

The Hungarian Elections:

A Return to Europe or a New Realpolitik?

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This policy outlook examines the 2026 Hungarian elections not as a straightforward “return to Europe,” but as a reflection of deeper structural shifts within the European project itself. It argues that Hungary’s political transition is shaped by three converging dynamics: the erosion of Europe’s normative coherence, the enduring constraints of the EU’s Russia policy, and the primacy of domestic economic pressures. By situating Budapest’s repositioning within a broader context of geopolitical uncertainty and institutional strain, the analysis challenges the prevailing narrative of rupture and instead points to continuity through pragmatic recalibration. The legislative elections of 12 April 2026 signify more than a routine governmental transition in Hungary; they mark a significant strategic shift in the country’s engagement with the European project, which will echo throughout the subsequent political developments discussed here.

Following sixteen years of continuous governance, Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of the Tisza Party, led by Péter Magyar. This outcome constitutes not just an electoral victory but a fundamental political transformation. With 53 per cent of the vote and 138 seats in the National Assembly, Tisza has secured both the mandate to govern independently and the supermajority necessary for constitutional reform, enabling it to reshape Hungary's institutional framework.

This result generated a notable sense of relief among European leaders, particularly in Brussels. Over time, Orbán's confrontational rhetoric and ongoing conflicts with European Union norms had rendered the Brussels-Budapest relationship a persistent source of tension. Disputes over the rule of law, democratic backsliding, allegations of systemic corruption, and Orbán's ambiguous stance on the war in Ukraine all contributed to this divide. By positioning himself against the EU's consensus on Russia, Orbán became a central figure in European dissent over sanctions against Moscow. As a result, for many within the European elite, the election outcome represents not only a democratic transition but also a perceived liberation from a problematic outlier and a symbolic "return to Europe" for Hungary.

This policy outlook contends that the 2026 Hungarian elections should not be viewed simply as a "return to Europe." Instead, they represent a convergence of three deeper dynamics—the erosion of Europe's normative coherence, the persistence of structural constraints in the EU's Russia policy, and the primacy of domestic economic drivers. These dynamics, explored in the following sections, suggest recalibrated continuity rather than decisive geopolitical rupture.

Indeed, the reaction from the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, was emblematic of this optimism. While the dust had barely settled, she hailed the results, asserting that *"Hungary has chosen Europe"* and is officially *"back on the European path."* Similar sentiments echoed throughout various European chancelleries.

However, these early celebrations overlook a crucial issue: is Budapest's new administration genuinely ready for the kind of close relationship Brussels envisions? More importantly, the real question has shifted. It is less about whether Hungary is rejoining Europe and more about whether today's Europe can still inspire the strong loyalty it once did. The true importance of these elections lies not just in Budapest aligning with Brussels but in whether the European liberal-democratic ideal retains its appeal amid today's changing realities and instability.

Europe to Return to— But Which Europe?

The optimism among European leaders after Viktor Orbán's defeat and Péter Magyar's rise follows a popular narrative: Hungary is finally "returning to Europe." Yet, this view assumes Europe remains stable and consistent in its principles, an assumption that now needs serious reconsideration.

In the aftermath of World War II, Europe positioned itself as a central architect of the liberal international order. For decades, it cultivated an identity grounded in democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Despite evident inconsistencies and selective applications, this normative framework retained a degree of internal coherence that sustained Europe's claim to moral and political leadership. Today, however, that legacy is under profound strain. Over the past two decades, successive political, economic, and humanitarian crises have exposed not only institutional fragilities but also a deeper estrangement from the very values Europe once claimed to embody.

Until the early 2000s, Europe could plausibly present itself as a custodian of liberal democratic norms, imperfectly so. Yet the challenges of the 21st century—from financial instability to mass migration, to armed conflicts and geopolitical fragmentation—have revealed a continent struggling to reconcile its ideals with its actions. The result is not merely a policy gap, but an emerging ontological crisis: a disjuncture between Europe's self-image and its political reality.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the European Union's institutional paralysis. Once heralded as a "normative power" capable of shaping global governance through values rather than force, the Union increasingly appears constrained by its own bureaucratic inertia and the divergence of its member states. Decision-making mechanisms are frequently gridlocked, while internal democratic backsliding has proven difficult to address effectively. In this context, the ambition to export democracy has given way to a far more modest objective: preserving an increasingly fragile *status quo*.

Europe's normative credibility has eroded most visibly in the area of human rights. The lack of response to civilian casualties and violations by European allies in conflicts such as Afghanistan and Iraq has drawn criticism. Similarly, the Mediterranean, once envisioned as a bridge between continents, has become a site where the right to life—central to Europe's foundational principles—is frequently violated. Policies of border fortification and pushbacks have transformed universal human rights into conditional privileges, dependent on geography and identity. In this securitised context, the liberal legal order has increasingly given way to populism, exclusion, and protectionism.

