooperative steps taken by the opposition, the Fidesz-KDNP alliance started giving the signals that it would build its campaign on the "return of Gyurcsány". Although the former prime minister, who was also the leader of the DK, the leading party in the opposition alliance, had already made it clear that he would not take on any role in the government if the opposition won the elections ("Gyurcsány I won't," 2020), he ruling bloc started a war against him mostly by reminding the public about the economic crisis that had faced the country under his premiership in the 2000s. As early as June 2021, for instance, Prime Minister Orbán classified Gyurcsány, along with pandemic and migration, among the three greatest threats to Hungary. In a party meeting speech, he said:

> Gyurcsány is the real enemy and Karácsony (referring to the Budapest mayor) and the others only play supporting roles. You must not forget that Gyurcsány is handing out the roles, he holds everything in his hands. We know the truth and we must make sure that everyone else finds out. It is important to remind people that once Gyurcsány returns, the left wing will again raise taxes, especially for people with children, they will let in migrants and raise public utility fees. Fidesz must prevent that ("Orbán Viktor Három," 2021).

The former prime minister was so central to the ruling bloc's campaign that it started a petition "Stop, Gyurcsány! Stop, Karácsony!" and had it signed by more than 100 thousand people ("Fidesz's anti-Gyurcsány," 2021). As the ruling bloc by then in the opinion that Karácsony would prevail in the opposition primaries and become the joint candidate for prime minister, they used his name in the anti-Gyurcsány petition. However, after Péter Márki-Zay had won the second round of the primaries, the ruling bloc modified its campaign and started to call it "Stop Gyurcsany! Stop Marki-Zay!" ("Lépett a Fidesz," 2021). The idea that the ruling bloc was willing to propagate with the campaign was that whoever the opposition put forward as a leader, it was still the same old opposition, of which the real leader was

former prime minister Gyurcsány, who had the entire opposition alliance turned around his finger to get back into power and turn the country back to pre-2010 era. In various occasions during his campaign, Orbán said the following:

> The rival that we must defeat again is the same old one. The one we defeated in 2010. This time, it is not a new left that we are confronted by, but the Gyurcsány era wants to return. Whoever has doubts should only look at Budapest, with Karácsony in the limelight, Gyurcsány's people are in charge in the background. Do not forget that they had deprived the people of a month's wages and pensions, tripled the utility fees, cut home purchase subsidies, and raised taxes ("Orbán Viktor: A Gyurcsány-korszak," 2021).

> Gyurcsány is lumbering the whole country with its talk show (…) If Gyurcsány makes a comeback, he will take us back to where we were before ("PM Orbán lambasts," 2022).

> The election is about the return of Gyurcsány. The Gyurcsány era might come back after April 3. Everyone must fight to prevent the left from coming back to power (…) Gyurcsány is the leader of the left as the leader of the largest party in the opposition, and their candidate represents the failed policies of the Gyurcsány era. So, the fate of Hungary is at stake in the elections ("Orbán at Fidesz parliamentary," 2022).

In his campaign substantially based on anti-Gyurcsány discourse, Orbán particularly aimed at benefitting from the left-right polarization in Hungary by always calling the opposition alliance "The left", even though for the first time since 2010 the opposition managed to form an ideologically broad-based alliance consisting of left-wing, liberal, and right-wing parties. By calling the opposition "The left", Orbán attempted to discredit the unprecedentedly diverse opposition alliance, ignoring all the changes that it had been through over the years, and identified it with the pre-2010 Gyurcsány era. After all, Gyurcsány was the prime minister as the leader of the governing Hungarian Socialist Party and Orbán often substantiated his left antagonism with the crises of the pre-2010 Gyurcsány era. In various occasions during his campaign, Orbán said the following:

> No matter how they disguise themselves, the left is still the same left. It starts off by telling lies, carries on with violence and then leaves everyone

> bankrupt. The left is backed by international forces so massively that only millions of Hungarians joining together can defeat it. The real threat is the international forces, the money, media, and the network behind them ("Orbán Viktor aki," 2021).
>
> In 2010 Hungary was bankrupt and ruined due to the sins of the previous left-wing governments. We must remember what happened up to 2010 and how much we worked to put things back on track. When the left was in power, unemployment was over 12 percent, and the economy was contracting in 2010 with very high taxes and the IMF loans. All they did is to introduce austerity measures and cut wages and pensions. We cannot afford to go back to those problems. Those who drove the country to bankruptcy then before 2010 now say that they are ready to take charge again. That would mean going backwards ("Election 2022 – Orbán Hungary," 2022).

The opposition, on the other hand, seemed to initially build its campaign on its action plan that it would carry out after winning the elections. Despite having lost most of the synergy that had been created during the primaries due to protracted negotiations between the six opposition parties and their candidate for prime minister Péter Márki-Zay on issues such as the campaign and the joint list, the opposition finally started its campaign in January 2022 with a strategy to concentrate on its program. This program that initially played an important role during the campaign included significant promises for improvement, particularly in the realms of economy and social policy. In the realm of social policy, for instance, the opposition pledged high level health services ("Ellenzék Orbán fizetőssé," 2022), better conditions for civil servants ("Márki-Zay Péter minden," 2022), lower VAT in food stuff ("Tisztességes keresztény," 2022) and better family benefit schemes ("Családpolitikai elképzeléseiket," 2022). Through these promises, the opposition also wanted to give the message that it would not totally reject all the practices of Orbán's 12-year rule but continue those that they deemed beneficial for the Hungarian society, such as certain welfare measures including the utility cost

reduction.[16] Thereby, the opposition aimed to demonstrate that if they won the elections they would not return the country to the pre-2010 era, as Orbán was propagating in his campaign.

In the realm of economy, too, the opposition came up with an assertive program. The main premise of this program was that the new government would significantly improve the state of Hungarian economy without having to apply austerity measures by gaining access to the frozen EU funds that the Orbán Government had been unable to use. The opposition argued that they would be able to retrieve these funds by fighting corruption, making public procurement transparent and restoring the rule of law ("Megszorítások nélkül," 2022). For the opposition, if the Orbán Government won the elections it would never be able to do what it took to get these funds and thus could not but pursue austerity policies (LMP, 2022).

Although its social and economic program loomed large in it, the campaign of the opposition was characterized by a greater political message. According to this message, the 2022 General Elections were truly a crossroads for Hungary, whereby the electorate would choose between "the West" and "the East" as two alternative futures for the country while casting their votes. The opposition argued that the continuation of the Orbán rule would further carry the country eastwards, where their victory would make sure that Hungary remained an uncorrupt, prosperous, transparent, and secure country "in the West". Throughout his campaign, the joint candidate for prime minister of the opposition Péter Márki-Zay underlined this in multiple occasions:

> Hungarians must choose between two opposing visions for their country when they head to the polls on April 3. One of those visions is Viktor Orbán's Hungary which has become the European Union's poorest and most corrupt country with the highest death rate. But there is another Hungary and we are

[16] One of the first three campaign billboards of the opposition gave the message: "Orbán goes, utility cost reduction remains." See "Opposition's first campaign," 2022.

> asking voters to support the platform for a prosperous Hungary ("Election 2022 – Márki-Zay voters," 2022).
>
> I am promising you a Hungary that is committed to the West, cohesive, successful, and free (…) We have one good choice. We have to choose Europe over the East, freedom over slavery, and a rising Hungary over destitution ("Márki-Zay Péter minden," 2022).
>
> We do not want to see hundreds of thousands of more people leave the country. It is Europe that must be brought here and that is impossible to do with Viktor Orbán. But it is possible with the help of the EU and NATO (…) Therefore itis clear: West over East, which requires a change of government on April 3 ("Márki-Zay Péter 3000 település," 2022).

The East-West division that left a big mark on the opposition campaign was clearly not just rhetoric. As a matter of fact, the realization of the promises in the opposition's social and economic program was also contingent on voters' preference of the West over the East.

While polarizing the election campaign along the East-West line through his discourse, Péter Márki-Zay was willing to make sure that this polarization did not reinforce Orbán's conventional nationalistic discourse against the opposition, whereby he always accused the opposition of being pro-Western, pro-European and anti-Hungarian, and defending the interests of Brussels rather than those of Hungary. To that end, Márki-Zay did two things to make a special appeal to the conventional voter base of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance in an unprecedented way for the opposition. First, he criticized the ruling bloc of not being strict enough in the fight against illegal migration and vowed to retain the border fence installed by the Orbán Government ("Ígéretcunamival és Orbán," 2022). Márki-Zay argued that the government had accepted over 100 thousand migrants in 2019 and 2020 in his address at a border station between Hungary and Serbia ("Márki-Zay opposition would," 2022), and accused the government of hypocrisy in the issue of migration ("Péter Márki-Zay's interview," 2021).

Second, throughout his campaign Márki-Zay, who always underlined his identity as a believing Christian, continuously questioned the Christianity of Prime Minister Orbán in an attempt to demonstrate that he was just abusing it for political purposes and called Christian voters not to vote for Orbán saying "Christian people do not vote for thieves" ("Márki-Zay in Transylvania," 2022). Throughout his campaign Márki-Zay said:

> The Judeo-Christian culture is very significant in Hungarian culture and it is obviously not represented by Viktor Orbán. No one should think that stealing has anything to do with Christianity or Judaism. Judaism is based on the Ten Commandments which includes "You shall not steal". How can one call themselves a Christian if they do not follow the most basic rules of the Ten Commandments? ("Election 2022 – Márki-Zay voters," 2022)

> Orbán has broken several points of the Christian Ten Commandments in recent years, including the commandment "You shall not kill" because he is responsible for the death of 45,000 Coronavirus victims. During the pandemic the government introduced free parking instead of free testing and acquired insufficient vaccines because even at a time like that, it was rather interested in how to steal ("Márki-Zay szerint Rákosiék," 2022).

> How can someone who considers how to best keep an equal distance from a murderer and a victim be an honest person? How can they call themselves Hungarian and Christian? ("Márki-Zay szerint a közvéleménykutatások," 2022).

