

The Hungarian Election and Its Consequences

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In fairytales, justice prevails. In real life, such occasions are much rarer and so give more satisfaction. Therefore, that Viktor Orbán did not just lose but was further tripped up by his own party's devious regulations calculated to secure a perpetual parliamentary majority is the source of not a little *Schadenfreude*. Due to such previous Fidesz tampering with electoral laws, the victorious party does not need 2/3 of all votes cast in order to get 2/3 of the Parliamentary seats. This time, the system benefited the opposition. Magyar's Tisza party has 141 seats of the total 199, while Fidesz-KDNP only has 52, although in the vote for the party lists, Tisza obtained just over 53% of the votes; in addition, it won seats in individual districts (where candidates win with a relative majority) sometimes with less than 50% of the vote.

What will this victory and supermajority mean in practice?

The consensus in Hungary was that the only way to rid the country of the Orbán regime was to vote for Péter Magyar, regardless of ideological alignment. He has promised to restore democracy and undo the damage of the Orbán years. While he has the constitutional means to do so, because a two-thirds majority enables any party to change the laws, including the constitution, the economy is in dire straits.

The new government will certainly reshape relations between Hungary and the EU. While Orbán both demonized 'Brussels' as an enemy of Hungary and obstructed especially Ukraine-related decisions, Magyar's priority is to unfreeze funds totalling around 10 billion euros that have been held back due to numerous violations of EU rules and corruption. (Hungary is in 84th place out of 181 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, a ranking shared with, among others, North Macedonia and Burkina Faso.) In order to have any chance of carrying out promised and much-needed reforms in Hungary, to create 'a functioning country' as Magyar pledged, the government will need these EU funds. Magyar has already started negotiations with the bloc to achieve their release. Certainly, he will endeavour to

satisfy EU demands in this respect, and indeed, many of his promises to a domestic audience in his election manifesto dovetail with the EU's conditions. Such issues include ending corruption, restoring the independence of the judiciary, restoring a free press and university autonomy. The new alignment is already visible: the European Union flag, removed in 2014, again flies from the Parliament building. Magyar will not veto and obstruct EU aid for Ukraine, nor run anti-Ukraine ad campaigns in Hungary. Hungary has already returned money and gold that had been confiscated on trumped-up charges of money-laundering from a Ukrainian convoy travelling through Hungary in March.

Yet this does not mean endorsing Ukraine's membership of the EU. Magyar had previously stated that this step would not be realistic in the next ten years. After his victory, he said that Hungary would not oppose accession negotiations but refuse a 'fast-track' entry. Most recently, at a meeting on 6 May with António Costa and Ursula von der Leyen, Magyar's position to a great extent corresponded to Orbán's: a demand to first enlarge the rights of Hungarian minorities in Ukraine before agreeing to support Ukrainian membership. Magyar and Zelenskiy will meet, probably in June, and whether direct negotiations will lead to Hungarian support remains to be seen.

Nor is it good news for those who are hoping that the new Hungarian government's position on immigration will differ from that of its predecessor. The first political discussion with a head of state that Magyar had abroad, even before taking his oath of office, was in Rome with Georgia Meloni. According to Magyar, the two agreed on many issues, including 'illegal migration', and strengthening economic competitiveness. At the same time, the new government includes ministers who had been critical of Orbán's anti-immigration propaganda.

While Magyar declared that Hungary is pro-EU and that Russia is a threat to the EU, how he will deal with the tensions between Hungarian nationalism and EU membership is an open question. The new government's swearing-in ceremony gave mixed messages. Apart from the Hungarian national anthem, those of the EU, of the Romany minority, and the so-called Sekler (Székely) anthem were also performed. This last was written after the 1920 Treaty of Trianon and asks God not to abandon Transylvania; it was popularized when Hungary briefly regained part of Transylvania during the Second World War from Hitler's gift and was subsequently prohibited in both Hungary and Romania after the end of the war until 1989; it became the official anthem of the Transylvanian Seklers in 2009. The performance of all these pieces seems to signal the desire for a European, inclusive and nationalist country at the same time. The far-right Our Homeland Movement (a party that has 6 seats in Parliament) also demanded that the new government take its oath on the Holy Crown of Hungary, a medieval crown that was once again elevated to constitutional significance under Orbán, following the model of the interwar Horthy regime.¹ According to previous news, Magyar had agreed, which was met with heavy criticism from the left; in the end, only the MPs of Our Homeland Movement took their oath in front of the crown.

¹ On the significance of the 'Holy Crown', see the relevant chapter in my book on Stephen I, <https://doi.org/10.1093/9780191995439.003.0005>.

Within Hungary, Magyar has promised to restore the health service, education, and democratic freedoms. The ‘flooding of Tisza’ (Tisza is an acronym, for ‘respect - freedom’, but it is also the name of a river in Hungary) is already sweeping away beneficiaries of the Orbán regime. Individuals and entire boards of institutions are resigning. True to long tradition, many who on 11 April were still loyal Fideszniks by the end of the following day discovered they had always opposed Orbán. Nor is it just up to individuals to examine their conscience or change their spots. There are already arrests for embezzlement, corruption and abuse of office. Companies and businesses close to Fidesz that had received bottomless funds from the government are already having a hard time. ‘Facts’, a news programme on TV2 called the ‘flagship of Orbánist propaganda’ and ‘vilest programme ever in Hungarian media’ by Magyar has already been discontinued. Police started investigating for electoral fraud in an electoral district of county Vas, where a Fidesz candidate won because a man named Péter Magyar (not identical to the opposition leader) garnered some of the votes probably meant for Tisza.

The reform of the judicial system, the restoration of scientific and university autonomy could make quick progress with political will. The new Parliament already started to legislate on its very first day; for example, the dismissal of the Chief Prosecutor henceforth depends on a two-third majority decision of Parliament. Magyar had called on chief functionaries of the Orbán regime to resign, but this legislation already shows how those who may be reluctant to do so would be removed. The success of all the other necessary reforms and the creation of a well-functioning economy, however, will require much more than a parliamentary supermajority. The new government includes experts rather than ideological sidekicks and Magyar created independent ministries for education, health and the environment, which had been abolished under Orbán. A pragmatic, technocratic approach dominates, and this, together with economic need, will ensure a true step change in Hungarian politics.