This selective application of norms is particularly evident when contrasting Europe's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine with its approach to the Gaza conflict. While Europe has mobilised substantial support for Kyiv in defence of international law, its muted and often ambiguous response to alleged violations in Gaza has raised questions about consistency. The selective invocation of historical responsibility has undermined Europe's moral authority and diminished its credibility in advocating universal legal values.

Given these conditions, the idea of Hungary "returning to Europe" demands critical examination. If Europe is undergoing a significant ethical, political, and identity crisis, the meaning of such a return becomes unclear. The main question is not whether Hungary is rejoining Europe, but which version of Europe it is rejoining, and whether that Europe still presents a compelling normative vision.

This erosion of normative coherence has concrete political effects. As the credibility of European institutions declines, their capacity to generate compliance among member states weakens. In this context, governments are incentivised to prioritise domestic political legitimacy over alignment with European norms, particularly when those norms are perceived as selectively applied. Hungary's trajectory, therefore, reflects not an aberration but a rational adaptation to a shifting normative environment within the Union.

The Brussels– Budapest–Moscow Nexus: Europe's Strategic Impasse

Beyond the domestic realignment, the Hungarian election results also possess the potential to fundamentally recalibrate the delicate geopolitical axis stretching between Brussels, Budapest, and Moscow. At the heart of this tripartite relationship lies a deepening structural dilemma for the continent: the inevitable and enduring role of Russia within the European strategic equation.

Although many European elites view Viktor Orbán's defeat as a decisive shift toward the European mainstream on the "Russia question," this interpretation is both premature and overly simplistic.

For over a decade, Hungary under Orbán occupied a position that was both functional and contentious. Although frequently castigated for breaking the European consensus on sanctions and military aid to Kyiv, Budapest simultaneously served as a conduit for residual diplomatic communication with the Kremlin. In an era where EU–Russia relations have reached a terminal fracture point, the utility of such a backchannel—however uncomfortable for Brussels—cannot be entirely dismissed. Consequently, Hunga-

ry's departure from the herd was not merely an act of obstruction; it represented an alternative geopolitical reading that acknowledged the inevitability of eventual engagement with Moscow.

This debate, however, transcends the specificities of the Hungarian position. The "Russia problem" has evolved from an internal friction point into a systemic crisis testing the Union's overall strategic capacity. Currently, the European Union appears entangled in a normative labyrinth, attempting to manage a complex kinetic conflict through the lens of moralistic rhetoric and political clichés.

Despite the imposition of unprecedented sanctions, Moscow has avoided economic collapse; conversely, despite colossal financial and military infusions into Kyiv, Russia remains undefeated on the battlefield. This stalemate exposes the inherent limitations of the current European strategy. The economic burden of sustained aid is exerting acute pressure on European treasuries, while the depletion of domestic military inventories to support Ukraine is eroding the Continent's own sovereign security apparatus. Furthermore, the severance of Russian energy flows has left Europe in a state of chronic energy vulnerability, effectively "chilling" European capitals both metaphorically and literally.

These challenges are further exacerbated by tensions within the transatlantic relationship. Divergences between Washington and Brussels—particularly evident during the Trump era through trade disputes and differing priorities in global crises—have undermined Europe's claims to strategic autonomy. Simultaneously, escalating crises in the Middle East, especially the intensifying confrontation involving the United States, Israel and Iran, are drawing Europe into a multilayered geopolitical uncertainty in which it is not a primary actor, yet remains deeply affected.

Against this backdrop, expectations in Brussels that Hungary will fully realign with the EU's Russia policy following the elections risk overlooking these broader structural realities. While a Magyar-led government may indeed release frozen funds for Ukraine, signals such as continued openness to Russian natural gas imports—and pre-election rhetoric suggesting that "no one in Hungary wants a pro-Ukraine government"—point to a cautious search for equilibrium rather than a sharp strategic rupture.

The core issue is not simply the preferences of individual political actors, but rather Europe's structural dependencies and geopolitical limitations. Considering factors such as energy security, geographic proximity, and economic costs, a complete break with Russia is not a feasible short-term option for Europe. Hungary exemplifies this reality, but it is indicative of a wider continental trend.

Thus, the Brussels–Budapest–Moscow relationship reveals a fundamental reality: Russia is not merely an external actor, but an essential part of Europe's security and energy systems. The key question is not who governs Hungary,

but whether Europe can maintain a viable order while excluding Russia. Recent developments indicate that strategies based on excluding Moscow are increasingly disconnected from geopolitical realities.

Accordingly, the more pressing task for Brussels is not to overinterpret political shifts within member states, but to develop a more grounded and strategic policy framework—one that does not seek to exclude Russia outright, but instead incorporates it into a realistic assessment of Europe's long-term interests. This structural reality does not eliminate political agency; rather, European states retain the capacity to shape the terms and conditions of engagement with Moscow, even if they cannot fully avoid it.

The central challenge, therefore, is not whether to engage with Russia, but how to do so within a strategic framework that reconciles security imperatives with normative commitments. Failing this, Europe's Russia dilemma will not remain confined to Hungary but will continue to harden into a chronic condition across the continent.