Nevertheless, the Russian invasion of Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022, changed almost everything in the campaign. Particularly, the ruling bloc substantially changed its campaign focus and started to present itself as apostles of peace and the opposition as the warmongers. Prime Minister Orbán, himself, said in an interview very openly how the war in Ukraine changed his bloc's campaign:

> The current election is a strange one because its stakes had changed along the way. Even I have not seen something like this happen before. At the start of the campaign, our opponents held a primary election and it had become clear that the stakes of the election would be whether the pre-2010 era would make a comeback or if we can keep going. But in the middle of the campaign a war broke out in Hungary's neighboring country (…) Now it is Ukraine and Russia who are at war, one of them is a nuclear power. The campaign has

> been cut in half by this unprecedented event ("Orbán Viktor a választás tétje most," 2022).

During his post-February 24 campaign, Orbán said in multiple occasions that the elections were between his pro-peace bloc and the "warmongering left":

> The war has raised the stakes of the election to the skies. It is in Hungary's interest not to be a pawn in the chess game of great powers. While we represent the interests of the Hungarian people and want peace, the pro-war left would jeopardize not only the gains of the past 12 years but the security of the country ("Orbán Viktor nem térithet," 2022).

> The war changed everything including our campaign. The issue became making a choice between war and peace and I believe that everybody in Hungary is on the side of peace irrespective of the party affiliation ("Election 2022 – PM Orbán left's," 2022).

In his campaign speeches, Prime Minister Orbán continuously referred to the pro-Western discourse used by the opposition and Péter Márki-Zay in their campaign. He repeatedly said that in case of a victory the opposition would pursue the interests of the West, Brussels, and the NATO rather than the very national interests of Hungary and drag the country into war. For Orbán, that would be a big catastrophe for daily lives of Hungarians as it would cause casualties from the army as well as the loss of cheap gas that it bought from Russia. So, to him, what his government stood for, namely peace and neutrality, was the best course of action:

> The left had made it clear that they did not see the war as a conflict between two peoples but rather as one that they, too, are directly connected to; and they think the right thing to do would be to have Hungary get involved in the conflict (…) The risk of war was at stake in this general election. If the opposition won, there would be another NATO country that wanted to push NATO and Hungary into this conflict. So, if we want peace, that can only be represented by the nationally minded side both in Hungary and within NATO ("Orbán Viktor a választás tétje béke," 2022).

> The issue of war or peace is pivotal to the country's future. We must prevent Hungary from being dragged into the war. This is not our war. If we want developments, we need peace. Let us stand up for our homeland, protect Hungary, and vote for peace. This is not our war; here we cannot win, but we could lose everything (…) Hungary will not have any energy at all if supplies

> from Russia are cut. The Hungarian economy cannot function without those supplies ("Orbán Viktor ez a háború," 2022).

Prime Minister Orbán and his government even claimed that the opposition was in constant contact with Ukraine ("Az ukrán külügyminiszter," 2022) and that they had already broken a deal about sending weapons and soldiers in the event of victory in the elections:

> The problem is with the left, which has already made its own backroom deal, is that if they won the election, weapons transports to Ukraine would get under way, and they would cut off oil and gas from Russia, ruining Hungary. This is risky, this is dangerous. The left wing is playing with fire ("Orbán Viktor ez a háború," 2022).

> If the opposition won this election, they would start sending weapons to Ukraine the next day and back proposals to turn off the taps of Russian pipelines supplying gas and oil to Hungary. We must not allow this and protect Hungary's interests. Any sanctions on energy deliveries would paralyze Hungary. There would be fuel shortages, factories would have to close down, and many people would lose their jobs ("Election 2022 – PM Orbán left's," 2022).

The post-February 24 campaign of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance apparently threw off the balance of Márki-Zay and the opposition in general. On the one hand, the opposition reacted quite in a defensive way to the accusations of Prime Minister Orbán, trying to explain that he would not let Hungary join the war. On the other hand, Márki-Zay also started to use a much more aggressive discourse against the government in an attempt to demonstrate how dangerous Orbán was for the country as "Putin's puppet" and that Hungary desperately needed the West in order not to suffer the same fate as Ukraine. Márki-Zay said throughout his campaign the following:

> The government keeps lying about the war, claiming that we want to send troops. It is Viktor Orbán who is sending weapons to Ukraine, and he promised military assistance to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. When I spoke about possible military assistance, I was attacked for it ("Opposition PM Candidate Márki-Zay allowed," 2022).

> NATO guarantees Hungary's security. As long as the NATO alliance remains strong, the war can be kept outside Hungary's borders. We will not send Hungarian troops to fight in the war between Ukraine and Russia. NATO does not want to send soldiers either, in other words, when we argue in favor of strengthening our NATO alliance, we do so with the intention of guaranteeing peace and security (…) The Western world sees Viktor Orbán as Putin's puppet. The war is an affirmation of my stance that the elections are a decision between the East and the West, either the Hungarian Putin or Europe, the wrong or the right side of history ("Márki-Zay opposition government," 2022).

> Hungarians have a moral duty to stand up for Ukraine because they are fighting our war. Hungarians experienced the same in 1956 and expected assistance (…) Hungary must support the European Union and the alliances that it is a part of which are capable of protecting the country ("Márki-Zay szerint a közvéleménykutatások," 2022).

> In order to lift Hungary, we have to abandon Putin-esque methods and policies that betrayed Hungary's allies, intentionally frayed the unity of Europe, and helped the imperial ambitions of the war criminal Vladimir Putin. Hungary's security lies with strengthened border protection, the European Union and NATO ("PM Candidate Márki-Zay presents," 2022).

5.4.3 Concluding remarks

The main strategy pursued by the opposition in the 2022 General Elections was based on the formation of a broad, cross-ideological opposition alliance that had previously brought about successful results in the 2018 Hódmezővásárhely By-Elections and the 2019 Local Elections. Considering the experiences of humiliating defeat in the 2014 and 2018 General Elections and of the very first victory vis-a-vis the ruling bloc of Prime Minister Orbán in the 2019 Local Elections, no one in the Hungarian opposition had a doubt that the only way to have a shot at defeating the Fidesz-KDNP alliance was to form a form united front against it (Z. Enyedi, personal communication, April 11, 2022; A. Mesterházy, personal communication, April 14, 2022; A Bozóki, personal communication, April 20, 2022; K. Cseh, personal communication, May 20, 2022; B. Bárány, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

The opposition alliance reached an understanding on how to elect the joint candidate for prime minister, the joint candidates in the electoral districts as well as the preparation of a joint national list. However, the inter-party negotiations, and the subsequent arguments between the contending nominees during the primaries caused a fierce competition within the opposition. Even though the opposition parties appeared to work out their differences and get united once the primaries were over, the repercussions of this fierce competition continued after the primaries (A. Mesterházy, personal communication, April 14, 2022). The three-month period between October 2021 and January 2022 was marked by protracted negotiations and disputes between Péter Márki-Zay and the leaders of the opposition parties. Once the campaign of the opposition finally started in January 2022, there was not a spark of the big synergy and enthusiasm that had been remarkable in the opposition during the primaries (A Bozóki, personal communication, April 20, 2022; B. Bárány, personal communication, May 3, 2022).

In sum, in addition to the long-standing institutional arrangements that played an incentivizing role for opposition cooperation, learning from failed and successful experiences of the past (G. Polyák, personal communication, April 7, 2022; A. Bozóki, personal communication, April 20, 2022; K. Cseh, personal communication, April 20, 2022; G. Hanák, personal communication, April 20, 2022) helped the opposition actors overcome the fault lines that divide them. However, despite the unprecedented formation of a full-fledged opposition cooperation, the intra-opposition competition that started in the course of the background deals among the parties before the primaries and was particularly crystallized during the primaries among the joint candidate for prime minister and the leaders of the opposition parties clearly undermined the opposition.

Although cooperation was the main difference of the strategy of the opposition ahead of the 2022 General Elections, depolarization was also an important pillar of this strategy. The fact that Péter Márki-Zay, who always presented himself as a believing Christian, father of seven children and a disappointed Fidesz voter created the hope that he would be much more successful than the conventional opposition parties of Hungary in appealing to the masses that had been supporting Prime Minister Orbán over the years (Z. Enyedi, personal communication, April 11, 2022). After all, he managed to defeat the candidate of the ruling bloc in Hódmezővásárhely, a small town that was commonly known to be Fidesz stronghold, in the 2018 By-Elections as an outsider to the Hungarian political establishment. This strategy was a result of the past experiences of the opposition, in which they had continuously failed to attract voters from the base of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance.

By pledging to preserve "the good practices" of the 12-year Fidesz rule, Márki-Zay committed not to return the country entirely to the pre-2010 period if he won the elections, which was also de-polarizing (A Bozóki, personal communication, April 20, 2022). As a matter of fact, the earlier phases of the campaign of the opposition were marked by the plans and pledges about how they would better govern the country than the incumbents. However, with the willingness to react to Orbán's harsh campaign and the war in Ukraine, Márki-Zay started to use an utterly more aggressive discourse. Thereafter, the focus of the campaign shifted from how to better govern Hungary to serious accusations to Orbán, whereby Márki-Zay started to question his conservatism, patriotism and even Christianity. Márki-Zay continuously called Orbán a thief and comparing him to Ceausescu ("Orbán Viktorral szembeni," 2022) he said that a Christian would never vote for a man like Orbán.

Moreover, the opposition and Péter Márki-Zay built their campaign on the East-West binary and claimed that the elections were a last chance for Hungary to remain in the Western world. Whereas in the earlier stages of the campaign the discourse based on the East-West binary was generally used to underline the economic advantages of the end of friction between Brussels and Budapest under a Márki-Zay Government, during the post-February 24 period, particularly with the increasing emphasis on NATO, it started to somehow reinforce Orbán's classical propaganda against the opposition, whereby he accused them of not being real patriots and being under the control of Western powers. With Márki-Zay's quite misinterpretable statement that the Hungarian troops would be sent to Ukraine in case of a request from NATO, Orbán started to use this propaganda to claim that if the opposition won the elections, they would drag Hungary into war ("Márki-Zay Péter Magyar katonáknak," 2022). Under those circumstances, during the post-February 24 period, the election campaign ceased to discuss who would better govern Hungary and turn into a shouting match, in which the ruling bloc accused the opposition of war-mongering and the opposition reacted by calling Orbán "Putin's puppet".

