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## The Hungarian elections:

What is the current situation and what can we expect?

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### Hungary and the war in Ukraine

Since 24 February 2022, we have been living in a different world. Russian President Vladimir Putin's brutal military aggression against a neighbouring country has fundamentally changed our concepts and feelings about the future of the global political order and liberal democracy. On the one hand, our world has become much more dangerous. The illusion that war would be impossible in Europe in the 21st century has been shattered. On the other hand, the heroic resistance of the Ukrainian people helps us not to lose our democratic, liberal convictions and our faith in common universal values. Ukrainians are fighting for their own freedom and sovereignty, but they are also fighting against the division of our world into spheres of interest dominated by great powers and new empires, all of which could result in disastrous consequences, as previous historical eras have proven. The unequivocal response of Western political actors, as well as the unity of the alliances and institutions of the free nations, NATO and the European Union, also gives us reason for long-term optimism.



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Up until a few years ago, few European politicians and observers would have paid attention to Hungarian elections, but now – and not only because of the well-known Putin-Orbán friendship – the significance of the forthcoming Hungarian parliamentary elections has been acknowledged and consequently, are being closely watched. As this author read in the American magazine 'Foreign Policy' in March 2022, '*From his beginnings as an anti-communist activist to his current incarnation as a global illiberal icon*', the success or failure of Viktor Orbán in these elections is being actively tracked by the international political scene.

During his election rally on Hungarian National Day on 15 March 2022, the Hungarian Prime Minister spoke of his supposedly wise strategy of remaining neutral in a conflict between two foreign states. 'Strategic calm' and neutrality in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: these were the keywords that framed his rhetoric. The argument is based on an interpretation of the history of a relatively small nation that must now, once again, as was often the case in the past, suffers as a victim due to great power confrontations in our region. Therefore, according to Orbán, Hungary should not rely on the interests of a foreign country but must build up her own strength to preserve herself in a hostile world. This desire for peace from the Prime Minister means that Hungary should not interfere in a dispute in our neighbourhood. 'No matter who wins, we all will lose,' Orbán said on 15 March.

Yes, this strategy of talking peace and not naming the culprit can seem quite convenient. It appears that many Hungarians hope the war will stay confined to its geographical borders and that Hungary should not provoke the Russians. In short, Hungary is not Poland. The dominant tradition of 'careful caution' originates from the soft communist dictatorship of the János Kádár era (1956-88), not from the heroism of the 1956 revolution. Using this historical background, Orbán can play on people's various fears for political gain once again.

But he also has a problem. After Putin's aggression, he has been forced to do a half-turn – he supported the common positions of the European Union and voted in favour of new sanctions. Currently, half of Fidesz voters support Putin and the other half oppose him. A large part of the Hungarian media loyal to the government addresses the first group, while some Fidesz politicians address the latter. Orbán himself, without naming names, talks about peace. This cacophony is complicated for his supporters, but his camp can still stick together to defend its identity against its opponents, the assumed repressive liberal-left-communist cultural establishment.

Orbán made the statement above from a highly provincial and morally unjustifiable perspective. There are no politicians in neighbouring smaller countries who have uttered such declarations. Orbán's idea of Ukraine as a buffer zone reminds this author of his anger 30 years ago when Hungary was first recommended only a partnership with NATO and not immediate membership. He has thus conveniently forgotten that anger in the current circumstances.

## Orbán and the world

Despite Orbán's half u-turn the day after the beginning of the Russian invasion, suspicion is growing that the Hungarian Prime Minister does not share the worldwide moral outrage over the invasion and wants to maintain his special relationship with Putin in the long run. The numerous Fidesz supporters from Poland did not travel to Budapest during the Hungarian national holiday to demonstrate together - as they have done in recent years. There are many clear signs that the friendship and the alliance between the Hungarian and Polish governments has gone awry. Leading Polish politicians of the populist conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) have openly criticised their former hero, Orbán. The fact that they have different positions on Russian policy is not really news, but currently the Putin question is the only issue for central and eastern Europe that pushes all other political considerations into the background. The scheduled Budapest meeting of defence ministers from the Visegrad Group, which includes Czechia and Slovakia, was cancelled.

Orbán has become completely isolated due to his stance. There is now a new reality. A few years ago, the Hungarian pro-government media portrayed him as the strongman of Europe. At the time, Orbán's special ideological path created a radical alternative to the mainstream positions of the political elites and, at the height of the migration crisis, even seduced members within the centre-right European political family. How did this story end? The strategy to seize power within the EPP failed completely. Today Orbán cuts the figure of a lonely provocateur. The dividing line between his party and the mainstream of European democrats has become crystal clear in recent years, also about the future of the European Union, through his confrontational language referring to national sovereignty and his frequent attacks on 'Brussels'. He also has well-publicised ongoing conflicts with the European institutions over the rule of law, the constitutional separation of powers, media pluralism, academic freedom, corruption, and so on: we know the list all too well at this point.

If Orbán wins the April elections, he would probably do everything in his power to keep alive the prospects of a new 'Populist International' (a so-called Renaissance Group in the European Parliament). It would be a case of 'ostrich politics' to declare him a loser on the international stage. The dividing line between liberal democrats on the one hand and authoritarian populists on the other has not disappeared. One should not rule out an alliance of the populist right-wing parties, despite the ideological and personal differences between some party politicians. Donald Trump could also feasibly come back to power in 2024 and his friendship with Orbán is much deeper today than during the four years of his presidency. Liberal democrats should also prepare for a scenario in which the charismatic Hungarian politician could play an important role on the world stage once again, regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

## The chances of the opposition

The former leader of the European People's Party (EPP), now Polish opposition leader Donald Tusk, gave a speech during the Hungarian national celebrations on 15 March at a rally held by the united Hungarian opposition. Here he found new partner politicians who talk about a future loyal relationship with the European Union and NATO, and with whom the construction of a new co-operative central and eastern Europe and Visegrad Group within the EU could become possible relatively quickly. Of course, in the event of an election victory of the six-party alliance led by Péter Márki-Zay, the opposition certainly wants to break with Orbán's legacy. The constitutional amendments and the cardinal laws passed by Fidesz's parliamentary two-thirds majority over the last 12 years will most likely not allow for some immediate fundamental changes (unless the opposition gains their own two-thirds majority) due to needing to respect the rule of law, but a whole new political course with dynamic political communication could gain greater support.

It is still too early to speculate on whether the six party leaders and the six parliamentary political groups can work with a prime minister without a party of his own. We have good examples on how wide and colourful democratic government coalitions have been able to survive after the rule of a populist leader: think about Slovakia in 1998 following Vladimír Mečiar's illiberal democratic system, and Israel right now, where eight parties govern the country after the successful dethroning of Benjamin Netanyahu – well, almost for a year by now.

In the Hungarian case, it would be political suicide for any party participating in a new anti-Orbán government to take both the responsibility and blame for a collapse of unity that allows Fidesz back into power. This alliance is much less about strict policy concepts and how to implement them, but about driving Hungary back to its pro-Western and pro-European path after 12 years of Orbán's rule, including a necessary adjustment to the new realities of the 2020s, following the pandemic and now the war in Ukraine. Ideological differences matter less: Jobbik, for example, has made a long march towards national-conservative values and has left its extreme right past behind. Green environmental innovations and liberal ideas about the restitution of the rule of law might go hand in hand without jeopardising multi-partisan co-operation. What might be more challenging is keeping the internal balance of positions and influence among the political forces, as well as the ambitions of top politicians in check.

First of all, the opposition should win the elections. It won't be an easy task. Although opposition candidates could take all constituencies in Budapest, in the countryside the flag is still flying for the ruling party. Polarisation is extremely high: there are only a few undecided citizens in the tiny centre of the political spectrum who might still be

seduced by one side or the other. Most likely, 90 % of voters already know how they will vote: 45 % for the ruling party, 45 % for the opposition.

How can the opposition reach the uncertain, rather apolitical, often former Fidesz voters? Their only chance seemed to rest on finding a candidate from the political centre and not to nominate someone from the traditional left parties. Péter Márki-Zay, a conservative-liberal mayor of a small town brought a sense of panache and style to the opposition campaign for a while and the six parties were 'united in diversity'. But it has quickly become clear that good positioning of the leading candidate is a necessary, but perhaps not a sufficient condition, for victory. One needs not only a common programme, which the opposition has already presented, but also a vision, a mobilising narrative beyond the inevitable Orbán-bashing throughout the election campaign.

Victory would be especially difficult when elections are free but not fair: Márki-Zay received a total of five minutes during the entire election campaign from the public media to present his ideas, whilst Orbán's 15 March speech has been repeatedly broadcast. Orbán refused an invitation to a live TV duel, although two-thirds of citizens wanted to see a debate between the two top candidates. Moreover, the free segment of the media probably aren't able to penetrate rural areas where elderly citizens can only watch TV channels that are dominated by pro-Fidesz messaging.

Independent Hungarian NGOs had asked for a full-scale election observation mission by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), an unprecedented wish that was granted. According to ODIHR, its recommendations following the last Hungarian parliamentary elections had not been considered and implemented by the Hungarian authorities. On the contrary: the list of measures and problems that have hindered a truly even playing field has become much longer. The electoral system still openly benefits Fidesz. Just to mention one element, previous bouts of gerrymandering has resulted in traditional conservative constituencies with smaller populations, where right-wing populist candidates can safely win with fewer votes. This is compared to the much larger levels of support needed to gain mandates in more urban-liberal districts. As the electoral system is not proportional, as in Germany, where citizens also have two votes, experts emphasise that 50 % plus one vote would be not enough. On a downward slope, the opposition might need 53-55 % of the popular vote on its joint party list to be able to win enough individual mandates.

Overall, the opposition will also need some luck to win. Does Putin's attack on Ukraine paradoxically translate into a solid chance for the opposition? Probably not: the 'rallying around the flag' effect is also working for Fidesz.

But a miracle could still happen at the last minute! In such a case we would at last return to the spirit of 1989, 12 years after Orbán's populist twist. The united opposition would definitely return to the joint decision-making rules and norms of the international democratic community. The fight against corruption would include joining the European Public Prosecutor's Office and to respect the conditionality mechanisms linked to the payments coming from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). The Russian connection would become irrelevant and Hungary might try to find real solutions to ensure its energy independence from Gazprom, in cooperation with its European partners.

Otherwise, with another Fidesz win, dark and depressing times would continue for Hungarian liberal democrats. Our values, our future - and not only for Hungary - are all at stake in this election. The 'Orbanisation' of the country has not yet been completed. But even in such a case, the 'other Hungary' would survive and the alternative offer of an open, liberal, democratic political future for the country will prevail one day.