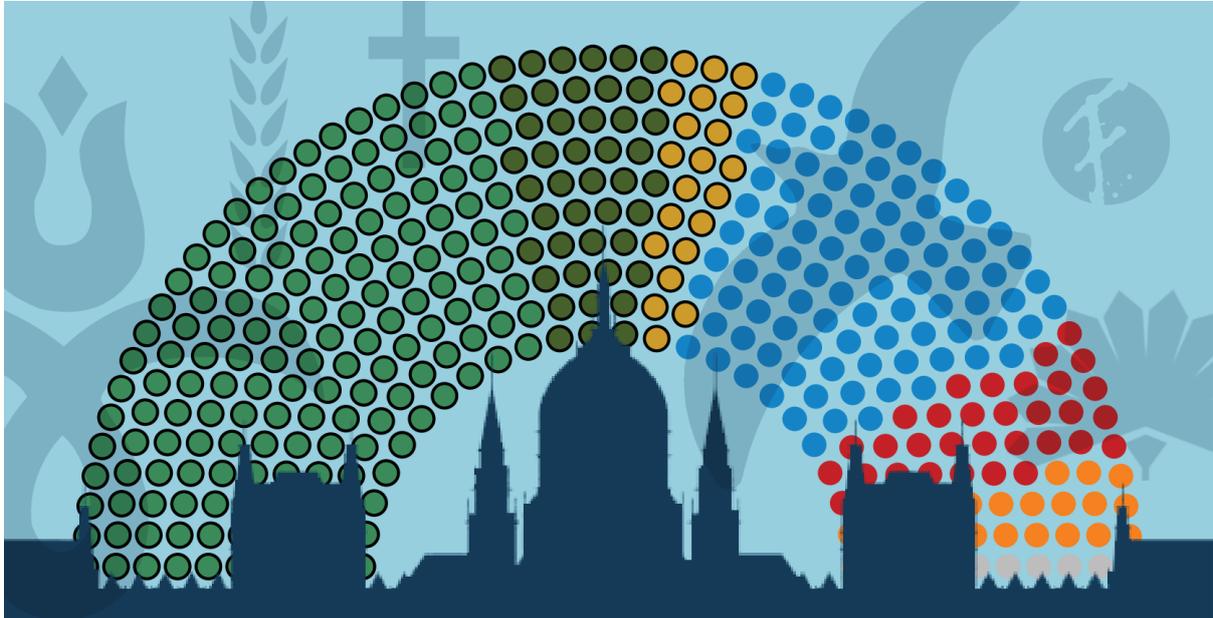


# 30 YEARS ON – PUBLIC OPINION ON THE REGIME CHANGE IN HUNGARY



RESEARCH SUMMARY

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The aim of this joint research of Policy Solutions and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung was to explore the views of the Hungarian society about the regime change of 1989-1990 after 30 years. Building on our empirical results, lessons can be drawn not only about the society's assessment of the Kádár-regime 30 years on, but also about which hopes related to the regime transition were fulfilled and which ones were not, how Hungarians see different historical periods (Kádár regime, 1990-2010, Orbán-regime after 2010) through the lens of the financial situation of their families, and under which Hungarian governments was Hungarian democracy in the best condition.