The Primacy of Domestic Dynamics

Finally, interpreting the election results as indicative of a fundamental shift in Budapest's foreign policy would be analytically unsound. Although the new era has raised expectations of diplomatic normalisation in Brussels, the main drivers of this transition are rooted in Hungary's domestic political and economic circumstances. Péter Magyar's longstanding involvement with the Fidesz establishment and his reluctance to depart significantly from Orbán's positions on key sovereign issues highlight a notable degree of strategic continuity.

When dissecting the determinants of voter behaviour, the decisive role of economic anxiety becomes self-evident. The Hungarian electorate prioritised the cost-of-living crisis and prolonged economic stagnation as the definitive issues of the campaign. Over the past three years, the national economy has laboured under near-zero growth rates, while inflation peaked at approximately 17% in 2023—a figure substantially exceeding the European Union average. Despite a gradual deceleration of inflationary pressures through 2025 and 2026, the residual erosion of household purchasing power has prevented a comprehensive recovery. Furthermore, with public debt hovering between 74% and 75% and a chronic budget deficit, the nation's structural vulnerability has only deepened.

This economic malaise was further exacerbated by the protracted freeze on billions of euros in EU funds due to "rule of law" disputes with Brussels. This suspension stifled public investment and intensified the requirement for external financing, making the economic squeeze immediately palpable to the citizenry. The Orbán administration's subsequent imposition of "windfall taxes" on the banking, energy, and retail sectors—intended to bridge the fiscal

gap—served only to galvanise resentment not only within the business community but across broader social strata.

Consequently, Magyar's political ascendancy is rooted less in transformative foreign policy rhetoric than in his masterful strategic positioning in the domestic arena. While the anti-Orbán vanguard was already primed to coalesce around a viable challenger, Magyar's true triumph lay in his ability to penetrate the traditional Fidesz base. As a figure emerging from within the system, he was perceived not as an "alien" alternative, but as a credible agent of internal reform. His departure from Fidesz was framed primarily through the lens of anti-corruption rather than ideological schism, allowing for a fluid transition in voter loyalty without the friction of a sharp cultural break.

Moreover, Magyar successfully occupied the vacuum left by the structural frailties of the traditional opposition—namely, its fragmentation, lack of decisive leadership, and inability to set the national agenda. His expansive rallies and emphasis on robust governance cast him as a charismatically authoritative figure in the Weberian sense. Crucially, by eschewing a platform based solely on anti-Orbán sentiment in favour of concrete policy prescriptions, he avoided the tactical pitfalls of his predecessors. The strongest evidence of this strategy's effectiveness was the unprecedented voter turnout, which approached 80%, the highest level in modern Hungarian history.

In summary, the 2026 election results appear to stem primarily from domestic economic and political tensions rather than a desire for a fundamental shift in foreign policy. While international dynamics provide important context, their direct impact on voter behaviour was limited. Electoral outcomes are determined by local issues, and governments are judged by their economic performance. The Hungarian case thus reinforces the principle that political power is ultimately threatened when domestic economic conditions deteriorate, regardless of international achievements.

This domestic anchoring has direct implications for foreign policy. A government primarily driven by economic stabilisation and electoral legitimacy is likely to adopt a pragmatic external posture, prioritising flexibility over ideological alignment. In this sense, Hungary's external positioning is less a function of leadership change than of enduring domestic constraints.

Conclusion

To sum up, much like electorates elsewhere, Hungarian voters have used the ballot box to articulate their dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and to usher in a new political leadership. This electoral shift will undoubtedly generate a momentum for change, and Péter Magyar is likely to diverge from his predecessor, Viktor Orbán, on certain political and stylistic fronts. However, such a transition should not be misconstrued as a wholesale reversal of Budapest's foreign policy orientation.

Although a more conciliatory approach in Hungary's relations with other European governments may be expected, it is unrealistic to expect Budapest to relinquish its strategic autonomy. The European Union's internal challenges and its struggles to manage ongoing political crises make such a scenario unlikely. Hungary's foreign policy, regardless of leadership, will continue to be determined by national interests and structural realities rather than external pressures.

A more likely scenario is a gradual, pragmatic adjustment. As the new leadership addresses domestic economic challenges and restores stability, its foreign policy initiatives will likely gain increased domestic support. This enhanced legitimacy will, in turn, strengthen Budapest's position in external affairs. A government that achieves economic recovery domestically is better equipped to pursue assertive policies internationally.

The Hungarian case illustrates a broader pattern within the European Union: political change at the national level does not necessarily translate into strategic realignment at the continental level. Instead, it often reveals the persistence of deeper structural constraints that shape policy continuity across administrations.

In this sense, Hungary may become an even more consequential actor in European foreign policy debates. Particularly on critical issues such as relations with Russia, Budapest could transition from being perceived merely as a dissenting voice to becoming a more influential and agenda-shaping player. Ultimately, the trajectory ahead suggests not rupture but continuity through adaptation—where domestic consolidation serves as the foundation for a more confident, strategically autonomous foreign policy posture.