2026 Election in Hungary: A Threat to Parliamentary Democracy Curbed?

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In 2004 Hungary joined the European Union (EU) alongside nine other countries, including former communist states. Yet within months of winning the 2014 election, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán pointedly observed that 'the liberal Hungarian state was also incapable of protecting the country from falling into debt and declared that his government was building an "illiberal state"'.[1] His intentions were a clear threat to parliamentary democracy; a process commenced in the previous term. Raising the question as to how this could occur in a member state of the EU and what the broader implications might be. In part, as former Trump advisor Steven Bannon described Orbán, as 'Trump before Trump' and in some ways providing a template for elements of the Heritage Foundation Project 2025.

Hungary, a country of only 9.5 million people, had exhibited a disproportionate influence within the EU. Against the international backdrop of growing global support for national populist politics there was considerable interest in Hungary's election of 12 April 2026 in terms of further consequences for parliamentary democracy, as Orbán sought a fifth consecutive term.

Since the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire Hungary has had two short lived republics, one after each of the world wars, so never established a robust parliamentary democracy.[2] The collapse of Soviet Union domination resulted in the abrupt end to the third republic and a hasty transition to a post-communist state. In summer 1989 the ruling Socialist Workers' Party

[1] Speech given at the open summer university in Băile Tuşnad, Romania on 26 July 2014. Accessed at: https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp

[2] András Bozóki, *'Introduction: The Significance of the Roundtable Talks',* András Bozóki (ed.), *The Roundtable Talks of 1989: The Genesis of Hungarian Democracy: analysis and documents,* Central European University Press, 2022, pp. xviii-xix. Accessed at www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9789633865453-005/pdf

'entered reconciliation talks with opposition groups and the social representation bodies'.[3] Rather than start from a blank canvass, the negotiators worked on an extensive overhaul of the 1949 Constitution, that held until January 2012. Whereas much more time is required for the transition of a state-run economy to that of a market one. Many wrongly blamed the economic dislocation, especially the privatisation of state assets, on the new political institutional order.[4]

In 1989 Orbán also came to prominence. As a young liberal, he made an impassioned speech at the state occasion for the reburial of Imre Nagy, the executed leader the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Hungary.[5]

Orbán first became prime minister in 1998 when his Fidesz[6] party formed a centre right coalition government. After losing the following two elections, he vowed to return to reshape Hungary's political system.

The breakdown of the Hungarian Socialist Party government and the impact of the global financial crisis paved the way for Fidesz's landslide victory in 2010. Securing a two-thirds parliamentary majority gave Orbán the power to amend the constitution.[7] In an interview to an Austrian newspaper he stated:

> *that in this respect I would like to tie the hands of the next government.*
>
> *And not only the next one, but the next ten governments[8].*

He did not waste the opportunity, as over four terms he used his super majorities to systematically weaken democratic institutions and consolidate his power.

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[3] László Vass, *'Changes in Hungary's Governmental System',* Attila Ágh (ed.), *The Emergence of East Central European Parliaments: The First Steps, Hungarian Centre of Democracy Studies,* 1994, p. 187.

[4] Kim Lane Scheppele in the *Foreword,* Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State the Case of Hungary*, Central European University Press, 2016, p. xvii.

[5] Paul Lendvai, *Orbán Hungary's Strongman*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 6-8.

[6] Fidesz is an acronym for Fiatal Demokratak Szövetsége (Alliance of Young Democrats).

[7] Princeton University, *Hungary 1989 Country Report*, under the Constitution Writing & Conflict Resolution Project. Accessed at: https://pcwcr.princeton.edu/reports/hungary1989.html; then post 2012, *The Fundamental Law of Hungary 2011 Article S (2)* Accessed at: https://www.parlament.hu/documents/125505/138409/Fundamental+law/

[8] *Kronen Zeitung*, 10 June 2011 as quoted Lendvai, *Orbán Hungary's Strongman*, p. 93.

Central to Orbán's plans was the System of National Cooperation (NER), fusing political, economic, and social power. Businesses loyal to the government benefited from state contracts and EU funding through non-competitive tendering.[9] While legislation facilitated the transfer of public assets into politically connected hands.[10]

As Orbán valued fealty above all. Political appointees filled courts and public institutions,[11] eroding the rule of law, judicial independence and constitutional checks and balances. Parliamentary scrutiny steadily declined as Fidesz members 'dutifully' accepted executive actions without question. The executive abused the state of danger provisions of The Fundamental Law.[12] These emergency powers have been in continuous use since 2016, first for the migration crisis, then during the COVID-19 pandemic and again from 2022 due to the armed conflict in a neighbouring country, being the Russia-Ukraine war. This further expanded executive authority to deal with these issues by decree without scrutiny.

There was minimal media independence as most of the media and provincial newspapers were controlled by pro-government oligarchs generously financed by state advertising. Public broadcasting became openly partisan,[13] while repeated amendments to electoral law favoured Fidesz.[14] Though elections remained formally free they were increasingly unfair, allowing Fidesz to secure parliamentary supermajorities with less than half the popular vote.