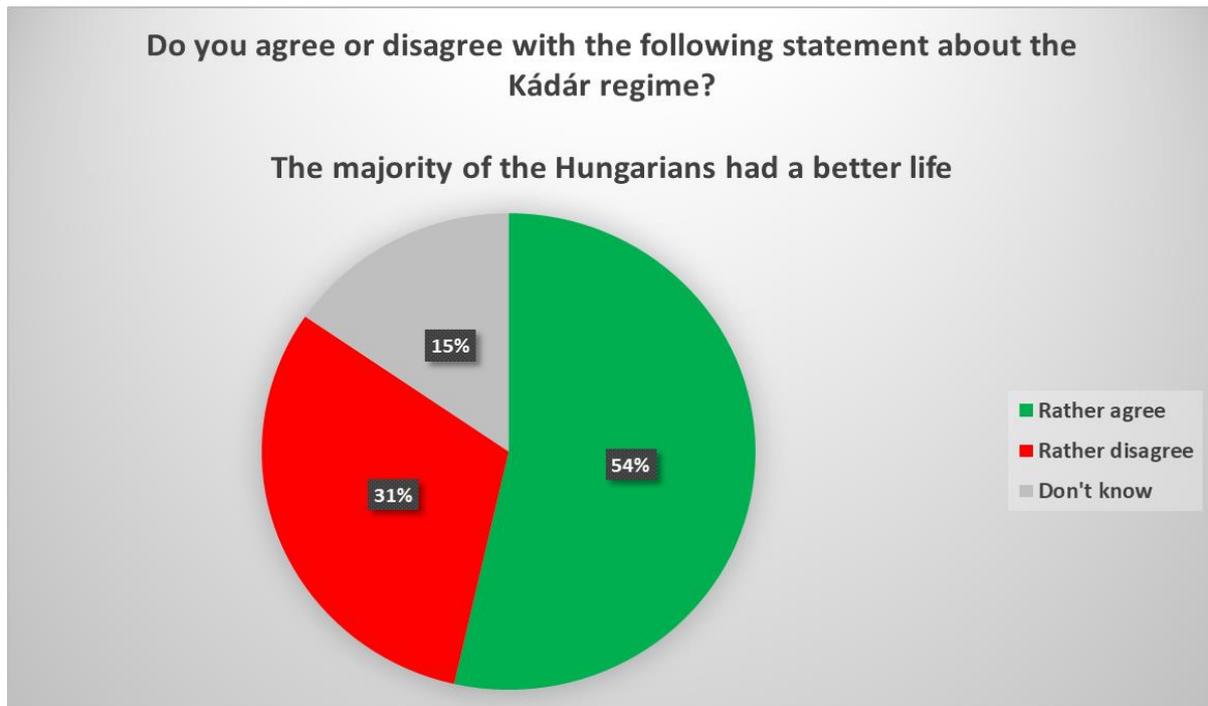
The research is based on an opinion poll conducted by Závecz Research. Just before the coronavirus pandemic, 1000 people – representing the whole adult population of Hungary by age, gender, type of settlement and education – were interviewed personally between 3 and 13 March 2020.

### **The main advantages of the Kádár era according to the Hungarians: the possibility of material prosperity, order, predictability**

**According to the absolute majority of respondents (54%), the majority of Hungarians had a better life under the Kádár regime (pre-1990) than today, while only a third of respondents (31%) believed that the majority of the Hungarian society could afford more today than before 1990 (Graph 1). In all opposition camps, there are more people who say that the living standards of the majority were better during the Kádár era than those who think differently: socialist MSZP (70%) and left-liberal DK (71%) voters value the period before the change of regime the most in terms of welfare, but even the majority of radical right Jobbik voters think (54%) that the majority of Hungarians lived better before 1990. In addition, it is important to note that although exactly half of the Fidesz camp had a negative view on this statement, more than a third of pro-government voters look back on this period with nostalgia, and believe that the majority of Hungarians lived better under Kádár than they do now under Viktor Orbán's government.**

**The older an age group, the higher the proportion was of those who agreed that the majority lived better before the regime change. A significant correlation can be observed when looking at the educational background:** citizens with lower education tend to believe that most Hungarians lived better under Kádár. Among the lowest qualified citizens, 62 and 27 percent are the share of the two sides, but even according to the relative majority of graduates (45%), most Hungarians lived better before 1990 than today. Regarding the breakdown by type of settlement, the inhabitants of small towns (60%) assessed the standards of living under the Kádár regime the most positively, in opposition to the people of Budapest, who were more likely to think that Hungarians live better today than before the regime change (41% vs. 47%).