In conclusion, while the past experiences taught the opposition the need to pursue a depolarization strategy, the war, and the related gaffes of Márki-Zay rendered this strategy ineffective (Z. Enyedi, personal communication, April 11, 2022; A. Mesterházy, personal communication, April 14, 2022). Particularly during the post-February 24 period, the opposition failed to come up with an alternative axis of politics but, on the contrary, reproduced the axes used by Orbán Government.

CHAPTER 6

EXPLAINING ELECTORAL STRATEGIES OF POLITICAL OPPOSITIONS IN TURKEY AND HUNGARY

The electoral strategies pursued by the opposition parties do evolve over the course of autocratization. As previous chapters that thoroughly describe the processes of strategy development and implementation reveal, both Turkish and Hungarian oppositions made substantial changes in their electoral strategies over time, gradually incorporating the strategic elements of cooperation and depolarization. Table 9 shows how this evolution is empirically observed throughout the process of autocratization in both Turkey and Hungary.

Table 9. Empirical observations of the strategies of cooperation and depolarization pursued by the actors of political opposition in Turkey and Hungary over the course of autocratization

<table>
<tr><th colspan="3">The case of Turkey</th><th colspan="3">The case of Hungary</th></tr>
<tr><th>Elections</th><th>Cooperation</th><th>Depolarization</th><th>Elections</th><th>Cooperation</th><th>Depolarization</th></tr>
<tr><td>2007G</td><td>No cooperation</td><td>No depolarization</td><td rowspan="2">2014G</td><td rowspan="2">No cooperation</td><td rowspan="4">Passive depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>2010R
2011G</td><td>No cooperation</td><td rowspan="3">Passive depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>2014L</td><td>No cooperation</td><td rowspan="2">2018G</td><td rowspan="2">No cooperation</td></tr>
<tr><td>2014P</td><td>Cooperation</td></tr>
<tr><td>2015G</td><td>No cooperation</td><td rowspan="4">Active depolarization</td><td rowspan="2">2019L</td><td rowspan="2">Cooperation</td><td rowspan="4">Active depolarization</td></tr>
<tr><td>2017R</td><td>No cooperation</td></tr>
<tr><td>2018GP</td><td>Cooperation</td><td rowspan="2">2022G</td><td rowspan="2">Cooperation</td></tr>
<tr><td>2019L</td><td>Cooperation</td></tr>
</table>

Even though the process of autocratization itself might be seen as the obvious reason behind this gradual change, there is clearly a set of more complicated causal processes that account for how the strategies of cooperation and depolarization, which, as underlined in previous chapters, entail significant risks and challenges,

became the defining features of the electoral strategies pursued by Turkish and Hungarian oppositions. The aim of this chapter is to solve this puzzle and indicate the causal processes that lead to this outcome.

This chapter discusses the strategies of cooperation and depolarization in separate sections, where the cases of Turkey and Hungary are dwelled on together, and under each section a number of within-case comparisons are made along with certain cross-case parallel demonstrations in order to reveal the causal processes behind the change in electoral strategies pursued by opposition parties over the course of autocratization.

6.1 The strategy of cooperation

As underlined above, this dissertation puts forward three variables that play a role in whether the opposition parties in autocratizing contexts pursue cooperation strategies and, if they do, how they change over time the strategy of cooperation: (1) the presence of incentives provided by electoral institutions, (2) the transformative impact of populist autocratization on the intra-opposition fault lines and (3) the feedback from the latest elections. In order to explain the change in the strategy of cooperation pursued by opposition parties and indicate how these three variables interplay during the process in the autocratizing cases of Turkey and Hungary, six sets of within-case comparisons are made in this section (see Table 10).

The sets of within-case comparisons are deliberately organized according to the election type because different types of election (general, local, presidential, referenda etc.) usually have peculiar dynamics and thus the best strategy is deemed to be to compare them among each other. However, that does not mean whatsoever that there is no interaction between successive elections of different types. On the

contrary, the process of strategic learning over the course of autocratization takes place regardless of the election types and thus such interactions are also taken into account in the analysis.

Table 10. Sets of within-cases comparisons made to account for the cooperation strategy

Strategy in question	Case	Election type	Compared elections
Cooperation	Turkey	General	2011G – 2015G – 2018G (see Table 11)
Cooperation	Turkey	Local	2014L – 2019L (see Table 13)
Cooperation	Turkey	Presidential	2014P – 2018P (see Table 16)
Cooperation	Turkey	Mixed	2014P – 2015G (see Table 12)
Cooperation	Hungary	General	2014G – 2018G – 2022G (see Table 14)
Cooperation	Hungary	Local	2014L – 2019L (see Table 15)

6.1.1 The incentives provided by the electoral institutions

The data collected from the empirical observations in the cases of Turkey and Hungary confirm that the presence of incentives provided by electoral institutions is a necessary condition for the actors of political opposition to consider cooperation as a strategic option in the first place and that otherwise they would never take all the risks of engaging with other actors, from whom they are separated by deep-rooted social-political fault lines. The comparison of the general elections in Turkey (see Table 11), for instance, shows that the new provisions in the electoral law introduced in 2018, through which the 10 percent electoral threshold would no longer apply to the individual political parties officially engaged in an electoral alliance as long as the alliance has enough votes in total to surpass the threshold, played a big role in making cooperation a viable strategic option ahead of the 2018 General Elections, which had not been the case in the 2011 or 2015 General Elections.

Table 11. The comparison of the general elections in Turkey over the course of autocratization

	(1) Incentives provided by electoral institutions	(2) Transformed intra-opposition fault lines	(3) Feedback from the latest election	Cooperation outcome
2011G	No			No cooperation
2015G	No			No cooperation
2018G	Yes - 10 percent electoral threshold does not apply to alliances with the new provisions in the electoral law	Yes - Most of the intra-opposition fault lines are significantly overweighed by anti-incumbent fault line.	Yes - A series of losses - Particularly the failure of the opposition to form a coalition after 2015G	Cooperation - The new provisions in electoral law became an incentivizing factor for the actors, particularly the new and small parties, to cooperate. - Enough autocratization has taken place for CHP, İYİP, SP to consider the anti-incumbent fault line more dominant than the fault line dividing them. HDP is still excluded.

One might rightfully argue that this change in cooperation strategy might have to do with the different levels of authoritarianism in 2011, 2015 and 2018 in Turkey. Two observations need to be made. First, such a difference in the depth of the autocratic regime also exists between 2011 and 2015, as underlined in the previous chapters, but because no change took place from 2011 to 2015 with regard to the incentives provided by electoral institutions for cooperation, in neither of these general elections cooperation was considered as a viable strategic option. Second, this hypothesis can also be tested through a comparison between 2014 Presidential Elections and 2015 General Elections, which took place under similar regime conditions (see Table 12). While in 2014 the opposition parties CHP and MHP make an official cooperation by nominating a joint presidential candidate, they did not consider such a cooperation as an option after less than 10 months. This is undoubtedly because of the majority vote needed for the election of the president, which played an incentivizing role in bringing these parties together. Nevertheless, even if the presence of the incentives provided by electoral institutions is necessary for cooperation, it is certainly not sufficient. This is evident in two further sets of comparisons. First, the comparison of the local elections in Turkey shows that even

though the institutional setting did not change at all, the 2019 Local Elections marked an unprecedented cooperation between opposition parties (see Table 13).

Table 12. The comparison of 2014 Presidential Elections and 2015 General Elections in Turkey

	(1) Incentives provided by electoral institutions	(2) Transformed intra-opposition fault lines	(3) Feedback from the latest election	Cooperation outcome
2014P	Yes - Majority vote in the first ever popular presidential vote	Yes - Enough autocratization has taken place for CHP and MHP to clear the hurdle of cooperation	Yes - A series of losses	Cooperation - Majority vote was considered as an incentivizing electoral institution. - Enough autocratization has taken place for the CHP and MHP to consider the anti-incumbent fault line more dominant than the fault line dividing them. HDP is not invited.
2015G	No			No cooperation

Similarly, looking at the general elections that took place in Hungary after Viktor Orbán came back to power in 2010 – in 2014, 2018 and 2022 – one observes a different cooperation outcome in each of them without any difference in the institutional setting (see Table 14).

In sum, as both comparisons indicate, the presence of incentives provided by electoral institutions does not guarantee cooperation. Therefore, the questions of whether cooperation is pursued and, if it is, how it is pursued are to be answered by further variables beyond the institutions, which will be dealt with in the upcoming sections.

6.1.2 The transformative impact of populist autocratization on the intra-opposition fault lines and the feedback from the latest elections

In all the above-mentioned instances, where the presence of incentives provided by electoral institutions is not solely explanatory, the cooperation outcomes are

accounted for by the transformation of the intra-opposition fault lines and the feedback from the latest elections. Several within-case comparisons demonstrate this.

Table 13. The comparison of the local elections in Turkey over the course of autocratization

	(1) Incentives provided by electoral institutions	(2) Transformed intra-opposition fault lines	(3) Feedback from the latest election	Cooperation outcome
2014L	Yes - Plurality vote in the election of the mayors	No - Not enough autocratization has yet taken place[17]		No cooperation - Plurality vote in the election is an incentivizing electoral institution, but it is apparently not sufficient for cooperation as the second and third conditions are not met.
2019L	Yes - Plurality vote in the election of the mayors	Yes - Enough autocratization has taken place for CHP & İYİP, and for HDP to unofficially support them	Yes - A series of losses - Cooperation somewhat worked in the 2018GP	Cooperation - Plurality vote in the election is an incentivizing electoral institution. - Unlike in the 2014L enough autocratization has taken place for all the opposition actors to consider the anti-incumbent fault line more dominant than the intra-opposition fault lines dividing them. - Although it did not win the opposition the elections, the cooperation in the 2018G worked for the opposition in many ways

First, looking at the comparison of local elections in Turkey, it is possible to conclude that cooperation became possible in the 2019 Local Elections despite the presence of the same institutional circumstances as in 2014 mainly because with deepening autocratization the anti-incumbent fault line became much more dominant

[17] Here it is argued that enough autocratization did not yet take place ahead of the 2014 Local Elections that would lead the opposition parties to engage in cooperation as they did, for instance, in the 2019 Local Elections. However, it was also argued above that ahead of the 2014 Presidential Elections that took place five months after the local elections, enough autocratization took place for the main opposition CHP and the nationalist MHP to engage in cooperation by fielding a joint presidential candidate. The reason for this difference is not that autocratization exceptionally gained pace during those five months, but rather it is the fact that the two kinds of elections are so different that the dynamics of cooperation significantly differ. In 2014 the president was to be elected for the first time by popular vote, but the office was still non-partisan and non-executive. So, by fielding a joint candidate, neither CHP nor MHP was compelled to renounce their partisan identities and claims, whereas in local elections running joint candidates would only be possible in that some of the allying parties withdraw from the elections in a particular constituency and invite their voters to vote for the ally party. While the level of autocratization in Turkey by 2014 was enough for the opposition parties, the CHP and MHP, to set aside their differences and cooperate for the election of a non-partisan, non-executive president, it was apparently not enough to do it in the local elections, where partisan sensitivities play a bigger role. Thefore, contexts significantly matter to understand the dynamics of strategy development and implementation.

in the eyes of the opposition parties than it had been in 2014, evidently overweighing the intra-opposition fault lines (see Table 13). On the other hand, cooperation became also compulsory as the autocratic ruling bloc also decided to cooperate, which was another reason for the opposition parties to set aside intra-opposition fault lines and concentrate on the anti-incumbent fault line. Furthermore, the feedback from the 2014 Local Elections, where noncooperation by opposition parties worked for the AKP, and from the 2018 General Elections that cooperation somewhat worked for the opposition, even if it did not lead to victory, by having deprived Erdoğan's AKP of its parliamentary majority and the entire ruling bloc of the supermajority, was another contributing factor that led the opposition to cooperate. In 2014, there had not been such feedback.

Table 14. The comparison of the general elections in Hungary over the course of autocratization

	(1) Incentives provided by electoral institutions	(2) Transformed intra-opposition fault lines	(3) Feedback from the latest election	Cooperation outcome
2014G	Yes - 5 percent electoral threshold - Majoritarian electoral system	No - Not enough autocratization has yet taken place for the opposition parties to set aside the intra-opposition fault lines		No cooperation - Only cooperation was between the opposition parties not separated by deep-rooted fault lines, Együtt, MSZP-P and DK. LMP refused to participate; Jobbik was not invited. - Electoral threshold is an incentivizing electoral institution for such actors under a fragmented party structure.
2018G	Yes - 5 percent electoral threshold - Majoritarian electoral system	Yes - Significant amount of autocratization has taken place. The talks about the need for cooperation began.	No - The partial cooperation in the 2014G does not provide positive feedback	No cooperation - Although significant autocratization has taken place, there was no positive feedback from the 2014G. - The victory in the Hódmezővásárhely by-elections just before the 2018G partially changed the mood and led to last-minute withdrawals. But it was too little too late for a comprehensive cooperation.
2022G	Yes - 5 percent electoral threshold - Majoritarian electoral system	Yes - Enough autocratization has taken place for the opposition parties to set aside the intra-opposition fault lines	Yes - The strategy worked in the 2019L	Cooperation - Full-fledged opposition cooperation through joint candidates in SMDs and a joint national list led by a joint PM candidate

A similar dynamic came into play for the two local elections in Hungary that took place under Orbán's rule in 2014 and 2019. Although the 2014 Local Elections is not part of the thorough empirical research of this dissertation, a within-case comparison between the two local elections (see Table 15) would not only increase the internal validity of the theory put forward by this dissertation but also help make a cross-case comparison between Turkey and Hungary, whereby there are significant parallels as far as the local elections are concerned. Just like in Turkey, the 2019 Local Elections in Hungary marked an unprecedented cooperation by opposition parties, whereby all major opposition parties managed to coordinate to nominate a joint candidate against the ruling bloc in almost all constituencies. This was certainly a result of the intra-opposition fault lines losing their importance vis-à-vis the growing anti-incumbent fault line as well as positive feedback from the mayoral by-elections in Hódmezővásárhely, a conservative stronghold for Prime Minister Orbán, in February 2018, in which all major opposition parties supported an independent candidate, Péter Márki-Zay who then won the elections against the candidate of the ruling bloc. Like in Turkey, there had not been such feedback back in 2014.

The change in the cooperation strategies pursued by the Hungarian opposition parties over the course of autocratization is manifest in the general elections as well (see Table 14). In the 2014 General Elections, it was only the parties on the left, clearly not separated from each other by deep-rooted social-political fault lines, which could achieve cooperation. The LMP refused to join them on the grounds that it did not want to ally with political actors who played a role in the crises of the 2000s. Jobbik, on the other hand, was not even invited as being in the same alliance was then imaginable for neither Jobbik nor the parties on the left. In 2018, the regime in Hungary became more authoritarian and the anti-incumbent fault lines were

clearly stronger than in 2014. There were already some public debates suggesting that all opposition parties including LMP and Jobbik should be part of a "technical cooperation" to contest the Fidesz-KDNP alliance more effectively (Moldicz, 2018). However, the opposition parties were still not ready to set the intra-opposition fault lines aside and engage in an official cooperation with each other until the mayoral by-elections in Hódmezővásárhely that took place several weeks before the general elections. After they had seen that through a full-fledged opposition cooperation Orbán was vincible even in one of his strongholds, the opposition parties started to withdraw their candidates in favor of each other in a series of last-minute decisions in an attempt to decrease the number of opposition contenders in the single member districts. However, this was too limited to change the fate of the elections as the opposition's strategic architecture was not based on cooperation. Nevertheless, the Hódmezővásárhely experience gave quite positive feedback and ahead of the 2019 Local Elections the Hungarian opposition came to an understanding to concentrate their energy on defeating Orbán's ruling bloc. So, with the participation of the parties on the left, LMP and Jobbik, the opposition managed to coordinate their candidates, having a single nominee from the opposition in every constituency. Having emerged victories from the 2019 Local Elections, the opposition deemed the cooperation strategy to have worked and decided to further pursue it in the 2022 General Elections.

A similar dynamic came into play for the presidential elections that took place in Turkey over the course of autocratization (see Table 16). Ahead of the 2014 Presidential Elections, enough autocratization had already been experienced by the CHP and the MHP to consider the anti-incumbent fault line more dominant than the fault line dividing them, which resulted in these opposition parties nominating a joint

presidential candidate for the country's first every popular presidential vote. In 2018, the regime in Turkey was utterly more autocratic and this time the presidential vote was meant to elect the country's first ever executive president. Compared with 2014, the intra-opposition fault lines in 2018 were less of a hurdle for the opposition parties and consequently the opposition parties that formed the Nation Alliance vowed to unite in a possible runoff. Even the pro-Kurdish HDP that was excluded from the alliance gave the signal that it would support their candidate in the runoff. Such a broad consensus was not reached back in 2014. On the other hand, the feedback that the strategy of having a joint presidential candidate did not work in 2014 played a role in the opposition's strategic choice of nominating multiple presidential candidates in 2018 and, consequently, the cooperation strategy of the opposition was runoff oriented.

Table 15. The comparison of the local elections in Hungary over the course of autocratization

	(1) Incentives provided by electoral institutions	(2) Transformed intra-opposition fault lines	(3) Feedback from the latest election	Cooperation outcome
2014L	Yes - Plurality vote in the election of the mayors	No - Not enough autocratization has yet taken place		No cooperation - Only occasional cooperation between the opposition parties not separated by deep-rooted fault lines, Együtt, MSZP-P and DK.
2019L	Yes - Plurality vote in the election of the mayors	Yes - Enough autocratization has taken place	Yes - Loss of the 2018G - The strategy worked in the Hódmezővásárhely by-elections	Cooperation - Full-fledged opposition cooperation beyond two intra-opposition fault lines by means of candidate coordination and nomination of joint mayoral candidates in almost every constituency

Moreover, even though the 2023 Presidential Elections is not part of the thorough empirical research of this dissertation, it also provides data that further validates the theory put forward by this dissertation, as the deepening autocratization and the feedback from the 2018 General Elections and the 2019 Local Elections led

the opposition parties to pursue the strategy of a full-fledged cooperation strategy with a joint presidential candidate.

Table 16. The comparison of the presidential elections in Turkey over the course of autocratization

	(1) Incentives provided by electoral institutions	(2) Transformed intra-opposition fault lines	(3) Feedback from the latest election	Cooperation outcome
2014P	Yes - Majority vote in the first ever popular vote	Yes - Enough autocratization has taken place for CHP and MHP to clear the hurdle of cooperation	Yes - A series of losses	Cooperation - Enough autocratization has taken place for the CHP and MHP to consider the anti-incumbent fault line more dominant than the fault line dividing them. HDP is not invited.
2018P	Yes - Majority vote in the presidential elections	Yes - Enough autocratization has taken place for the opposition to set aside the intra-opposition fault lines	Yes - The loss in 2014P - Particularly the failure of the opposition to form a coalition after 2015G	Cooperation - Enough autocratization has taken place for CHP, İYİP, SP to consider the anti-incumbent fault line more dominant than the fault line dividing them. HDP is excluded from the alliance, but all these parties vowed to support the opposition candidate in a possible runoff.

In sum, looking at the evolution of the cooperation strategy pursued by Turkish and Hungarian oppositions over the course of autocratization, it appears that the strategic choices have been made in accordance with three variables set forth by the theory of this dissertation.

6.2 The strategy of depolarization

As underlined above, this dissertation puts forward two variables that play a role in determining whether the opposition parties in autocratizing contexts pursue the strategy of depolarization and, if they do, how they change it over time: (1) the transformative impact of populist autocratization on the opposition's approach to the fault lines between its bases and those of the incumbents, and (2) the feedback from the latest experiences. Two respective within-case comparisons from the cases of

Turkey and Hungary are made in this section (see Table 17), in order to explain whether, and how, the opposition parties come to pursue the strategy of depolarization and indicate how these two variables interplay over the course of autocratization.

