



Can Hungary's opposition win and restore democracy?

by Zselyke Csaky, 21 January 2026

After 15 years, Viktor Orbán could lose power. But the opposition's path is fraught with obstacles, from a lopsided electoral system to the extraordinary difficulty of restoring democracy even if they win.

Hungary is scheduled to hold parliamentary elections on April 12. After more than 15 years, this will be the first time that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán faces a strong opponent and could lose power. The stakes of the election could not be higher: if Orbán wins, Hungary will continue its slide into autocracy domestically and will keep blocking joint action at the EU level. But if he loses, a unique opportunity opens up: at home, the opposition will have a chance at re-establishing democracy, and within the EU, it could change Hungary's position as the perennial obstructionist.

While Brussels has developed creative ways to handle a difficult Budapest, excluding it from decisions wherever possible, it has yet to find a permanent solution to Hungary's vetoes. This means that the elections matter for the EU as a whole. Because of the global context, these elections are even more important: the challenges the EU faces, from a sputtering economic engine to a warmongering Russia and a hostile United States, are more significant than before.

The opposition Tisza party is currently leading in the polls, but things can still shift in the next few weeks, and a victory is far from certain in Hungary's lopsided electoral system. This insight looks at the plausibility of an opposition victory and the chances of restoring democracy in Hungary afterwards.

Can the opposition win in Hungary?

An opposition victory will depend on at least three factors: the popularity of the opposition party or parties; the peculiarities of the Hungarian electoral system; and the events leading up to the election.

Domestic politics in Hungary has undergone a significant change in the past two years. The traditional left-right divide that defined Hungary's politics since the early 1990s has collapsed. It has been replaced by a transformed arena where a political newcomer, Péter Magyar and his Tisza party, has gone from

obscurity to challenging the governing far-right Fidesz party as the most popular political force. Even though Magyar, the ex-husband of Fidesz's former justice minister, is a conservative politician, Tisza's voter base is united by its opposition to Fidesz and incorporates much of the left-leaning vote. Left-liberal parties such as the Demokratikus Koalíció, DK (Democratic Coalition) and Momentum have been decimated, and current polls show a three-party parliament as the most likely outcome, with only the extreme-right Mi Hazánk (Our Homeland) making it past the 5 per cent electoral threshold in addition to Fidesz and Tisza.

Tisza is currently in the lead, polling at around 44 per cent, while Fidesz is just behind at 41 per cent, and Our Homeland is at 6 per cent. (This is based on [polling averages](#) collected by political analyst Gábor Tóka and takes into account both independent pollsters, among which Tisza is leading by as much as 10 percentage points, and pro-government polling, where Fidesz is ahead by 6-7 percentage points.) The gap between Tisza and Fidesz has been narrowing since summer 2025, with the latter making some gains thanks to [pre-election campaign spending](#), such as a subsidised mortgage scheme for first-time buyers, tax cuts for families and a pension top-up for the elderly.

However, popularity alone will not determine the outcome – the electoral system adds another layer of complexity. Hungary's electoral system is a mixed system but has [features](#) that favour the largest party. The so-called [winner compensation](#) bolsters the winner's position by adding 'wasted' votes for the winning party (the votes that went beyond the necessary margin for victory) to count towards its total number of seats. This runs counter to the logic of proportional electoral systems, where it is the losers that receive compensatory seats to ensure that their representation corresponds to their vote share, even if they fail to win districts. Winner compensation, however, significantly boosted Fidesz's seats in previous elections. For example, in 2022 Fidesz received 53 per cent of the popular vote but 68 per cent of the seats, gaining a supermajority for the fourth time in a row.

According to polling experts, the system also [disproportionately favours](#) Fidesz, so much so that Tisza would need to win the popular vote by more than 3 percentage points to secure an election victory. This is partly due to gerrymandering – several Fidesz strongholds are smaller than the average voting district, for example, meaning that fewer Fidesz votes are required to elect a representative (though this assessment is based on previous elections and voter preferences could still shift). And partly because of other structural features of the system, such as the fact that the ethnic Hungarian vote beyond Hungary's borders strongly favours Fidesz and that the elected minority representative has traditionally also aligned themselves with Fidesz.

Cheating at the ballot box is unlikely in Hungary, but there are several other elements that made recent elections "free but unfair" in the assessment of [election observers](#). These include Fidesz's abuse of state resources – such as organising 'national consultations' that spread [misleading claims](#) under the guise of public surveys or exploiting official government channels to send political ads to people who had only registered for the Covid vaccine. Additionally, the information environment is highly distorted: Fidesz-friendly businessmen have acquired hundreds of [media outlets](#) over the past 15 years, and journalists and the government's critics are regularly targeted with smear campaigns. Disinformation has long come from the top in Hungary, and it has received a boost with [AI-generated](#) videos recently. On social media, Fidesz massively outspends other parties in the region. In the month before the Czech elections, for example, all Czech political parties combined spent a total of €500k on Facebook, while [Fidesz and its proxies spent](#) almost €2.5 million in the same period – despite the fact that the Hungarian elections were almost a year away at that point. In addition, civil society has long had to contend with politically motivated harassment and threats. The recently established [Sovereignty Protection Office](#) (SPO), an

official government body, has regularly labelled NGOs, as well as opposition politicians, as threats to national sovereignty.