Graph 1. Public opinion about the living standards under the Kádár regime (pre-1990)



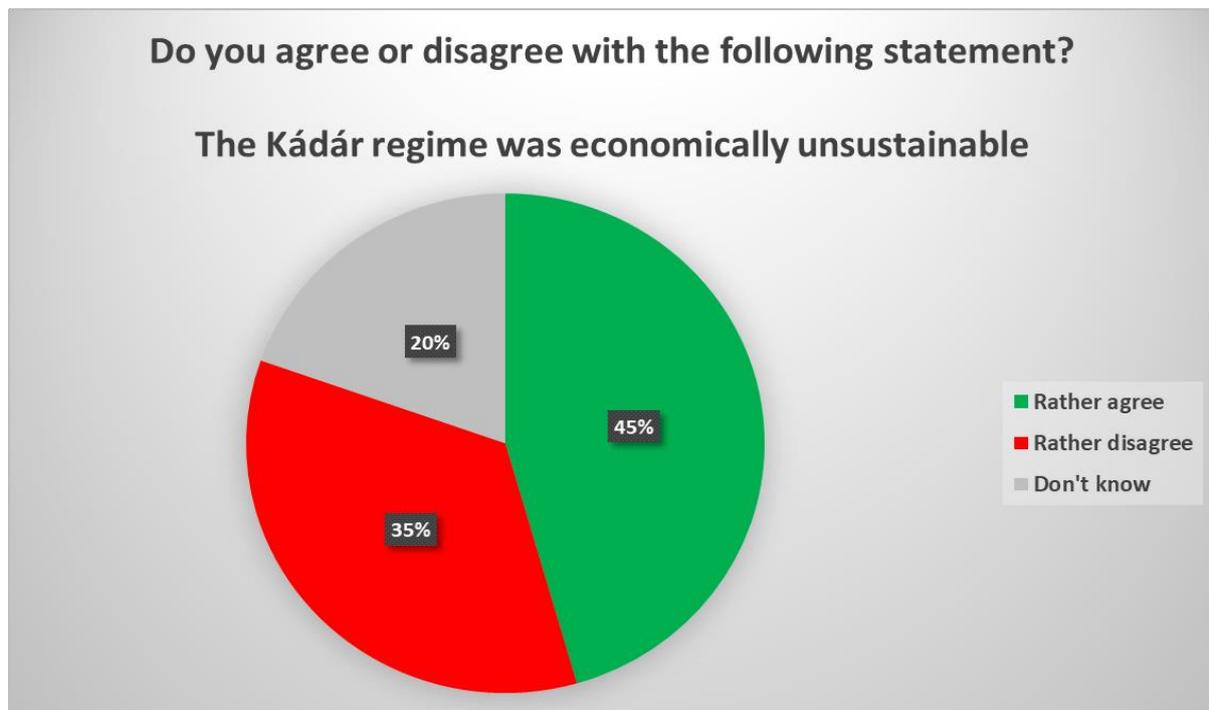
Compared to the previous question, there were even more respondents (61%) who said that the conditions for individual financial prosperity were more favorable under the Kádár regime. The majority of all voter groups agreed with the statement, even more than half (52%) of pro-government voters believed that the opportunity for material prosperity was fundamentally open before the regime change. As previously, the supporters of MSZP (78%) and DK (75%) were the most positive about the individual prosperity provided by the socialist era. Age is also crucial: while only 39 percent of the youngest (under 30) believed that people had the chance to prosper in the pre-1990 system, the same proportion was 74 percent among people over 60.

It is also worth noting that almost two-thirds of Hungarians (63%) said that there was predictable order and social peace under the Kádár regime, and only every fourth respondent rejected this opinion. The fact that, in addition to the statements about living standards and prosperity, the respondents agreed with this answer to the greatest extent provides important information about the thinking of Hungarian society about the Kádár era. Even the majority of Fidesz voters (54%) shared this view, but the vast majority of other voter groups also gave positive responses. There is a widespread consensus among MSZP voters (84%) that there was order and social peace in Kádár's time, and to a somewhat lesser extent, but many DK voters (74%) and even the undecideds think similarly (64%).

## The main disadvantages of the Kádár era: economic unsustainability, the requirement of ideological reliability

While many people say that the majority lived better in the Kádár era than in the decades after the regime change, the relative majority is also aware that the pre-1990 system was economically unsustainable (Graph 2). 45 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that the Kádár regime was economically unsustainable, while only a rough third of respondents (35%) had no doubts about the long-term viability of the socialist economy, financed partly by Western loans.

Graph 2. Public opinion about the economic sustainability of the Kádár regime



Voters of the liberal Momentum party are more likely to believe (56%) that, despite attempts at economic reform, the Kádár system was economically unsustainable, and not surprisingly, a majority of pro-government voters (53%) also saw the period as an economic dead end. Supporters of MSZP (49%) and DK (44%) believe the most that the economic policy of the Kádár era was sustainable – but even among them there is no absolute majority for this opinion.

**Hungarians clearly see the fact that mainly those who were on good terms with the regime were able to advance professionally as a negative feature of the communist system.** According to the majority of the respondents (54%), those who did not conform to the system in Hungary before 1990 experienced disadvantages, while 29 percent took an

opposing view. The majority of Fidesz voters (62%) share the opinion that the primary condition for career building before the regime change was ideological/political reliability. The undecideds (52%), Jobbik (51%) and Momentum (57%) voters also agree with this statement. In contrast, opinions are balanced among DK voters (47% vs. 46%), and those who said that it was not that important to be ideologically reliable for attaining important positions and for overall career progression were in majority only among the supporters of the Hungarian Socialist Party (41% vs. 55%).

### **According to the majority of Hungarians, life was better before the regime change**

In 2020, the majority of Hungarians (52%) believe that life under the Kádár regime was better overall than in the decades after the change of regime. In contrast, only a narrow third of respondents (31%) thought that life was worse under Kádár than in the period since 1990.

Even among Fidesz voters, the general perception of the Kádár regime is balanced: almost exactly the same share (43%) think it was better under Kádár as those who think that the overall quality of life in Hungary has improved since 1990 (41%). Apart from Fidesz voters, there is an absolute majority among the supporters of every party with more than 5 percent of vote share in polls for the statement that life was better overall under the Kádár regime.

### **Primarily Fidesz voters think that the hopes of the regime change have been realized**

**When we asked the respondents about what hopes related to the regime change have been realized in the decades after the change of regime, market-based capitalism came first (54%), just before freedom of speech (51%) and an expanding labor market (50%).** In addition, there was only one case when the positive answers were in majority: the implementation of free and fair elections (48% vs. 41%). Regarding the other cases, Hungarians assessed the change of regime more negatively. **According to the Hungarian society, the two biggest failures of the regime change have been the increasing social inequalities and widespread corruption.**

**Fidesz voters believe the most that a well-functioning market economy was realized after 1990.** Exactly two-thirds (66%) of pro-government voters supported this opinion, but Momentum voters (57%) had a similar, above-average view. Among MSZP (48% vs. 48%) and DK (45% vs. 41%) voters, we see roughly two camps of equal size.

**Fidesz supporters also think that anyone can express any opinion without consequences since the change of regime in Hungary.** 69 percent of pro-government voters believe that there has been freedom of speech in Hungary since 1990, and only every fifth pro-government voter (20%) was contrary to this view. The opposition voters, on the other hand, have much more negative views. The more skeptical views among current opposition voters about freedom of speech can presumably be explained by their negative experiences of the last ten years.

**Regarding job creation, pro-government voters also seem to be the most satisfied group with the balance sheet of the three decades of Hungarian democracy.** Sixty-three percent of Fidesz voters said that more jobs have been created in the country since the regime change, despite the fact that in the years following 1990, masses lost their jobs, mainly due to the collapse of the Hungarian industry. **Furthermore, pro-government voters have a good opinion on the implementation of free and fair elections, with two-thirds (68%) saying that one of the basic conditions for fair democracies was established well with the change of regime.** However, all groups outside the Fidesz camp tend to think that on the whole, free and fair elections have not been achieved. Again, this may presumably be explained by the post-2010 Fidesz vs. opposition cleavage, and the fact that opposition voters are critical of the new electoral law passed in 2011, and have serious doubts about the fairness of domestic elections that have taken place since then.

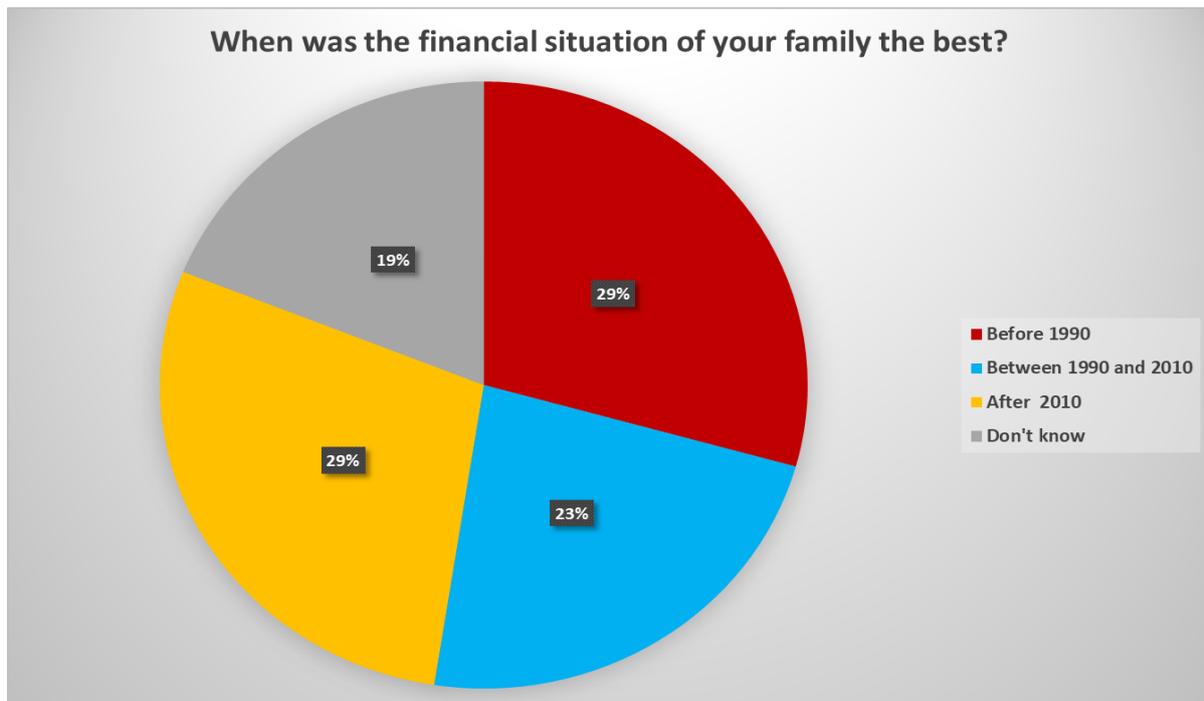
**Only the relative majority of Fidesz voters (49% vs. 41%) think that Hungary is a more equal country than in 1990 and that social inequalities have decreased since then.** On the other hand, opposition voters have a bleaker opinion on the issue. 39 percent of the Momentum camp agreed with the statement, while among MSZP (35%), DK (29%), and especially Jobbik supporters (27%), those who say that the society has become more egalitarian in the last 30 years are in clear minority.

**There was a cross-party consensus only on one issue when we asked about the results of the regime change: according to the Hungarians, corruption has become more widespread since the fall of the Kádár regime.** Among Fidesz voters, this position attained only a narrow majority (47% vs. 39%), but the opinion of the opposition is quite overwhelming: 68 percent of DK, 73 percent of Jobbik, three-quarters of Momentum (75%) and 80 percent of MSZP voters believe that the level of corruption has worsened over the past thirty years. Nearly two-thirds of the undecideds also tend to agree with opposition voters. Once again, it is worth emphasizing that the severely negative perception of corruption under the post-2010 Orbán governments may also leave a deep impact on the opinions about the entire post-regime change period.

**Fidesz voters consider the post-2010 Orbán government a golden age for their families, while opposition voters prefer either the Kádár era or the period between 1990 and 2010**

The exact same number of people chose the Kádár regime as the Orbán regime when we asked the respondents to pick the period in which they thought their own family was in the best financial situation: 29 percent of Hungarian society lived in the best material circumstances in the period before 1990, while the same number felt this to best apply to the years after 2010 (Graph 3). The twenty years after the regime change was the most favorable period financially for the families of 23 percent.

Graph 3. Public assessment of different periods in terms of the financial situation of own family



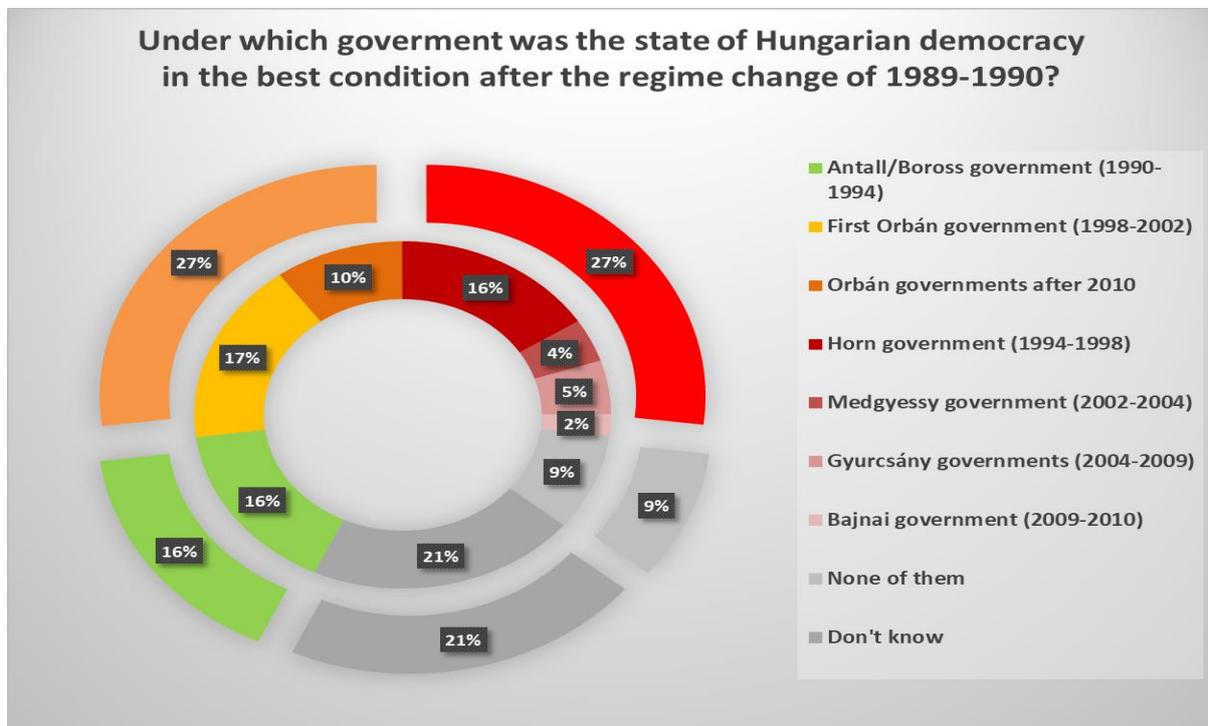
**On the issue of family livelihood, party affiliation is crucial:** almost two-thirds of Fidesz voters marked the years after 2010 (fully confirming the results of our “Orbán10” research regarding the economic legitimacy of Fidesz), while the Kádár era and the two decades after the regime change were the most financially favorable periods for only 12 to 14 percent of pro-government voters. Almost the same number of MSZP and DK supporters looked back on the Kádár era and the twenty years after the change of regime as the most favorable period for the financial situation of their families, but almost none of them chose the 10 years of the Orbán regime. Many Momentum voters (mostly young, urban liberals) could not answer the question, but among those who did, the Kádár era (33%) and the period between 1990 and 2010 (32%) were the most common answers. At the same time, most of the Jobbik voters (and undecideds) replied that it was the best for their families in the Kádár regime.

**Both the Kádár era (34%) and the ten years of the Orbán regime (31%) seem to be more of a golden age for the less educated.** The higher the qualifications of the respondents, the less often these two periods appear in the responses - in parallel, the more educated voters chose the period between 1990 and 2010 in a slightly higher proportion. The breakdown by type of settlement confirms the results of the Orbán10 research: the assessment of the ten years of the Orbán government is the most positive in the villages.

## The quality of democracy under right-wing and left-wing governments

When we asked the respondents to pick the government under which the state of Hungarian democracy was the best since the regime change, as many people (27% vs. 27%) nominated one of the MSZP governments as Viktor Orbán's governments (Graph 4). Overall, the first three freely elected governments were chosen within the margin of error: the state of democracy in Hungary under the governments led by József Antall and Péter Boross (1990-1994), the Horn government (1994-1998) and the first Orbán government (1998-2002) were chosen as the best by 16-17 percent of respondents. A good third of Hungarians do not feel close to any government after the regime change, or do not have a strong opinion on the development of the quality of democracy in the last three decades.

Graph 4. Public opinion about the quality of democracy under Hungarian governments since 1990



The shift of pro-government voters' views towards the 1998-2002 era is striking. Nostalgia for the first Orbán government among conservative voters is significant. According to four out of ten Fidesz voters, democracy was in the best condition in Hungary between 1998 and 2002. However, it is also worth mentioning that according to 11 percent of pro-government voters, the quality of democracy was the best in Hungary under József Antall, while a further 7 percent chose the socialist Gyula Horn's era.

It is not surprising that the cult of Gyula Horn is the strongest among the voters of MSZP: four out of ten socialist supporters chose the period between 1994 and 1998,

and a further 14 percent mentioned Péter Medgyessy's government (2002-2004), while the 27 percent for the Antall government is also noteworthy. The 5-year reign of Ferenc Gyurcsány (2004-2009) was left virtually unmentioned by almost every current MSZP voter. **According to a fifth of DK voters, the governments of their party's president (Gyurcsány) between 2004 and 2009 was the heyday of democracy, but there are even more people in the DK camp who think that the period of Gyula Horn in power was the benchmark (33%).** In addition, the heritage of Antall is valued even among some DK voters: 18 percent of them believed that democracy in Hungary was in the best state between 1990 and 1994.

**There is also a strong nostalgia for the conservative Antall government among Jobbik voters, with 29 percent opting for this period,** but Fidesz governments are scarcely considered to have been favorable for democracy among Jobbik supporters, not even the generally more popular 1998-2002 cycle. **The syncretic party character of Momentum is well illustrated by the fact that there are enthusiastic supporters of each era among its voters:** 23-23 percent chose Gyula Horn and József Antall, and a further 10 percent chose the first Orbán government.

The older age groups tend to choose the various Orbán governments. The same trend can be seen in the case of socialist governments: senior citizens were more likely to pick a left-wing cabinet. **It is also important to point out that nearly half of the under-30s (48%) could not pick any government, indicating a lack of political interest, a serious crisis of confidence and a lack of credibility on their part against the political elite of the post-regime change period.**

**Compared to the joint research of Policy Solutions and FES in 2018, it is striking how much the public perception of the System of National Cooperation (the post-2010 Orbán era) has worsened in terms of the state of democracy in just two years.** In 2018, 22 percent of those surveyed nominated the post-2010 Orbán governments, a proportion that has more than halved since then. At the same time, nostalgia for the first Orbán government grew, with almost twice as many electing the former center-right coalition government now as two years ago. At the same time, it is also spectacular that the popularity of the conservative cabinet led by József Antall has also increased significantly in the last two years (9% vs. 16%). These changes are mainly due to the fact that when it comes to democracy, current Fidesz voters consider the period of the civic conservative Antall government or the first Orbán government, which also represented the moderate conservative values of Antall (at least in rhetoric) between 1998-2002, to be much more desirable than before. There are only minor changes in the perception of left-wing governments. Of these, it is worth noting that the cabinet headed by Gyula Horn was now chosen by four percentage points more as the best period for Hungarian democracy than two years ago.

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