Table 17. Within-cases comparisons made to account for the depolarization strategy

Strategy in question	Case	Election type	Compared periods
Depolarization	Turkey	Mixed	Three periods are compared (see Table 18): - 2007-2010, 2010-2014 and 2015-2019
Depolarization	Hungary	Mixed	Two periods are compared (see Table 19): - 2014-2018 and 2018-2022

Unlike those for the cooperation strategy, the within-case comparisons for the depolarization strategy are designed for comparing the periods rather than individual elections because, as opposed to the cooperation strategy which does vary from one election to another due to different dynamics between different election types, the depolarization strategy is usually developed for a longer term and consequently the feedback reception for this strategy might also take longer.

6.2.1 Depolarization by opposition under autocratization in Turkey

Over the course of populist autocratization in Turkey under Prime Minister, and later President, Erdoğan, the strategic approach developed by the political opposition for how to deal with the social-political fault lines that are constantly kept active by the populist autocrats in power changed several times. According to these changes, the process of autocratization can be divided into three periods, in which the political opposition in Turkey developed different strategic approaches to respond to the strategy of polarization pursued by the Erdoğan-led ruling bloc: the 2006-2010 period, the 2010-2015 period and the 2015-2019 period (see Table 18).

6.2.1.1 The 2007 – 2010 period

As thoroughly described in Chapter 3, when it first came to power in 2002, the AKP deliberately refrained from actions and discourses that would activate the fault lines, particularly the secular-conservative cleavage, which divide the Turkish society. For this reason, the first period for Turkish opposition to respond to AKP Government's polarization strategy begins in 2006 with the debates on the election of a new president in Spring 2007. Back then, the secularist establishment that was still quite powerful in state institutions particularly in the military and the judiciary, made it very clear that the post should not be filled by an AKP hardliner, who would not be "truly allegiant" to the values of the republic ("Hükümet genelkurmay," 2007). Meanwhile, the main opposition CHP sided with the secularist establishment and took a procedural action in the parliament to prevent AKP's candidate for president, Abdullah Gül, from getting elected in a series of rounds, which then remained inconclusive. Ultimately, the stalemate around the deadlocked presidential election was resolved with the declaration of the early elections scheduled for July 2007. In an attempt to capitalize on the reactivated secular-conservative fault line in the society, the main opposition CHP built its election campaign upon the premise that the AKP is not allegiant to the values of the republic and thus should not stay in power, which paved the way for further polarization of Turkish society along the deepening secular-conservative fault line. Nevertheless, this strategy apparently did not pay off for the opposition as the AKP won the election by landslide, increasing its vote share from 34 to 47 percent.

With its grip on power strengthened in the elections, the ruling AKP started to get more defiant against the secular establishment. In alliance with the Gülenists, the ruling AKP went on the offensive by means of pivotal cases of Ergenekon and

Sledgehammer, and a constitutional amendment package to purge the military and judiciary of secularists. While the AKP was on the offensive to take total control of the state institutions during the 2007 – 2010 period, relying on the majority support, which it managed to successfully consolidate by means of polarizing politics, the opposition was neither unified nor powerful enough to challenge it. Particularly, the main opposition CHP's leadership continued to be on the defensive with its conventional secularist discourse, raising the doubts as to whether the strategy based on the defense of the republican values was the right one to pose a real challenge for the AKP. Meanwhile, an alternative oppositional approach was also in the making, whereby the main focus was on the fight against corruption, and socio-economic and welfare-related issues. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, a prominent CHP MP who was a leading figure to adopt this new oppositional approach, took on AKP representatives in live-broadcast public debates and gradually increased his popularity. The CHP leadership nominated Kılıçdaroğlu for Istanbul mayor in the 2019 Local Elections and even though it was not enough for an electoral victory, he managed to increase CHP's votes from 28 to 37 in the biggest metropolitan of the country. As a result, Kılıçdaroğlu was widely considered as a rising star, who was representing a new style of opposition. So, when CHP's long-time leader Deniz Baykal resigned after a video tape scandal in May 2010, Kılıçdaroğlu stepped forward as the only candidate and became the leader of the main opposition CHP.

6.2.1.2 The 2010 – 2015 period

Kılıçdaroğlu's leadership of the main opposition CHP was expected to be different than that of Deniz Baykal anyway. However, beyond the change in leadership that was caused by some video tape scandal, the early 2010s marked a debate on the need

for a new style of opposition against the AKP that had won four consecutive elections during the 2000s and become so powerful in the process as to trigger a regime transformation from tutelary democracy. That was not an ordinary development, neither for the opposition nor for the country in general. Therefore, the change in leadership was followed a debate on the need for change in the CHP in general.

Table 18. The periodization of Turkish opposition's response to the polarization strategy pursued by the Erdoğan-led ruling bloc over the course of autocratization

	(1) Has autocratization triggered the need for the opposition parties to reach out beyond their conventional bases?	(2) Feedback from the latest period	Depolarization outcome
2007 – 2010	No		No depolarization The opposition contributed to polarization through its actions and discourses that helped further deepen the secular – conservative fault line.
2010 – 2015	Yes The fact that the AKP became so powerful during the 2007 – 2010 period as to pave the way for a regime transformation away from tutelary democracy triggered the need to shift the anti-incumbent fault line to appeal to new bases	A series of losses during the previous period: 2002G, 2004L, 2007G, 2009L	Passive depolarization The opposition refrained from reproducing polarization, attempted to reach out to new bases mainly through a new discourse addressing the socio-economic issues and cooptation of new figures from outside its own elite circle, but an aggressive anti-Erdoğan rhetoric was still at the center. So, they ultimately failed to build a new politics effectively challenging the existing axes of politics imposed by the incumbents.
2015 – 2019	Yes The fact that the ruling bloc became so powerful during the 2010 – 2015 period as to pave the way for a regime transformation into electoral autocracy triggered the need to revise the existing depolarization strategy	Strategy did not work - a series of losses during the previous period: 2010R, 2011G, 2014L, 2014P	Active depolarization The opposition went beyond "anti-Erdoğanism" and countered polarization by stressing cross-cutting ties, making a direct appeal to the new constituencies, and proposing new axes of politics via tangible proposals for the social-political issues facing the country.

As thoroughly dwelled on in Chapter 3, the change in the CHP's style of opposition that marked the 2010 – 2015 period had two main pillars. First, the focus on the fight against corruption and the socio-economic and welfare-related issues, and second, the attempt to reach beyond the party's conventional base, particularly the conservatives and the Kurds. This two-pillar strategy was also evident in CHP's

election campaigns during this period. In order to demonstrate that there is a "new CHP", some political figures from outside the party's conventional elite circles were invited to fill high-ranking positions in the party, which was considered by the new CHP leadership as a strategic short-cut to appeal to new bases. In the 2014 Local Elections, for instance, the CHP nominated Mansur Yavaş for Ankara mayor and Lütfü Savaş for Hatay mayor. While Yavaş had been the candidate of the nationalist MHP for the same position in the 2009 Local Elections and had managed to get twice as more votes as his party due to his popularity, Savaş had been one-term mayor elected as the candidate of the AKP. In the 2014 Presidential Elections, the CHP leadership took a step further and nominated Ekmelleddin İhsanoğlu as their joint presidential candidate with the MHP at the cost of being severely criticized by the party's own base. İhsanoğlu was the former secretary-general of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation and was thus a real outsider for the CHP's predominantly secular conventional bases. The objective for such strategic nominations was understandably to soften up the polarization provoked by the AKP Government and take a short cut to appeal to new bases.

Another characteristic of the CHP's new style of opposition that marked the 2010 – 2015 period, as thoroughly dwelled on in Chapter 3, was to use an aggressive discourse against Erdoğan and engage in harsh polemics with him during the election campaigns. Considering the ever-deepening affective polarization that the populist autocrats in power were deliberately provoking as part of their strategy, the tactical choice of such harsh discourses generally proved to be dysfunctional, overshadowing other elements of depolarization that were incorporated to the overall electoral strategies pursued during that period.

In sum, the 2010 – 2015 period is clearly distinguished from the 2007 – 2010 period in that it marked the pursuit of a new electoral strategy by the main opposition CHP, whereby the party clearly refrained from polarization and attempted to reach out new constituencies beyond its conventional bases. As elaborately dwelled on in Chapter 3, the new leadership of the party faced some challenges from within the party, particularly ahead of the 2014 Presidential Elections, which they overcame thanks to the concentration of power in the hands of the party leadership. However, during that period, the CHP still lacked a proactive strategy to counter and neutralize the polarization strategy pursued by the AKP Government by, for instance, emphasizing cross-cutting ties between the sections of Turkish society that became increasingly separated from each other in the process and introducing new axes of politics (Somer et al., 2021). For this reason, the depolarization strategy pursued by the main opposition CHP during the 2010 – 2015 period was classified as passively depolarizing in this dissertation.

6.2.1.3 The 2015 – 2019 period

Even though it helped the party increase its votes from 18-20 to 25-26 percent of the votes, the passive depolarization strategy pursued by the main opposition CHP during the 2010 – 2015 period fell short of attaining the goal to neutralize the polarization strategy of the AKP through which it could preserve its majority support throughout the period. The AKP managed to win all the elections during the period – the referendum in 2010, the general elections in 2011, the local and presidential elections in 2014 – was strong enough to initiate the process of autocratization that would gradually turn the country into an electoral autocracy.

Considering the negative feedback on the strategy pursued during the previous period, the main opposition CHP announced ahead of the 2015 General Elections that it would have a rather new campaigning strategy, in which a comprehensive welfare-oriented action plan was proposed for the socio-economic issues that the society faced without engaging in any polemic with the newly elected President Erdoğan or the government. As thoroughly dwelled on in Chapter 3, despite the intra-opposition fault lines, the campaigns of the nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish HDP were utterly inspired by CHP's new approach and in an atmosphere of regional crises in Syria and Iraq with the rise of the ISIS that was quite suitable for the government to capitalize on, the ruling AKP lost its parliamentary majority in June 2015 for the first time since it came to power in 2002. However, the failure of the opposition parties to make post-election cooperation and the rise of PKK and ISIS terror around the country soon created the rally-round-the-flag effect and the AKP regained its majority in November 2015. Though it fell short of unseating the government, CHP's revised depolarization strategy helped it become the only political party to be in dialogue with all the political actors. The CHP maintained its constructive and depolarizing approach ahead of the 2017 Constitutional Referendum and conducted an inclusive "No" campaign, whereby it refrained from any polarizing, contentious or polemical discourse and did not even use its party logo. Presenting the issue in question as a "suprapolitical" matter concerning the future of country, the inclusive "No" campaign led by the CHP succeeded in emphasizing the cross-cutting ties between the polarized social sections, like in the campaign for the 2015 General Elections. As a result, a considerable number of voters that had supported the parties of the "Yes" camp, the

ruling AKP and the nationalist MHP, in the previous elections voted “No” in the referendum.

