Hungary’s Foreign Policy after Orbán

Yauheni Preiherman

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Summary

After the opposition party Tisza won the parliamentary elections in Hungary, many political circles in the EU are in a state of euphoria. They expect that after the long rule of Viktor Orbán, Budapest will now become part of the European governance mainstream. However, in the long term, such expectations appear premature and even naïve.

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On 12 April, parliamentary elections were held in Hungary, and for the first time in 16 years, power in this Central European country will change hands. Instead of Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party, the new government will be formed by the opposition Tisza party, which won a resounding victory under the leadership of Péter Magyar. This marks the outcome of perhaps the most high-profile election campaign of the year, closely followed not only in Europe but far beyond its borders.

This time, polling didn’t fail

Public opinion polls in Hungary had long and consistently indicated an impending victory for the Tisza party. Looking at the dynamics of political preferences in Hungarian society over the past six months, the final result appears, at first glance, entirely expected. The only thing few dared to predict was the scale of Péter Magyar’s triumph.

That said, right up until election day, polling data still raised numerous questions.

> In recent years, electoral sociology in various countries has so often missed the target that it has ceased to be seen as a reliable forecasting tool.

Moreover, in Hungary itself, during the previous parliamentary elections in 2022, it proved to be of little use. At that time, pollsters expected a neck-and-neck race until the very end, indicating that the ruling party and the opposition coalition were running side by side. In the end, however, Fidesz decisively crushed its opponents.

Moreover, during the 2026 Hungarian campaign, certain aspects of the public opinion polling raised doubts about the validity of the data being collected. For example, Hungarian pollsters themselves privately admitted that they faced a situation where an unusually large number of citizens refused to answer election-related questions. Whereas previously, to obtain a representative sample of 1,000–1,500 respondents in telephone surveys, it was enough to call 3,000–4,000 people, now the number of calls had to be three to four times higher.

As a result, many experts drew parallels with a similar situation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, when nearly all polls confidently predicted a victory for Hillary Clinton, yet Donald Trump ultimately emerged as the winner. This gave rise to the hypothesis that Hungary in 2026 might also be experiencing a "Trump effect": voters were reluctant to disclose their support for Viktor Orbán, as such a choice was perceived as retrograde in many social circles.

Another factor that complicated forecasting was the specificity of the Hungarian electoral system. It is mathematically very complex, combining voting in single-member districts with party lists. The results involve a redistribution of votes according to a rather intricate formula that is atypical for the vast majority of countries. As a result, the popularity of a given political force in society—as reflected in public opinion polls—does not directly translate into the number of parliamentary seats it ultimately receives.

To the credit of Hungarian and international pollsters who have recently conducted electoral research in Hungary, their work this time produced a high-quality result. Whether this was due to a coincidence of circumstances or a professionally adapted methodology is a separate question. What remains a fact is that less than three hours after the polling stations closed, Viktor Orbán publicly conceded defeat and congratulated his opponent on the victory.

Hungary and the EU

After the Fidesz party acknowledged its defeat, loud expressions of euphoria began to emerge in Brussels and many other European capitals. Senior officials from EU institutions and leaders of several member states immediately issued triumphant

statements, emphasising the significance of the Hungarian election results for a united Europe.

This euphoria is based on expectations that Hungary's future government will fundamentally change the country's foreign policy and, in particular, assume a very different role within the European Union—especially regarding Russia and Ukraine.

> In the short term, noticeable changes in Budapest's rhetoric will likely occur, and possibly not only in rhetoric.

This will be driven both by certain differences in the programme of the Tisza party presented to Hungarian voters and by the clear desire of the incoming prime minister to distance himself from the anti-EU image long associated with Orbán's government.

However, the anticipated shift in Hungary's foreign policy priorities in the post-election period will largely have a practical explanation. Péter Magyar needs to fulfil one of his key campaign promises and secure access to €17 billion in EU funding that had been frozen due to the Fidesz government's refusal to implement reforms required by Brussels. Importantly, around €7 billion of this amount must be unlocked by August, otherwise it will become unavailable.

Therefore, beyond implementing the necessary reforms, Magyar will also need to integrate quickly into the European political mainstream. He will aim to capitalise as efficiently as possible on Brussels' relief over Orbán's defeat in order to secure the decisions needed to restore access to the frozen funds, which amount to roughly 10 per cent of the country's GDP. This means that in the near future, a series of high-profile statements and policy decisions can be expected from the new government that will contrast sharply with the long-standing policies of Viktor Orbán.