Last-minute changes to the election system are unlikely at this point. Getting rid of the 5 per cent threshold (similar to what Serbian President Vučić and [his ruling party did](#) previously) could have shaken things up significantly and favoured Fidesz. Such a change would have fragmented the opposition vote, as it is currently the left-liberal parties that fall below the threshold. Bloomberg also [reported](#) on Orbán's alleged plans for 'castling' – a move reminiscent of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who switched places with Dmitry Medvedev in 2008 only to return to the presidency in 2012. But trying to move into the presidency would be a risky move for Orbán this close to the election. It would demonstrate weakness, not strength, showing that he no longer trusts in winning the popular vote.

This all means that an opposition victory is theoretically possible, if quite difficult, in Hungary. For now, Tisza is in the lead, but with still three months to go, events leading up to the vote will have a significant impact on the outcome. Anything that influences Hungarians' feelings of safety and security – Magyar [mentioned](#) the possibility of foreign drone incursions as an example – could produce a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect for the government, tilting things in favour of Fidesz.

Can the opposition restore democracy?

If the opposition manages to overcome Fidesz's massive structural advantages and win, it will be faced with significant problems. Growth has remained [elusive](#) for years and the budget deficit has remained high. Public services, healthcare, and education have suffered from years of underinvestment due to Orbán's outsized focus on ideology and foreign policy. But any immediate policy question will be overshadowed by two much larger challenges: will Tisza be able to govern, and will it be able, and willing, to restore Hungary's democracy?

When it comes to a new party's ability to govern, much will depend on the scale of its victory. Fidesz has captured Hungary's institutions, entrenching itself by occupying long-term positions from the chief prosecutor to the Constitutional Court and the Media Council. It has also rewritten Hungary's constitution 15 times since coming to power. Orbán's rule has deeply reshaped Hungarian society, transforming public opinion on issues ranging from foreign policy to personal liberties – most often at odds with the European mainstream.

If Tisza wins by a large margin, it will provide the party with sufficient popular backing to start undoing these changes. But if Magyar secures a narrow victory, which seems the more likely scenario based on current polling, Orbán will be breathing down his neck, one bad move away from returning.

The biggest obstacles for an opposition government will include the president, the chief prosecutor, the media, the civil service and parts of the judiciary – all stacked with Fidesz loyalists. Last year, the governing supermajority appointed a new chief prosecutor, moving his predecessor, Fidesz founder Péter Polt, who had occupied that position for 15 years, to head the Constitutional Court. This way, Fidesz secured two important posts just before the elections, with allies freshly appointed for 9 and 12 years – well over two parliamentary terms. Fidesz also has an ideological ally in President Tamás Sulyok, in office until at least 2029, and, as mentioned above, the party has captured much of Hungary's media, including the public broadcaster, which it has turned into a partisan mouthpiece.

Hungary would not be the first country to attempt restoration after a prolonged period of democratic backsliding in the EU. Poland's case is [instructive](#) in this regard: Donald Tusk has been struggling to undo

the damage after unseating Law and Justice (PiS), demonstrating that in a post-illiberal setting, legal – but also political – obstacles stand in the way of restoring democracy.

Just like Polish President Karol Nawrocki, who continues to block judicial reforms, Orbán would do anything to make it difficult for the new government to govern and enact changes. Even without an official role, Orbán would be able to count on his loyal allies and Fidesz's 'deep state' – or the patronage network and economic power the party has amassed in the past 15 years. These include [privatised](#) public assets such as universities and foundations, and billions of forints diverted from public funding to private entities through [unfair procurement](#) practices and bypassing market competition.

Two potential options to paralyse lawmaking would be for the president to send new laws to the Constitutional Court – thereby hampering the work of the parliament under the guise of 'constitutional' concerns – or to call early elections. The latter is possible if the Fiscal Council, a body overseeing Hungary's budget and currently stacked with Fidesz allies, fails to give its consent to adopting a new budget (the earliest date for that is in 2027). Whether Fidesz decides to take advantage of these opportunities will likely depend on the election outcome and the party's popularity after the vote. They are powerful tools to create chaos, but their use could backfire if Magyar has overwhelming popular support.

Even if a new government successfully navigates Fidesz's booby traps, its room for manoeuvre will be limited by the sheer number of policy challenges – from the state of the economy to public services, healthcare and education – as well as the difficulty of overhauling the system Fidesz created. Restoring independence to the captured institutions requires a supermajority in most cases, which, at least as things stand now, a new government is unlikely to have.

It will then be faced with a difficult choice: leave the system untouched and its voters dissatisfied – therefore resigning itself to losing the next (or early) elections and giving up on restoring democracy – or proceed contrary to the letter of the law. It is too early to say which direction Magyar, himself a lawyer, would choose. But whichever way Tisza decides to go, this challenge highlights why democratic breaks are so difficult to mend and why electoral turnover is itself [not a guarantee](#) of democratic recovery.

Conclusion

While the opposition Tisza party currently leads in polls, it must overcome structural disadvantages from a biased electoral system to Fidesz's abuse of state resources and distortion of the information environment. Even if the opposition overcomes these obstacles, restoring democracy will be extraordinarily difficult: Fidesz has captured key institutions by appointing loyalists to long-term positions and has several options to paralyse the work of the new government.

Whatever the outcome, the EU will have a pivotal role to play. If the opposition wins, it can serve as an anchor – this will be important given the depth of institutional capture in Hungary and the likelihood that any new government will lack the supermajority needed for comprehensive reforms. The EU should maintain pressure to uphold democratic standards and provide tangible support for restoration efforts, while recognising that the process will be lengthy and fraught with legal and political traps set by Fidesz.

At the same time, Brussels must prepare for the possibility that Orbán remains in power. If that happens, it can no longer continue with the status quo ante. It will need to face Hungary's disruptive

behaviour head-on – before forthcoming elections, such as the French vote in 2027, bring additional obstructionist governments into power.

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