As thoroughly dwelled on in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, the post-2017 period marked the institutionalization of the new autocratic regime that had long been in the making. In the two elections that took place during this period, the 2018 General Elections and the 2019 Local Elections, the main opposition CHP continued to counter the polarization strategy pursued by the populist autocratic ruling bloc by means of emphasizing cross-cutting ties and proposing new axes of politics via tangible proposals for the social-political issues facing the country. This active polarization strategy pursued by the main opposition CHP from 2015 onwards, which had previously produced partial electoral gains, finally helped the CHP-led opposition bloc achieve an unprecedented electoral victory against the Erdoğan-led ruling bloc in the 2019 Local Elections, winning the mayoral seats in most of the major metropolises including Istanbul and Ankara.

In sum, irrespective of how it affected the election results in this period, the strategy of active depolarization allowed the Turkish opposition to go beyond what might be called “anti-Erdoğanism” and propose the society an alternative program based on a novel vision under the circumstances of an increasing autocratization and regime transformation. The partial achievements in the 2015 General Elections and the 2017 Constitutional Referendum, and the victory in the 2019 Local Elections lead the opposition to stick to the pursuit of the depolarization strategy.

6.2.2 Depolarization by opposition under autocratization in Hungary

The strategic approach developed by the Hungarian opposition for how to deal with the social-political fault lines and the strategy of polarization pursued by the Orbán-

led ruling bloc over the course of populist autocratization can be examined in two periods: the 2013 – 2018 period and the 2018 – 2022 period (see Table 19).

Table 19. The periodization of Hungarian opposition's response to the polarization strategy pursued by the Orbán-led ruling bloc over the course of autocratization

	(1) Has autocratization triggered the need for the opposition parties to reach out beyond their conventional bases?	(2) Feedback from the latest period	Depolarization outcome
2013 – 2018	Yes The fact that the Orbán-led ruling bloc paved the way for a regime transformation into defective democracy during this period triggered the need to appeal to new bases.	The loss against the Fidesz-KDNP in 2010G	Passive depolarization The opposition attempted to reach out to the constituencies that had previously supported Orbán by (1) addressing socio-economic issues and proposing solutions, and (2) raising the alarm about country's future in the West. So, they ultimately failed to build a new politics effectively challenging the existing axes of politics imposed by the incumbents.
2018 – 2022	Yes The fact that the Orbán-led ruling bloc paved the way for a regime transformation into electoral autocracy during this period triggered the need to appeal build a more proactive depolarization strategy.	Strategy did not work - A series of losses during the previous period: 2014G, 2014L, 2018G	Active depolarization The opposition went beyond reaction and defense, managed to introduce alternative axes of politics, countered polarization by stressing cross-cutting ties and made a direct appeal to the new constituencies, namely the "disappointed ex-Fidesz voters" through a joint PM candidate outside the opposition's elite circles.

6.2.2.1 The 2013 – 2018 period

The majoritarian electoral system that was installed after the Fidesz-KDNP alliance had changed Hungary's constitutional system from top to bottom turned cooperation into the focus of the electoral strategies to be developed and implemented by the opposition parties. For this reason, during the 2013 – 2018 period, the Hungarian opposition spent much of its time and energy for inter-party cooperation and alliance building ahead of the elections. However, one of the keys for Orbán-led ruling bloc to hold onto power is to preserve and consolidate its majority support by keeping intra-opposition fault lines and the anti-opposition fault line constantly active and deep.

During the 2013 – 2018 period, the Hungarian opposition pursued a two-pillar strategy to deal with the polarization strategy implemented by the Orbán-led

ruling bloc. First, considering the fact that Orbán came back to power so powerfully in 2010 due to a series of social-political crises in the 2000s, the opposition parties addressed the socio-economic issues facing the Hungarian society in their campaigns, criticized the government of not doing well enough and vowed to solve these issues if they come to power. The idea of the opposition parties was to reach out to the constituencies who had voted for Orbán in the 2010 General Elections and persuade them that they would govern better. Second, throughout this period, the Hungarian opposition constantly emphasized in their election campaigns that Hungary would totally be pulled off from the West should Orbán keep winning elections and stay in power. This discourse is one of the examples, whereby the opposition confined itself to raise the alarm about the government rather than offering an alternative vision to the public. In fact, much as this two-pillar strategy aimed to reach out new constituencies, it did not very much help the opposition parties attain this goal as it fell short of effectively responding to the polarization strategy pursued by the ruling bloc by means of offensive discourses against the opposition with a nationalist, anti-left, anti-liberal, anti-EU, and anti-refugee rhetoric. For instance, while the ruling bloc under Prime Minister Orbán had simple campaign messages on matters like refugee crisis, the so-called "Soros plan" and Hungary-EU relations, which activates and deepens multiple fault lines against the opposition at the same time, the aforementioned two-pillar strategy pursued by the opposition apparently fails to help it go beyond these fault lines.

In sum, the rapid autocratization that the Orbán-led ruling bloc initiated after coming back to power in 2010 triggered the need for the opposition to reach out to the constituencies that had supported Orbán. However, the two-pillar depolarization strategy failed to help the opposition parties develop a proactive approach through

which to attain this goal. As a result, the opposition parties stayed rather defensive and reactive throughout the period.

6.2.2.2 The 2018 – 2022 period

Following the accelerated autocratization and electoral losses during the 2013 – 2018 period, the opposition parties in Hungary reviewed their electoral strategies after the 2018 General Elections. Due to the incentives provided by electoral institutions, cooperation was still the primary element of the electoral strategy to be pursued by the opposition. Particularly the victory of the opposition in the Hódmezővásárhely mayoral by-elections indicated that cooperation that goes beyond the intra-opposition fault lines could be key to make Orbán lose even in one of his strongholds. As a result, cooperation continued to be the underlying element of the opposition's electoral strategy during the 2018 – 2022 period.

Nevertheless, the changes observed in opposition's electoral strategies were not limited to cooperation. From the 2019 Local Elections onwards, the opposition parties started to pursue a more proactive strategy to deal with the fault lines deliberately activated and deepened by the Orbán-led ruling bloc. In the 2019 Local Elections, for instance, the main strategic message of the ruling bloc's campaign was that good local governance hinged on being on good terms with the central government and that the electorate thus had to elect the candidates of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance. As thoroughly explained in Chapter 5, the opposition responded through a three-pillar strategy. First, by agreeing to have a single opposition nominee in each constituency to be chosen either by primaries or inter-party negotiations, they managed to set the agenda and made sure that the elections were about the local issues. Second, they responded to the message of the ruling bloc's campaign with

another message emphasizing that it was not the central government but the people themselves that the local governments needed to be on good terms with to ensure good local governance. Finally, they managed to capitalize on a corruption scandal involving a prominent mayor of Fidesz and demonstrate that it was just the tip of the iceberg. Through this three-pillar strategy, The Hungarian opposition was able to proactively respond to the polarizing axes imposed by the Orbán-led ruling bloc and managed to introduce alternative axes of politics.

An active depolarization strategy continued to be a part of Hungarian opposition's electoral strategy ahead of the 2022 General Elections. In order to have the slightest chance of prevailing against the ruling bloc in the elections, the opposition absolutely needed to appeal to new constituencies and get their support. For some in the Hungarian opposition, there was a considerable number of "disappointed and/or undecided ex-Fidesz voters", who could support the opposition if they nominated an appropriate candidate ("Opposition's collapse," 2022). For those, who thought that there really was such a voter group, there was no doubt that the opposition needed to appeal to this group to get the better of the Fidesz-KDNP alliance. As thoroughly explained in Chapter 5, this debate marked the runoff of the opposition primaries in October 2021 and Péter Márki-Zay, the mayor of Hódmezővásárhely who defined himself as a faithful Christian and a "disappointed ex-Fidesz voter", won the primaries to be the opposition bloc's joint candidate for prime minister. Under his leadership, the opposition bloc would pursue a depolarization strategy by shifting the anti-incumbent fault line to appeal to the particular target group of disappointed ex-Fidesz voters.

Ahead of the 2022 General Elections, the opposition bloc improved the two-pillar strategy that had previously been pursued to reach out to new constituencies.

First, the projects to solve the socio-economic issues of the country were broader in scope and prepared by a commission joined by all the opposition parties. Second, they again argued that another Orbán Government would put Hungary's place in the Western world in a real jeopardy, but they also conveyed the concrete message that a change in government would allow Hungary to have much better relations with the EU, which would also enable the country to get the funds that Orbán Government had been denied and thus contribute greatly to the solution of Hungary' economic problems without any need for austerity measures. By doing so, the opposition bloc managed to introduce a new axis of politics (East-West, democracy-authoritarianism) and concretely demonstrate how being on the right side of this axis would affect Hungarian people's daily lives.

During the campaign ahead of the 2022 General Elections, as thoroughly explained in Chapter 5, Márki-Zay often referred to his Christian faith, regular church visits and his conservative family life and accused Orbán several times of not sincerely allegiant to these values and abusing them. Márki-Zay also took a clear stand regarding the refugee crisis and accused the government of being too soft on the matter.

In sum, regardless of whether it worked or not, the depolarization strategy that was pursued ahead of the 2022 General Elections was clearly different from those pursued in the general elections in 2014 and 2018 and was unprecedented in many ways. The pursuit of this novel, active depolarization strategy, as aforementioned, was a clear result of accelerated autocratization and the feedback from the latest periods.

