

Change after 30 Years? Evaluation of the General Election in South Africa¹

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Abstract:

The South African people elected a new parliament and new provincial legislation on 29 May 2024. The election seemed to be a historical one: Nelson Mandela's party, the African National Congress (ANC), is less and less able to attract South African voters. Firstly, the municipal election of 2021 showed decreased support (less than 50 per cent) for South Africa's dominant party, secondly, the cooperation of liberal and right-wing parties earned the attention from the voters. Finally, former head of state, Jacob Zuma, made his comeback.

This unusual situation made the dethronisation of ANC possible. However, after 29 May, neither the ANC, nor the Multi-Party Charter, a.k.a. MPC (electoral alliance of these parties: Action South Africa – ActionSA, African Christian Democratic Party – ACDP, Democratic Alliance – DA, Inkatha Freedom Party – IFP, Freedom Front Plus/Vryheidsfront Plus – FF Plus/VF Plus), nor the far-left opposition – Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) and uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) – could not achieve majority in the National Assembly. A Coalition is needed, otherwise, South Africa will not be able to work.

My article tries to make effort to explain the context and outcome of this current general election. A normative analysis of programs and goals. South Africa's economic and social state suffers from a serious level of inefficiency that can be turned into success by decentralisation of public administration, reform cultural and linguistic rights, the exploitation of the competitive advantage of South Africa's provinces.

Keywords:

ANC; far-left; general election; MPC; South African politics.

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1. Introduction

The South African nation is divided by ethnic, lingual, and financial background of its citizens. An English person from the Western Cape (South Africa's richest province) can be barely compared to a Xhosa citizen from the Eastern Cape (South Africa's poorest province). The first one might live in a respectable area in Cape Town; the second one is suffering from a lack of sufficient public services, the good education background, or a decent living condition in general. However, since they are living in the same country, their perceptions and preferences will almost never meet in this universe, as the current general election has proven it.

Although many similarities can be explored in their mind-set, and the expectations connected to the current general election, which showed many similarities with the first democratic one in 1994: South African people, who registered to vote, require straight answers to their questions about their future. The quasi one-party-state of the apartheid era (1948–1994) led by the National Party seemed to be replaced by the dominance of the African National Congress (ANC), since Nelson Mandela's party created a program that received huge support from the black majority and won all the general elections. For this reason, Seekings's concerns became real (Seekings, 1997, pp. 303–306).

As it is known, the ANC lost the majority of seats in the National Assembly (lower house) of the South African Parliament. An overview of 1) the South African electoral system and 2) the most important political parties is presented in the subsections below.

1.1. The South African Electoral System

The South African Parliament is a bicameral legislative body in Cape Town. The National Assembly (lower house) has 400 seats: 200 mandates are elected from the national list, and 200 other mandates are from the provincial lists. General elections are held every 5 years, and the system is in favour of small and micro parties, since there is no minimum threshold (Mattes and Southall, 2010, p. 51; Government of South Africa, 1996, pp. 1269–1273, 1331.). The core of legislation is carried out in this chamber.

The Senate is the upper house. All 9 provinces delegate 10–10 representatives. To pass an act, the National Assembly needs the accordance of the Senate; thereafter, its promulgation. (Government of South Africa, 1996, p. 1331). The provincial legislatures, which are elected at the same time, have 30–80 representatives. (Government of South Africa, 1996 pp. 1312–1313.) The majority of representatives in the National Assembly elect the president of the Republic of South Africa, and in the provincial legislatures, the own premier (Government of South Africa, 1996, pp. 1323–1324).

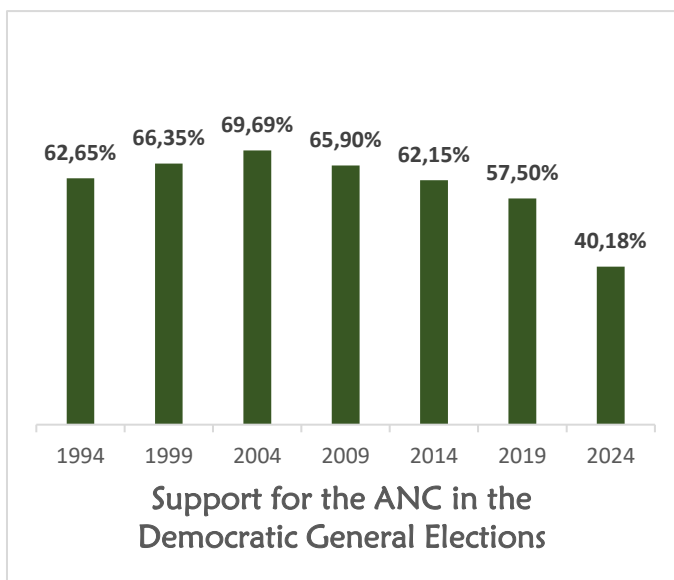
As it was mentioned above, the lack of a minimum threshold helps to get the representation of parties without significant support, although it must be concluded that the winning party always gains the key role when it comes to the issue of forming

government. Hence, the winner can show a form of generosity, for example, the ANC co-operated with the micro party GOOD (former left-leaning members of the DA), which seems to be appealing to the image of a functioning democracy.

1.2. The Main Parties

This subsection introduces the reader to the South African political parties and their main programs. The ANC is the most important one; from 1994 until 2024, it was the dominant and hegemonic one. Its partners are the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) (Cedras, 2021). However, it must be pointed out that the ANC approved members from the former apartheid ruling party: the New National Party decided to dissolve itself and merge into the ANC collectively (Schulz-Herzenberg, 2005, pp. 166–186). This institution is “crossing the floor.” All parliamentary systems in British tradition have this opportunity.

The ANC implemented policies that caused controversies in South African politics. Firstly, Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act (Republic of South Africa, 2003), and secondly the Constitution was modified to make possible the land expropriation without compensation (Kloppers and Pienaar, 2014). In this case, the far-left EFF supported the ANC’s bill; hence, two-thirds of the representatives of the National Assembly changed the Constitution.



The ANC’s support reached its peak during Thabo Mbeki’s presidency. The South African economy received credits from international banks in the second half of the 1990s. Mbeki could exploit his opportunities; hence, the government passed legal norms in favour of the black population. From the beginning of Zuma’s presidency, the ANC’s support started to decline (Election Results on the Internet, 2019; Toit and de Jager, 2015; Haddad, 2024).

Opponents of the ANC’s policies are coming from the centre-right and far-left. The liberal and right-wing opponents have very different backgrounds. The DA, which is a liberal party, became a descendant of the progressive opposition parties of the apartheid era. The FF Plus/ VF Plus, a party that defends Afrikaner interests, e.g., Cape autonomy,



linguistic rights of Afrikaans, and protection of land owned by white smallholder farmers, is a mixture of the Conservative Party (an opposition party to the change in 1990–1994) and Afrikaner interest groups. (Southern, 2011). Paradoxically, the cooperation agreement that was initiated by this last small party. Corné Mulder took contact with the DA after the municipal elections in 2021, when the ANC could receive somewhat more than 45 percent of all votes. Other culturally right-wing parties, like the conservative and Zulu nationalist IFP, and the economically libertarian ActionSA signed a cooperation that was given the name Moonshot Pact. In August 2023, the popular DA federal leader John Steenhuisen announced this agreement. Microparties, like the United Independent Movement (UIM) and the Spectrum Nationalist Party (SNP), furthermore, the Independent South African National Civic Organisation (SANCO), which is an NGO, also engaged themselves with the change (Pillay, 2023). On 7 October 2023, the ACDP entered the coalition as a party with a presence in the National Assembly and municipalities (ActionSA, 2023). Finally, other micro parties also entered into this electoral coalition, namely the United Christian Democratic Party (UCDP), the Ekhetu People's Party (EPP), and the Unemployed National Party (UNP). This coalition of 11 forces signed the Multi-Party Charter (MPC). The president was not named by them, however, the DA is the strongest party in this coalition; hence, Steenhuisen had the highest chances. Sadly, South African society is not as colour blind as the liberals, and the fact that Steenhuisen is a white man from a middle-class family with a Dutch-sounding name, means disadvantage (Thornycroft and Farmer, 2024; Gray, 2024).

The MPC created a program that has the following priorities: 1. Growing the economy and creating jobs; 2. Ending load shedding and achieving energy security; 3. Achieving law and order that combats crime, corruption and drugs; 4. Ensuring quality education that delivers opportunities for all; 5. Delivering basic services to all through high quality infrastructure; 6. Building a professional public service that delivers to all, and ending cadre deployment; 7. Ensuring quality healthcare for all within a caring healthcare system; and 8. Building a social relief framework for South African households living in poverty. Social democratic and liberal elements are represented in these sections. The governing principles are based on classical liberal values like decentralisation, equality, and free-market economy: 1. The South African Constitution, the rule of law, and equality before the law; 2. Decentralising power to the lowest effective level of government; 3. Accountable, transparent government with zero tolerance for corruption; 4. Capable government that spends public money efficiently to deliver quality services to all; 5. Caring government that puts people first and prioritizes the poor; 6. An open market economy; 7. Policies guided by evidence that they produce positive results for society; and 8. Redress our unjust past by promoting non-racialism and unity in our diversity (ActionSA et al., 2023). The public policy specialists of this MPC program were seeking to find common grounds, which can provide a sufficient governance for the very heterogeneous nation of South Africa.

Last but not least, let us examine what the far-left planned to deliver to the South African citizens. The EFF created by Julius Malema (among EFF members: Command-in-Chief, a.k.a. CIC Malema) in 2013 by the split of young radical members of the ANC Youth League, is a Black nationalist and Marxist party. Since the socialist elements (nationalisation, racial quotas) are mixed up with Pan Africanism, populism, and the propagation of ‘white guilt’ by hate speech, Malema and his companions might be easily identified as some neofascist group (Satgar, 2019). Malema’s most prominent voters are coming from the “second lost generation”: These young people belong to the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) population. In 2022, approximately 17,100,000 people from the age group 15–60 years were classified as NEET (Khuluvhe and Ganyaupfu, 2023, p. 4). Malema converts their despair and anger into mandates, and the fact must be pointed out that his effect is transnational: His violent statements are popular across Africa (Mbetse, 2015). The members of the EFF Parliamentary Group frequently and vehemently attack the ANC, scandalous events in the National Assembly are usually connected to their activities (Fölscher et al., 2021). Furthermore, Malema considers Zimbabwe a positive example and, in his opinion, Mugabe was a “hero of the people.” (Karrim, 2019).

Analysing the South African far-left, the most spectacular event of the current general election was Jacob Zuma’s comeback. Zuma, who is an uneducated person, a former member of the resistance against the apartheid, a president of the republic who must have to resigned because of his corruption, shook up the South African politics. His part, the uMKhonto weSizwe (MK, in English: Spear of the Nation) has overwhelmingly similar goals like the EFF (transformative change, challenging economic disparity), although there was a considerable exception: Malema’s team is a Black nationalist party, while Zuma portrayed himself as a proud Zulu. Zuma exploited the nostalgia of the elderly and disappointed poor black people by choosing this party that is named after the ANC’s former paramilitary organisation (MK Party – uMKhonto weSizwe, 2024; Rapanyane, 2021). The 82-year-old politician, who has four polygamous wives, was barred by the Constitutional Court from running for parliament (Dean and McKenzie, 2024).

The cooperation of Malema and Zuma was not carried out, despite all the similarities. On the other hand, it can be concluded, that the antagonisms of the most prominent parties are not able to create a frame, where the centre-right MPC could cooperate with Malema and Zuma purely against the formation of a new ANC government led by Cyril Ramaphosa.

2. The General Election

On 29 May, 27,672,364 registered South African voters (66 per cent voter turnout) visited the voter stations nationwide. This high number is almost half of the total

population (59, 89 million people). The opinion polling data made sure that voters are in a historical situation, when the ANC's support did not reach 40 per cent, and the MPC enjoyed more than 30 per cent: The last opinion poll made by Atlasintel between 25–28 May predicted for the ANC 37.3 per cent, for the MPC (DA – 19.7 per cent, FFP – 3.1 per cent, ActionSA – 2.5 per cent, IFP – 2.5 per cent, ACDP – 0.8 per cent) all together 28.6 per cent, and the far-left parties could calculate more than 10 per cent, as for the MK 14.3 per cent and for the EFF 11.6 per cent was calculated (Haddad, 2024; Atlasintel, 2024, p. 7).

The primary result came very slowly: People were staning in the queue later than the official closing (19.00), around 21.00 meant the end. Ballot counting began on 30 May and lasted until 1 June. Meanwhile, the election was held, public services performed occasionally quite badly, and a box disappeared, but the legality of this election was not challenged by the participants (Gadzo and Mohamed, 2024).

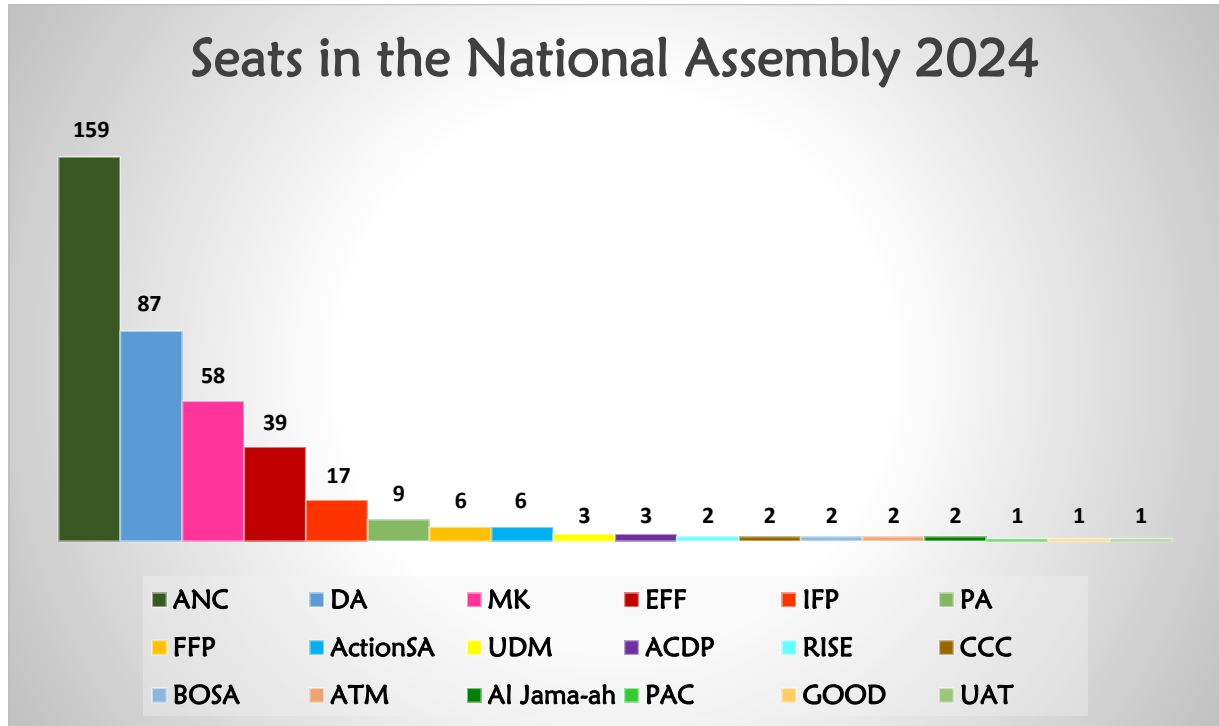
Analysts, media staff, and political scientists were sharing their observations with the public during the voting and ballot counting. They were eager to express the emotional side of this general election, plenty of them compared this one to the general elections in 1994. However, wishful thinking and future plans were present among the politicians too. From this point of view, Malema exploited the opportunity to make a show, when he was wearing a pro-Palestine scarf on 29 May (Ngcobo, 2024).

Around noon of 30 May the first results came into the open. The DA and the EFF performed worse than expected; the ANC was above 40 per cent. Practically, the ruling dominant party did not really fall under 40 per cent but the glory of the old days passed forever. At the end, only Zuma's MK was able to surprise the public, since they achieved an enormous breakthrough in KwaZulu-Natal province. The man who is “one of us” became the most prominent and credible representative of Zulu nationalism.

Besides the considerable change in the province with Zulu majority, other provinces remained the same when it came to observing political developments. Western Cape is the high castle of South African liberalism; the DA gained a majority. Other provinces were voting in favour of the ANC. Surprisingly, the Afrikaans-speaking Coloured population did not stand up for the MPC, however, the unfair treatment of their language done by Blade Nzimande (South African Communist Party, Minister of Higher Education, Science and Technology) could be a good reason for that.

The ANC list reached its most miserable support of 40.18%. It was enough for 159 seats in the National Assembly. No ANC government is possible without a coalition partner. The DA became the second in this contest with 21.81%, the liberals got 87 mandates. The allied parties of DA gained the following support: IFP – 3.85% and 17 seats, FFP – 1.36% and 6 seats, ActionSA – 1.2% and 6 seats, ACDP – 0.6% and 3 seats; hence, the MPC list did not perform much better than the members in 2019, the number of seats in the National Assembly grew from 112 to 119. Neither the far-left has reason to be happy, as the EFF gained only 9.52% of votes and 39 of seats in the National

Assembly, and Zuma’s MK received 14.58% of votes and 58 seats. Gayton McKenzie’s Patriotic Alliance (PA) became a nationwide small party: 2.06 per cent of support and 9 seats in the National Assembly. It seems like a promising performance.



Not a single party could achieve a majority (201 seats) in the National Assembly (400 seats). The ANC remained the dominant party (159 seats), the centre-right MPC (119) is unable to form a government, so does a cooperation of far-left with 97 seats (MK – 58 seats, EFF 39 seats). However, the ANC’s pro-Palestinian actions are in favour of Al Jama-ah (Congregation) party that represents “Islamic values,” and the “transformation” of society is appealing to the African Transformation Movement (ATM) and GOOD (former left-leaning members of DA) or the Pan-African Congress (PAC). The small parties have low representation (Results Dashboard, 2024).

3. Looking for a Junior Partner

The outcome of this general election was not unpredictable for the ANC. There must be organised some kind of negotiation “behind the scene.” The possible coalitions will be explained in this section. There are two ways but only one is operable. The situation is very similar to the German one in 2021 when the Social Democratic Party (SPD) was predicted to win the Bundestag election, and there was a frightening imagination about the coalition of SPD – The Greens – The Left. Voices from the mainstream media encouraged the SPD to make an agreement with The Greens and the Free Democratic Party, which has been leading coalition of Germany since 2021.

John Steenhuisen called a possible government by an ANC-EFF coalition the “doomsday coalition.” After Zuma’s re-entry into South African politics the federal leader of liberals added the MK to this coalition (Bavier, 2024). Furthermore, he never held the PA trustworthy, but rather a party that has ties to the ANC (Mahlati, 2023). A majority of 256 or 265 seats means a comfortable majority, 267 representatives can change the constitution. In the case of the implementation of a far-left policy, this coalition could count on the support of minor left-leaning and left-wing parties like GOOD and PAC. However, Steenhuisen’s most negative prediction cannot work for personal reasons: President Ramaphosa had Malema led out of the National Assembly more times; previously, Ramaphosa was one of those who expelled Malema from the ANC (Imray, 2024; Mange, 2024). A majority government would be somewhat more possible with Zuma’s MK. According to this outcome, 217 representatives mean a majority, but Ramaphosa should go. Zuma did forget nothing and forgave nothing. Ramaphosa played key role in Zuma’s resignation in 2018 (Dean and McKenzie, 2024).

A coalition government must be acceptable to external powers. A government led by left and far-left parties would create a “New Zimbabwe” in the domestic economy: confiscation of land owned by white farmers, nationalization of firms owned by whites and expelling them abroad means a straight way to bankruptcy and international isolation. Furthermore, the pro-Palestinian stance of South African foreign policy (ICJ decision about the invasion of Gaza that was called genocide) caused hostility towards Pretoria in the Western world (Horne, 2024; Kachroo, 2024). These tasks must be solved if South Africa intends to preserve the positive image of Mandela’s “Rainbow Nation” respectable position in the international politics in general. An ANC-EFF-MK government could not provide positive outcome, for this reason, let us see the only viable option.

The coalition with the DA is widely welcomed by the international public. A move into the centre was advised by the ANC-leadership to the president (Rose and Pilling, 2024). Ramaphosa is eager to create a coalition with the liberals and the IFP. This coalition means 263 seats in the National Assembly. The idea has opponents in the ANC, since there are members of far-left orientation charged with corruption (Pilling and Rose, 2024). The negotiations between the ANC and DA began on 3 June. On the one hand, a common government with the DA and the IFP is the primary option for the ANC. On the other hand, Steenhuisen is eager to avoid an ANC-MK or ANC-EFF “doomsday coalition.” The COSATU still opposes a coalition and favours a supply-and-confidence accord (Bartlett, 2024; Sguazzin, 2024; Thukwana, 2024).