The beginning of Orbán's political decline came in February 2024 when it emerged that Hungary's president had pardoned a man convicted of covering up child sexual abuse at a state-run children's home.[15] The pardon sparked mass public protest, that unlike the parliament could not be ignored. Both the president and minister of justice were forced to resign[16] and the Thirteenth Amendment to The Fundamental Law was quickly made to abolish the power of the president to grant pardons in cases of child sexual abuse.

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[9] Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State the Case of Hungary*, forensically documents the emergence of NER and how it operated during Orbán's first years in office.

[10] The *Public Interest Asset Management Foundations Performing Public Functions (Act IX) 2021* provided one such legal means for hidden privatisation.

[11] Lendvai, *Orbán Hungary's Strongman*, pp. 127-128.

[12] *The Fundamental Law of Hungary 2011, Article 53.*

[13] See '*6.1 Domestication of the media'* Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State the case of Hungary*, pp. 208-218.

[14] Scheppele in the *Foreword, Magyar*, *Post-Communist Mafia State the Case of Hungary*, p. xxii.

[15] Case number KEH/2787-6/2023 as reported in https://444.hu/2024/02/02/novak-katalin-kegyelmet-adott-a-bicskei-gyerekotthon-pedofil-exigazgatojat-fedezo-buntarsnak

[16] https://www.the guardian.com/2024/feb/10/hungarys-president-resigns-in-unusual-setback-for-ruling-party

The scandal became a catalyst for much wider public dissatisfaction. Fed up with the government the anti-Fidesz anger coalesced to transform Hungarian politics.

In the absence of a credible political opposition party Péter Magyar[17] filled the vacuum. The divorced husband of the former justice minister with connections to Fidesz emerged after resigning from Fidesz and turning corruption 'whistleblower'. Magyar took the opportunity to revive the dormant, but registered, Tisza Party[18] to contest the 2024 election for the European Parliament.[19].

The European Parliament election results launched Magyar on a continuous 22-month campaign all the way to the 2026 national election. Magyar built support through direct engagement with voters. He conducted a literal grassroots campaign visiting as many as five to six villages a day in traditional Fidesz strongholds across the country. He also undertook a symbolic walk from Budapest to Romania canvassing for the votes of ethnic Hungarians.[20]

Orbán's campaign centred on protecting Hungarian sovereignty and whipping up fear against the bureaucrats of Brussels, illegal migrants, George Soros, LGBTQI rights, and Hungary being dragged into the war in Ukraine. Magyar, as a former insider and of the centre right, proved less vulnerable to the government's well-known fear campaigns and personal attacks which had worn off over the years as Orbán's claims became increasingly incredulous.[21]

Meanwhile, Hungarians had become more concerned with domestic issues. After 16 years of Fidesz government voters displeasure centred on the scale of corruption, neglect of public services, deteriorating infrastructure, the struggling economy and child protection.

[17] Péter Magyar comes from a family prominent in law. His great uncle, Ferenc Madl, was president from 2000 to 2025. Magyar held positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including a posting to the EU. His last position before embarking on a political career was CEO of the Student Loan Centre. He was a member of the European Parliament from 2024 until his election as Prime Minister.

[18] Tisza is an acronym for Tisztelet és Szabadság (Respect and Freedom).

[19] An indicator of the anger of Hungarians was the fifth highest voter turnout of the 27 EU member states. Of Hungary's 21 seats in the European Parliament, Tisza won seven seats and Fidesz fell to eleven. See European Parliament. *European Elections 2024*. Accessed at <https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/hungary>.

[20] Komuves, A., Fenyo, K., & Than, K. (24 May 2025, updated 24 May 2026). Hungarian opposition leader Magyar walks to Romania, courting ethnic Hungarians. Reuters. Accessed at <https://www.reuters.com/world/hungarian-opposition-leader-magyar-walks-romania-courting-ethnic-hungarians-2025-05-24/>.

[21] Martin, L. (2026, April 8). Europe holds its breath ahead of Hungary's election. The Interpreter, Lowy Institute. Accessed at <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/europe-holds-its-breath-ahead-hungary-s-election>.

Capitalising on this mood, Magyar promised to expose corruption, pursue legal accountability and prosecutions, recovering stolen assets, removing political appointees from public institutions, restoring the rule of law, and rebuilding Hungary's relationship with the EU.

By the time of the 2026 election parliamentary democracy in Hungary was on life support as the executive was unchecked in the service of Fidesz. Some of the critical contributing factors included the lack of an independent judiciary and media, a skewed electoral system favouring Fidesz to gain two-thirds parliamentary majorities with the consequential power to amend The Fundamental Law and subservient government members failing to prevent the systematic dismantling parliamentary democracy, reducing the parliament to barely even a rubber stamp.

Tisza's landslide victory to secure its own two-thirds majority was remarkable. That the public rose up with the largest ever voter turnout shows the resilience of an engaged democracy with a large majority of Hungarians celebrating the result as a significant rebuff to the Orbán regime.[22]

Yet important questions remain. How will Tisza use its mandate to dismantle Fidesz's institutional changes and then shape Hungary's democratic future. Will it, as seems likely, mark the end of Orbán and Fidesz as political forces? Globally, what does it hold for right-wing populist movements at forthcoming elections and of the capacity to reverse democratic backsliding?

[22] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/12/viktor-orban-concedes-defeat-as-opposition-wins-hungarian-election