These changes will primarily concern the domestic political agenda: ranging from anti-corruption issues to matters of democracy and the justice system. Representatives of the Tisza party are also expected to continue emphasising their commitment to European integration and the restoration of constructive relations with Brussels and key EU member states.

A certain adjustment in Hungary's position on Ukraine can also be expected. At the very least, Magyar's government would face no obstacles in lifting Budapest's veto on the European Union's €90 billion aid package for Ukraine. This is all the more so given that Hungary itself has been granted the option not to contribute its own funds to this financing scheme for Kyiv, an arrangement that Viktor Orbán had also agreed to during the European Council's decision in December 2025.

However, all of this can be confidently expected only in the short term. What will happen next remains a much larger and still difficult-to-predict question.

> In a longer-term perspective, the euphoria in Brussels and several other capitals regarding Hungary's alignment with the EU mainstream appears, at the very least, premature, and perhaps even somewhat misplaced and naïve.

First, much of Fidesz's policy was shaped not merely by the views and preferences of its leadership, but also by Hungary's objective domestic and external realities, as well as the prevailing public opinion based on them. This includes historically complex relations with Ukraine, as well as Hungary's traditionally multifaceted relations with Russia.

One only needs to look at the map of this landlocked country to understand the lack of alternatives in certain political priorities pursued during Viktor Orbán's tenure. Completely abandoning them simply because Brussels and other European capitals expect it would hardly be the most optimal choice for any future Hungarian government.

Secondly, the relatively young Tisza party still lacks a sufficiently developed cadre reserve to rapidly replace the entire political and administrative elite of the country with its own personnel, even if it were willing to do so. This is an important factor for understanding the scope of possibilities in the future policies of Magyar's government. While the bureaucratic apparatus will generally follow the political direction set by the new authorities, the factor of Hungary's version of a "deep state" should not be ignored.

The bureaucracy is the carrier of a state's systemic and strategic orientations, expressing itself not so much through the articulation of political goals as through the implementation of concrete administrative tasks. In this sense, the chances of a relatively inexperienced Magyar team imposing radical and long-term institutional changes on the Hungarian state bureaucracy are limited. Moreover, it is not even certain that such revolutionary intentions exist within the leadership itself.

> *Third*, the Brussels euphoria over the Hungarian election results appears questionable because the Fidesz government was not the cause of the EU's foreign policy difficulties, but rather a symptom of them.

The increasingly sharp and visible contradictions within the EU are not accidental. They are not solely linked to Viktor Orbán's 16 years in power in Hungary, nor to the fact that governments led by Robert Fico in Slovakia and Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic have also emerged. The roots of these tensions are much deeper and more systemic. They stem both from the EU's institutional framework being poorly adapted to current global realities and from a growing crisis of mainstream political ideologies.

As a result of these and other factors, the post-Orbán euphoria in the EU is likely to fade within a few months. It will simply be forgotten, as it becomes clear that most of the problems of a united Europe—previously associated with the Hungarian prime minister—will not disappear, but will instead continue to expand.

Foreign policy of Magyar's government

Of course, forecasting the future foreign policy of Péter Magyar's government toward specific countries and regions based solely on pre-election rhetoric is of limited value. Electoral programmes quickly lose relevance when confronted with the harsh realities of governance—especially when new political forces and leaders come to power. This is all the more true in the current turbulent and uncertain period in international relations.

It is also difficult at this stage to form firm expectations regarding Magyar himself as head of government. Although he is, as is known, a former member of the same Fidesz party, which he left in 2024, he appears to have shared many of its programmatic approaches.

> Moreover, as already noted, he will be constrained by the framework shaped by Hungarian public opinion, which is highly pragmatic in foreign policy and conservative in orientation.

It is not accidental that all three parties that entered the new parliament represent the right-wing spectrum.

All of this influenced the pre-election rhetoric of the Tisza party and will continue to shape the trajectory of Hungary's foreign policy decisions after its electoral victory. Such structural conditions also create additional opportunities for countries that would like to preserve or rebuild productive relations with Budapest. Rather than simply waiting to see what course the new Hungarian government will take, they should proactively engage in diplomatic communication, demonstrating to the new members of Hungary's leadership the potential benefits of cooperation. This approach would help minimise the risks of undesirable fluctuations in Budapest's foreign policy.

Yauheni Preiherman
Director, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations