



AUSTRIAN INSTITUTE FOR
EUROPEAN AND SECURITY POLICY

Nr. 2026/3

Living with the Aftermath of Orbánism

Hungary's Struggle to Rebuild the State

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April 2026

AIIES COMMENT

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Introduction

Hungary's 2026 parliamentary election marks a decisive political turning point, as Péter Magyar and his Tisza movement removed Viktor Orbán from power after sixteen years of rule. This outcome is widely interpreted as both a major domestic shift in a positive direction and a development with broader European implications.^{1,2}

The Tisza Party secured 141 seats in the 199-member National Assembly, exceeding earlier projections and achieving the two-thirds supermajority required for constitutional reform.³ This creates a rare institutional opportunity to reverse previous governance reforms and realign Hungary with the European Union. However, dismantling the deeply entrenched political and economic system built under Orbán is expected to be complex and gradual rather than immediate.⁴

The Entrenchment of "Orbánism"

During his time in office, Orbán developed a highly centralized governance model often described as an "illiberal democracy," characterized by weakened institutional checks and balances and strong executive control.⁵ This system was consolidated through sustained institutional restructuring and political control across multiple domains.

Following 2010, Orbán's parliamentary supermajority enabled the adoption of a new constitution and a systematic reshaping of Hungary's institutional framework. Electoral laws were redesigned in ways that strengthened long-term incumbency advantages and reduced the competitiveness of future elections.^{6,7}

Judicial reforms further weakened the separation of powers by increasing political influence over appointments and limiting constitutional oversight, raising sustained concerns about judicial independence.⁸ At the same time, changes to media regulation and ownership structures significantly reduced pluralism, consolidating influence among pro-government actors and limiting independent reporting.⁹

Electoral system reforms—including redistricting and structural changes—further tilted the political playing field in favor of the ruling party, contributing to long-term dominance.¹⁰ These cumulative changes led scholars and EU institutions to characterize Hungary as a hybrid regime in which elections persist, but democratic safeguards were weakened.¹¹ Political scientists often describe such systems as "competitive authoritarian" regimes, where formal democratic institutions exist but incumbents maintain structural advantages that limit genuine competition (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Why Péter Magyar was the turning point?

Despite its stability, the system built under Orbán faced increasing long-term pressures. Economic strain, inflation, and declining living standards gradually eroded the material basis of political support.¹² At the same time, perceptions of corruption and elite capture contributed to growing public dissatisfaction, particularly among previously loyal voters. Concerns about institutional decline and media control further weakened public trust, while Orbán's continued emphasis on geopolitical and ideological conflicts increasingly diverged from voters' everyday priorities, such as cost of living and decline in public services.¹³

This growing domestic dissatisfaction translated into record electoral mobilization on the 12th of April. Voter turnout reached approximately 79–80%, the highest since Hungary's democratic transition, reflecting both high political stakes and broad civic engagement.^{14,15} Magyar's success can be attributed to a combination of credibility, opposition unity, and strategic issue alignment rather than a fundamentally new ideological platform. A key factor was his background as an insider-turned-reformer, which enabled him to appeal to conservative and undecided voters who would not

traditionally support the opposition.¹⁶ This helped him break longstanding partisan loyalties. Equally important was the consolidation of the opposition through the Tisza Party, which transformed a fragmented political landscape into a competitive two-bloc contest.¹⁷ By contrast, previous opposition efforts had failed due to vote splitting. Magyar's campaign also focused on corruption, governance quality, and economic recovery—issues that directly reflected voter concerns about inflation.¹⁸ Meanwhile, Orbán's continued reliance on narratives of national sovereignty and migration proved less effective in a context where economic concerns dominated.¹⁹

Domestic Implications: Reform Potential and Constraints

Péter Magyar, and his Tisza movement, is expected to pursue a reform agenda aimed at restoring democratic institutions and addressing entrenched corruption. His programme is likely to focus on strengthening judicial independence, rebuilding checks and balances, and increasing transparency in public administration in order to reduce political influence over state institutions.²⁰ He is also expected to work toward restoring media pluralism by limiting concentrated ownership and political influence over the media sector, while improving accountability in public spending and tackling corruption linked to elite networks.²¹ In parallel, his policy direction is likely to prioritise so-

cio-economic stabilization, including efforts to reduce inflationary pressures, and redirect state resources away from politically connected interests. At the European level, he is expected to realign Hungary more closely with the European Union by cooperating on rule-of-law reforms and working toward the release of frozen EU funds, thereby restoring a more constructive relationship with EU institutions.²²

Magyar already announced a plan to form closer ties with Austria and other Central European countries to gain more leverage in Brussels.²³

Despite the scale of the electoral victory, dismantling “Orbánism” remains a significant challenge. Over sixteen years, political, judicial, and economic networks were deeply embedded within the state, limiting the speed and scope of reform. Over the past decade, significant parts of the Hungarian economy became closely intertwined with politically connected business elites linked to the system built under Viktor Orbán. These networks are particularly resilient to reform because they do not rely solely on formal institutions, but are sustained through longstanding relationships between political and economic actors. As a result, they can resist change through indirect mechanisms such as investment slowdown or capital reallocation, legal disputes that delay policy implementation, and informal influence over administrative decision-making processes. This makes them one of the most du-

erable components of the system, as their power is embedded in relationships rather than formal rules.²⁴ In addition, many of the institutional changes introduced under Orbán are constitutionally entrenched or embedded in supermajority-level legislation, meaning that any reversal requires not only political control, but also sustained legal restructuring and broad institutional coordination, which slows the pace of reform significantly.²⁵ At the same time, the post-election environment creates a further political challenge: while citizens may expect rapid improvements in areas such as corruption reduction, wages, and public services, structural reforms typically unfold slowly, creating a risk of early political frustration and backlash.²⁶ The central difficulty for Péter Magyar is therefore that he must use existing institutional mechanisms to dismantle a system that was deliberately designed to be resistant to such change, producing a persistent gap between formal political authority and the slower-moving realities of entrenched economic and institutional power.

Implications for the European Union

At the European level, Orbán's removal eliminated a key veto player and may improve policy coordination, particularly on rule-of-law enforcement and support for Ukraine.^{27,28}

Under Viktor Orbán, Hungary maintained comparatively close political and economic ties with Russia and frequently diverged

from broader EU consensus on Ukraine-related policies. Budapest often delayed or diluted collective EU decisions, particularly on sanctions and financial assistance, positioning itself as a consistent outlier within the bloc.²⁹

With the election of Péter Magyar, Hungary is expected to adopt a more cooperative and aligned stance within the European Union. Early signals suggest a shift toward supporting common EU positions on Ukraine, while still maintaining a pragmatic approach to economic relations and energy considerations.³⁰

This adjustment could have broader implications for EU cohesion. Hungary's previous role as a veto player complicated unified responses to Russia's war in Ukraine; a more aligned Hungarian government may therefore strengthen the EU's capacity to act collectively on foreign policy and security issues.³¹

The latter can be already seen by the success of EU recently approving a loan of 90 billion euro for Ukraine as Hungary no longer objected.³²

At the same time, analysts caution that structural dependencies—particularly in the energy sector—may limit how quickly Hungary can fully realign its foreign policy. Hungary remains significantly reliant on Russian energy imports, especially natural gas, which constrains the scope of immediate policy change.

Furthermore, EU–Hungary relations have been significantly shaped by rule-of-law disputes. Around €17–18 billion in EU funds remain frozen due to governance concerns.³³ Funds are tied to reforms in judicial independence, anti-corruption, and procurement systems.³⁴ Significant recovery funds remain blocked pending reform benchmarks.³⁵ Magyar's reform agenda could unlock these funds if credible progress is achieved, improving both Hungary's fiscal position and EU relations.³⁶

Orbán's departure may also weaken transnational networks of nationalist and illiberal actors within Europe, reducing coordinated resistance to EU policies.³⁷ However, similar political trends persist across Europe, meaning broader ideological shifts are likely to remain gradual.

Conclusion

Hungary's 2026 election represents a rare case of democratic turnover within a system that has been widely described as structurally constrained and institutionally resilient. While the defeat of Viktor Orbán and the rise of Péter Magyar signal a significant political opening, the evidence from Hungary's institutional development over the past decade suggests that electoral change does not automatically translate into systemic transformation.^{38,39} The legacy of "Orbánism" is embedded in legal frameworks, state institutions, media structures, and

economic networks that continue to shape political and administrative outcomes beyond changes in government.^{40,41}

As a result, Hungary is entering a period defined less by immediate rupture than by prolonged institutional transition, in which reform capacity will depend on the ability to simultaneously rebuild state autonomy, manage entrenched elite interests, and meet high public expectations for rapid improvement.⁴²

At the European level, Hungary's political shift may reduce institutional friction within the EU and improve policy coordination, particularly in areas such as rule-of-law enforcement and foreign policy coherence.^{43,44}

Overall, the Hungarian case illustrates that electoral change can mark the beginning of a new political trajectory in which Hungary is finally able to take a different path and begin the gradual process of rebuilding state institutions, political trust, and democratic governance over time.

About the Author

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