Conference Name: Annual Conference on Management Business, and Economics, 20-22 October 2026, Bangkok
Conference Dates: 20-Oct-2026 to 22-Oct-2026
Conference Venue: Asian Institute of Technology Conference Center, Bangkok, Thailand
Appears in: PUPIL: International Journal of Teaching, Education and Learning (ISSN 2457-0648)
Publication year: 2026

Roland A. Csizmazia, 2026

Volume 2026, pp. 340-341
DOI- https://doi.org/10.20319/ictel.2026.340341
This paper can be cited as: Csizmazia, R.A. (2026). Control Without Resiliece: The Collapse of Hungary's Electoral Autocracy, 2022–2026. Annual Conference on Management Business, and Economics, 20-22 October 2026, Bangkok. Proceedings of Teaching & Education Research Association (TERA), 2026, 340-341

CONTROL WITHOUT RESILIECE: THE COLLAPSE OF HUNGARY'S ELECTORAL AUTOCRACY, 2022–2026

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Abstract

Between 2010 and 2022, Hungary's Fidesz government constructed one of the most durable electoral-authoritarian architectures in the European Union, combining electoral engineering, media capture, judicial capture, and an EU-funded patronage economy. In April 2026, that architecture collapsed at the ballot box. This paper argues that the regime's downfall was not the product of three unrelated shocks — a fiscal and EU-funding crisis, a domestic legitimacy scandal, and a foreign-policy crisis tied to the war in Ukraine — but of a single underlying mechanism: each pillar of the regime's institutional control had been built by displacing risk onto a resource the regime did not itself control, whether EU budgetary decisions, the credibility of an absolutist ideological claim, or the tolerance of a domestic electorate with a specific historical memory. When these external contingencies moved against the regime within a compressed window, control-based durability offered no protection. The paper develops this argument as a modification to existing accounts of electoral-authoritarian resilience, which explain institutional entrenchment well but say comparatively little about the conditions under which such entrenchment becomes brittle.

Keywords:
Electoral Authoritarianism, Democratic Backsliding, Hungary, Fidesz, Regime Collapse, EU Conditionality