6.3 In lieu of a conclusion: The interaction between cooperation and depolarization in Turkey and Hungary

Since the process of populist autocratization, as thoroughly explained in Chapter 2, predominantly unfolds through management of the social-political fault lines by the populist autocrats, the strategies to be pursued by the opposition parties in such contexts to prevail against the incumbents in the elections inherently aim to transform these fault lines in such a way as to prevent them from remaining useful instruments for the populist autocrats in power to stay in power. Both cases of Turkey and Hungary indicate that the process of autocratization, quite paradoxically, triggers both the need and the possibility for the development of a new kind of politics beyond these fault lines by the opposition parties. As a matter of fact, with the deepening autocratization that has increased the costs for the opposition in both countries, intra-opposition fault lines have gradually moderated, and the anti-incumbent fault line has been shifted by the opposition parties to extend their potential support base. So, in both Turkey and Hungary, the pursuit of the strategies of cooperation and depolarization by the opposition parties has become not only possible but also necessary in the process.

The fact that the opposition parties start to question the fault lines over the course of autocratization might enable the simultaneous pursuit of cooperation and depolarization as complementary and mutually reinforcing strategies. However, as underlined in the theoretical sections of the dissertation, that does not have to be the case. As a matter of fact, the Turkish and Hungarian opposition parties neither started to simultaneously pursue these strategies nor considered them equally important along the way. While Turkish opposition, for instance, started to pursue the strategy of depolarization at the quite earlier stages of autocratization vis-à-vis the Hungarian

opposition, the strategy of cooperation became the primary strategic element for the Hungarian opposition much earlier than it did for Turkish opposition. The main reason for this is that the Hungarian opposition needed to incorporate cooperation into its electoral strategy much earlier as a result of the rapid autocratization under the leadership of Prime Minister Orbán that made major institutional changes in the electoral system, whereas in Turkey the electoral institutions that incentivize and enforce electoral cooperation for the opposition could be installed long after the process of autocratization had started. Consequently, cooperation has always been the primary strategic element for the Hungarian opposition, which was also widely considered sufficient to arithmetically prevail against the autocratizing incumbents, whilst Turkish opposition gained significant experience in the pursuit of depolarization strategy until cooperation became an indispensable part of the game with the institutional changes.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This final chapter will conclude the dissertation with a summary of the major research findings in connection to the research questions and objectives, along with a discussion of their significance and main contribution. It will also review the shortcomings of the dissertation and propose potential areas and questions for future research.

This dissertation aimed to investigate the electoral strategies pursued by the opposition parties in the countries that have undergone the process of populist autocratization that eventually culminated in electoral authoritarianism. Having identified cooperation and depolarization as two main strategies for the political opposition to attain the goal of prevailing against the populist autocrats in power in the elections, the dissertation sought to understand how opposition parties change their electoral strategies over the course of autocratization and, particularly, when they happen to cooperate and/or depolarize. Based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of the opposition parties' electoral strategies throughout autocratization in multiple episodes in Turkey and Hungary, the conclusion would be as follows:

(1) The opposition parties are most likely to clear the hurdles and make the strategic choice of cooperation when incentives provided by electoral institutions are present, the process autocratization render the anti-incumbent fault line so dominant as to overweigh the intra-opposition fault lines and there is positive feedback from the latest elections.

(2) The opposition parties are most likely to clear the hurdles and make the strategic choice of depolarization when the process autocratization triggered the need for

the opposition parties to reach out to new constituencies and there is positive feedback from the latest period.

In fact, there is little, if any, scholarly doubt that both Turkey and Hungary have recently undergone protracted processes of populist autocratization, eventually leading them to become electoral authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, this dissertation does not solely focus on the period after the transition to electoral authoritarianism but rather on the entire, still ongoing process of autocratization, which in both cases is characterized by a gradual, covert, and ambiguous regime change from democracy toward authoritarianism. As this ongoing process is rife with uncertainties that significantly influence actors' perceptions and behaviors, it is difficult to develop a solid theory on how opposition actors strategize against the autocratizing incumbents. That being said, the longitudinal analysis conducted by this dissertation on the behavior of opposition parties throughout the protracted populist autocratization process allows us to make some significant observations:

First of all, this study showed that the deep-rooted social-political fault lines that populist autocrats in power instrumentalize over the course of autocratization are the main obstacles for the opposition parties to pursue the strategies of cooperation and depolarization. So, through these strategies the opposition parties mainly aim to put a spoke in the wheel of the populist autocrats in power, preventing the fault lines from becoming useful instruments in their hands to preserve their majority support, stay in power and continue autocratization.

Second, the results of the research also demonstrated that the evolution in the strategies pursued by the opposition parties over the course of autocratization mainly takes place through a process of political learning, which is triggered by the transformative impact of unfolding regime change on the opposition parties'

approach to the fault lines dividing their societies. The transforming approach of the opposition parties to the intra-opposition fault lines and the anti-incumbent fault line enables them to pursue the strategies of cooperation and depolarization, respectively, despite the challenges and risks that they entail.

Third, the results also indicated that the similar process of populist autocratization that Turkey and Hungary have undergone, as two quite distinct cases with significant contextual differences concerning history, culture, regional background, democratic past, size etc., appears to account for how in both countries similar dynamics have been in play during the development and implementation of cooperation and depolarization strategies by the actors of political opposition. This overall similarity notwithstanding, the research also revealed certain differences between the cases with regard to the timing of the pursuit of cooperation and depolarization strategies. While these differences do not contradict with main findings of the research, they offer significant insights into how these two strategies interact with each other in different contexts.

These observations demonstrate that the behavior of opposition parties throughout the protracted process of populist autocratization might significantly differ from that under the conditions of a long-standing, stable electoral autocracy. Differently put, making sense of the evolution of the opposition behavior during this process characterized by a wide range of uncertainties, where deep-rooted social-political fault lines and polarization play an important role, requires certain variables beyond those that have so far been put forward by the extant literature regarding the opposition behavior on long-standing electoral authoritarian regimes.

In the existing literature, the prominent parameter used to explain opposition cooperation is the vulnerability of the incumbent regime. Starting with Van de Walle

(2006), a significant number of scholarly works have argued that the likelihood of opposition cooperation in an electoral autocracy peaks when the regime is most vulnerable. Van de Walle and Gandhi & Reuter (2008) attribute regime vulnerability mostly to splits and defections from the ruling bloc. Both works contend that these are symptoms signaling the electoral defeat of the incumbent regime, which lead the opposition to consider cooperation feasible. Wahman (2011) also argues that increasing regime vulnerability raises the likelihood of opposition cooperation in electoral autocracies but attributes vulnerability to economic crises and pre-election liberalization rather than elite defections. Building on all these works, Ong (2022) claims that regime vulnerability is a primary factor for opposition parties to build alliances under electoral authoritarianism and points out that economic crises, elite defections, and mass anti-regime demonstrations increase the extent to which the regime is perceived vulnerable by the opposition. Going a step further, Ong introduces another variable and argues that opposition parties must also perceive themselves as dependent on each other in order to build alliances. He suggests that the perception of interparty dependence on the part of the opposition hinges on the parties having enough information on each other's capabilities and the conviction that their bases could vote for each other in case of an electoral alliance. In summary, the common conclusion drawn from all these works on opposition cooperation in long-standing, stable electoral autocracies is that opposition parties in such regimes recognize that their electoral success depends on joint action and yet take the risks associated with it only under certain conditions: First, they must consider the incumbent regime vulnerable enough for an electoral defeat and thereby perceive their chances of winning to be high; and second, as Ong argues, they must consider themselves dependent on each other to actually realize this electoral victory.

However, this dissertation demonstrates that in countries like Turkey and Hungary, once-democratic nations that have undergone a gradual and protracted process of autocratization culminating in electoral authoritarianism, opposition cooperation cannot be entirely explained by the prominent dynamics outlined in the existing literature for at least two reasons:

First, the process of autocratization experienced by these countries is so gradual and clandestine that it creates numerous uncertainties for the opposition regarding the fate of the political regime and the correct strategy to be pursued against the incumbents (Somer et al., 2022). Consequently, it takes considerable time for the opposition to decipher the autocratization sequence followed by the incumbents (Lührmann, 2021) and realize that cooperation is the only viable strategy to counter it. Often, it is during this process that opposition actors become aware of the risks associated with the strategies they choose to pursue. Therefore, learning and action often go hand in hand, leading to significant fluctuations in strategy development and implementation. Meanwhile, under these conditions of uncertainty, the opposition usually does not perceive the regime to be invincible, as in stable and long-standing electoral autocracies. The fact that the total votes received by the ruling bloc have not been significantly higher than the entire vote received by the opposition in Turkey and Hungary has sustained the perception among the political opposition that the incumbents are not invincible whatsoever in almost every election.

Second, the fact that one of the driving forces of the gradual regime change towards autocracy is polarization by the autocratizing incumbents along the deep-rooted social-political fault lines makes defections both at the elite and voter levels quite difficult, even in the case of significant economic or political crises. In fact, the

cases of Turkey and Hungary demonstrate that even if certain defections from the incumbent bloc occur, they do not necessarily render the ruling bloc vulnerable, as argued for in stable, long-standing electoral autocracies. In the case of Turkey, the ruling bloc led by President Erdoğan survived serious crises, such as the Gezi Park Protests, the corruption scandal in December 2013, the clash with the Gülenists, and the coup attempt in July 2016, while also experiencing significant elite defections from the AKP. The most notable defection occurred following the opposition victory in the 2019 Local Elections, resulting in the formation of two new political parties led by former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and former Minister of Economy Ali Babacan. However, contrary to expectations, neither of these events was followed by a significant defection at the voter level from the ruling bloc to the opposition (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2023). Additionally, the serious economic crisis that Turkey has been facing under President Erdoğan throughout his last term in power did not translate into success for the opposition in the 2023 General Elections. As this dissertation demonstrates, this is primarily due to the serious polarization between the bases of the incumbents and the opposition along deep-rooted social-political fault lines dividing Turkish society.