The negotiations between the DA, EFF and MK belong to the category of an impossible outcome. There are huge contradictions and antagonisms in their programs and aims. As a result of the ANC-DA negotiations, the ActionSA left the MPC and cut its ties to all members (Nkosi and Sithole, 2024). There are high chances that the DA and the AFP will drop the two openly right-wing partners, the FFP and the ACDP.

4. The Program

This section is about to elaborate on a program that could mean a minimum to the future governing parties. As it was previously written above, there are many key elements that cause hardship in the negotiation process.

Firstly, the racial quotas. These policies, predominantly connected to the Black Economic Empowerment, were introduced by the ANC. This program guaranteed top jobs for loyal and influential ANC members or their circles. The voters of the IFP were also positively affected by these implemented norms, since they are overwhelmingly Zulu people. The DA must be ready to make a compromise on this issue.

The harmful effects of racial quotas cannot be underestimated. Quotas were created as affirmative actions to help the historically disadvantaged people (Black people, Coloureds, Indians). The apartheid system was not able to work, since it needed the contribution of black people, otherwise, sectors of the South African economy could have been unable to operate (Burger et al., 2016, pp. 2–7). Nowadays, young and educated white people are leaving the country. If this tendency does not stop, the domestic economy is going to suffer from a lack of capable people (Griffiths and Prozesky, 2010, pp. 27–29).

The social programs must be also cut. The reliefs for the poor never eggs anybody to find a job, the individual remains in a vicious circle: the jobless who receives a paycheck will not be motivated to change their own lives, and this lifestyle will be just more favourable for many people. “[...] as a result of subsidizing individuals because they are poor, there will be more poverty” (Hoppe, 2007, p. 98).

For the exact same reasons, land expropriation without compensation must be smashed by government policies. South Africa’s agriculture is widely known for its prime quality products, especially the South African grape and wine. These products belong to the global supply chain. On the other hand, the uncertain situation causes a lack of investment of white farmers (Xaba, 2020, pp. 89-90). By nationalising and redistributing of vineyards, the farm economies will be bankrupt. Here, in the former Eastern Bloc, the people have very negative experiences from the socialist past. Hopefully, the openly anti-socialist parties of the future coalition will be able to convince the ANC.

Conclusion

This South African general election can be called historical not only because of its results. The outcome will be a coalition government, since the ANC needs an allied parliamentary group.



South Africa's further development depends on the junior partner. The participation of far-left parties in the government can accelerate the so-called "transformation," which leads to the expropriation of land and nationalisation of white-owned firms. In this case South Africa will be a "second Zimbabwe": Robert Mugabe, who was the quasi-dictator of that country, implemented all these policies. The outcome was tragic, since the economy bankrupted, and the educated, predominantly white people left the country. Hence, an ANC-MK or ANC-MK-EFF coalition can dramatically ruin South Africa's international reputation.

As it is known, the ANC makes the first effort to form government with the DA and the IFP. The DA is a supporter of non-racialist policies and free-market economy. For this reason, those policies, which are based on the Black Economic Empowerment Act in 2003, must be – at least partially – withdrawn. This step-to-centre can cause distraction among staunch left-wing and far-left wing members of the Tripartite Alliance.

With the help of the centrist-liberal DA and conservative IFP, a comfortable majority can be established in the National Assembly (lower house) and in the nine provincial legislations, which can secure the government's majority in the Senate. Furthermore, the international reputation of Africa's most important power will be improved.

As a conclusion can be drawn, the government formation in South Africa will have long-lasting effects on international politics and global supply chains. Only one option is viable.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declares that she has no known competing or financial interests in the production and publication of this study.

Notes on Contributor

László Pálfi defended his PhD in History in December 2022 at the Eötvös Loránd University. He studied History BA (2012-2015) and History MA (2015-2017) at the Eötvös Loránd University, and he also obtained a MSc degree in Public Policy and Management (2020) at the Corvinus University of Budapest. He wrote his thesis about the history of German-Namibian international relations from the 1840s to 2021. As a lecturer, he held courses about colonialism, German history and the topic of racial inequality. As an external researcher, he has been working for the Pilecki Institute since May 2019.

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