For all these reasons, understanding the dynamics of opposition cooperation under the conditions of protracted and gradual autocratization requires consideration of certain additional factors. This dissertation thus introduces the variables of (1) how the intra-opposition fault lines transform during the course of autocratization and are addressed by opposition actors, and (2) how feedback from past experiences shapes actors' behaviors. In fact, the latest general elections in Turkey and Hungary indicated how intra-opposition fault lines can be reactivated as a result of electoral defeat, thereby demonstrating that feedback from recent experiences might extend

beyond evaluating whether cooperation has been successful and play a role in further transforming the intra-opposition fault lines.

Having discussed all these factors, the defeat of opposition blocs in Turkey and Hungary during the last general elections, which appears to have marked the end of the optimistic period for the opposition following their local election victories in 2019, may reduce uncertainties in how the opposition perceives the regime, thereby contributing to the stabilization of electoral authoritarianism in these countries. The upcoming local elections in 2024 in both countries, which the opposition parties will likely not contest as a joint bloc due to the negative feedback that they received from the previous general elections, could be pivotal in this regard. While the loss of mayoral seats in important metropolises that the opposition won in 2019 might contribute to authoritarian consolidation, retaining them by the opposition will likely maintain the regime's competitiveness. In the former case, the parameters outlined by existing literature on opposition cooperation in electoral autocracies may become much more applicable in the future for Turkey and Hungary. In this respect, the theory proposed by this dissertation does not refute the mentioned studies on the cooperation behavior of opposition parties in long-standing electoral autocracies; rather, it complements them.

Another explanatory variable frequently discussed in the literature on opposition behavior in autocratic contexts is the level of repression. Gandhi & Reuters (2013) draw attention to the positive relationship between the level of repression and the likelihood of opposition cooperation in electoral autocracies, but they refrain from directly proposing causal direction. In her article scrutinizing fluctuating opposition cooperation in Venezuela throughout the 20-year rule under Chavismo, Jiménez (2023) argues that there is a curvilinear relationship between

autocratic repression and the form of opposition cooperation. She suggests that increasing risks and costs under conditions of high-level repression create disagreements among the opposition about the strategy to pursue against the incumbents, thus raising intra-opposition divisions. However, this dissertation does not seem to support this argument.

Examining what Jiménez means by "high-level repression" — government's absolute control over state institutions and resources, as well as the media; the outright banning of opposition parties; prevalent human rights violations; and/or systematic persecution, harassment, and even assassination of opposition leaders — Turkey, where jailing opposition politicians has long been commonplace under President Erdoğan's authoritarian rule, seems to partially meet the criteria. However, this did not lead the opposition to prefer informal and clandestine cooperation. On the contrary, they cooperated in the most formal possible manner ahead of the 2023 General Elections. Although it is difficult to anticipate the impact of possible increasing repression on opposition strategies in countries like Turkey and Hungary, this dissertation demonstrates that increasing autocratic repression has so far helped alleviate intra-opposition fault lines, thereby leading the opposition into unprecedentedly formal election cooperation ahead of the general elections in 2022 and 2023. On the other hand, the retreat observed from full-fledged opposition cooperation after these general elections lost by the opposition (Scheppele 2022) appears to have much more to do with negative feedback from recent experiences than increasing autocratic repression.

This dissertation makes at least two contributions to the growing literature on the strategies of political opposition under autocratization. First, the research revealed that same theories might not be as explanatory for understanding strategies

of political opposition in all electoral autocracies and that it could be of substantial importance through what kind of autocratization the regimes in question end up as electoral autocracies. In this regard, this dissertation demonstrated how populist autocratization instrumentalizes the deep-rooted social-political fault lines dividing the societies and how the subsequent polarization affects the dynamics of strategy development and implementation by the political opposition. The theory suggested by this dissertation was built on the particular challenges raised by this entire process and how opposition parties could overcome them.

Second, while scrutinizing the electoral strategies of the opposition parties in autocratizing contexts, this dissertation does not confine itself to the question of cooperation, unlike a great majority of the existing literature, and brings depolarization into the equation as an important strategic element, considering that how populist autocrats in power turn polarization into a useful weapon in their hands by instrumentalizing social-political fault lines dividing the societies. Thereby, this dissertation also happens to provide a preliminary example of empirical research on various types of depolarization strategies pursued by opposition parties in autocratizing contexts.

Besides the contributions this dissertation has also certain limitations and at least three of them need to be underlined. First, the incorporation of another case from a different context, which has also been through populist autocratization, such as Venezuela, would have not only made the cross-contextual comparison and the MDSD of this dissertation stronger but also certainly increased the external validity of the theory suggested by this dissertation. However, due to time and budget constraints a further case could not be incorporated to the research.

Second, this dissertation limited its scope by focusing on opposition strategies as its outcome variable and did not investigate how these strategies have affected the election results and the fate of the political regime. Further research need to be done to reflect on these questions, as opposition strategies might have an immense effect on them. Moreover, due primarily to time constraints, this dissertation exclusively focuses on electoral institutions while investigating institutional incentives for opposition cooperation. Further research with a broader institutional perspective should explore whether other institutional incentives, both positive and negative, influence political opposition actors' adoption of certain electoral strategies during the course of autocratization.

Finally, in its research and analysis this dissertation focuses on the social-political fault lines that the populist autocrats in power in Turkey and Hungary instrumentalized during the course of autocratization and how actors of political opposition cope with the activation of these fault lines by the incumbents. However, these are certainly not the sole cleavages that divide these societies. Particularly, the class-based divisions that continue to exist were not profoundly dwelled on in this research, even though they intersect the cultural and identity-based divisions that make up the focus of the dissertation. In fact, the social polarization in both Turkey and Hungary has a political economy aspect and it is understandable that in neither of these countries the autocratic blocs wish to disguise it. However, it is also clear that the opposition parties in both countries have not been quite successful either in constructing these class-based divisions (De Leon et al., 2009) by turning them into alternative axes of politics. This was particularly evident during the 2023 General Elections in Turkey, where the economic grievances of the conservative masses could be mobilized much more successfully by the ultra-Islamist New Welfare Party

(NWP) than the entire opposition bloc. Even though he could not forestall the voter defection from his AKP due to economic hardship, President Erdoğan managed to keep the NWP within his conservative-nationalist electoral bloc, thereby preventing the opposition bloc from capitalizing on the economic crisis. Moreover, the fact that the NWP was evidently more attractive for the conservative/religious voters hit by the economic crisis compared with the opposition bloc mainly dominated by center-right and center-left parties is a manifestation of how cultural and identity-based fault lines overweigh class-based divisions in Turkish politics.

Nonetheless, this research has also wider implications for the future of opposition parties in electoral autocracies. As underlined throughout the dissertation, overcoming intra-opposition fault lines significantly increases the chance of cooperation by opposition parties; however, cooperation does not guarantee electoral success. Even though opposition parties manage to set aside their differences and formally join forces, every time that the fault lines dividing them is (re)activated, which is indeed possible anytime for any reason, the opposition cooperation gets damaged and thus becomes further vulnerable to the attacks of the populist autocrats in power. If the cooperating opposition parties do not win the elections at the end, the rifts between them usually further deepen, as the loss of general elections in Hungary and Turkey has recently shown. Too much integration within the opposition bloc might also lead to the emergence of a third party or bloc on the opposition with the claim that the cooperating parties lost their identities and are no longer capable of representing their bases. On the other hand, as long as the fragmentation of the opposition works for the autocratic ruling bloc to stay in power, the need for cooperation does not vanish for the opposition either. Such dilemmas, which the populist autocrats in power would take advantage by all means, remain to be quite

challenging for the opposition. Moreover, although they are mentioned as challenges for the pursuit of cooperation and depolarization strategies, with the limited data from the media survey, this dissertation offers only a partial insight into how the risks of demobilization and defection come into play when opposition parties pursue these strategies. Therefore, further research is needed to empirically investigate the impact of cooperation and depolarization strategies on the party organization and the voter base of opposition parties in order to understand how the risks of demobilization and defection manifest when these strategies are pursued.

In the local elections, where polarizing issues of the national politics have less of an effect and there are a big number of seats to contest that could be somehow shared, the opposition parties could more easily capitalize on the dominance of the anti-incumbent fault line and the intra-opposition rifts would be less of a problem. The local elections in 2019 in both Turkey and Hungary, where opposition parties made a breakthrough clearly indicated this. However, the replication of such achievement in the general elections is apparently not as easy. Even within the context of economic crisis, mass demonstrations and major defections from its bloc, populist autocrats in power have proven to be more resilient than many predicted. It is such that even if the autocratic ruling bloc happen to lose its majority, as in the case of the 2015 General Elections, a possible failure by the opposition parties to produce a sustainable cooperation would allow the populist autocrats to come back stronger to power.

In both Hungary and Turkey, the great expectations of the opposition blocs that had followed the local election wins in 2019 were replaced by true despair after the loss of general elections in 2022 and 2023 respectively. In 2024 opposition parties in both countries will get through the tough test of local elections and

cooperation does not seem to be taken for granted as it was five years ago. Even if the opposition parties somehow manage to start over with a clean slate, the consequences of the recent electoral losses will continue to affect the electorate. Mutual accusations between the parties, negative feedback from past elections and the inevitable activation of the intra-opposition fault lines following the lost elections usually drag the existing actors of political opposition into crises of representation and legitimacy in the eyes of the electorate and renegotiations of the opposition cooperation at the elite level might not suffice to solve these crises.

In sum, looking at both successful and unsuccessful experiences of opposition parties in electoral autocracies around the world, it remains to be a fact that the strategy pursued by the populist autocrats in power to take advantage of polarization that keeps both the opposition and the larger society fragmented, cannot be neutralized by the actors of political opposition by staying fragmented. The extant literature seems to agree that the cooperation of pro-democracy opposition parties presents a viable strategy for prevailing against autocratic incumbents in authoritarian contexts. This cooperation, coupled with depolarizing politics, is seen as the most effective means to halt, and potentially reverse, the process of autocratization (Gamboa, 2017; Cleary & Öztürk, 2020; Tomini et al., 2023). Specifically, within the spectrum of autocratization spanning from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy, pro-democracy opposition parties are advised to leverage the electoral aspects of the political regime to their advantage. Consequently, further research is warranted to gain deeper insights into the impact of cooperation and depolarization strategies on election outcomes and the trajectory of political regimes in electoral autocracies.

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