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Canopy of Prayer



Dear Friends in Europe!

There is a humorous definition of football in the Hungarian public's mind: football is the sport that is played by twenty-two players and in the end the Germans always win. Something similar comes to mind about the elections every four years in Hungary: the election is the event in which many parties compete and in the end Fidesz always wins.

This definition is confirmed by the fact that in the last 4 elections, between 2010 and 2022, they always won by two-thirds over the various formations of the opposition. Most recently, in 2022, at the urging of their voters, the opposition were united, but it became the most devastating defeat ever. Until recently, it seemed that there was no opposition force, no government scandal, that would take the power out from Viktor Orbán's strong hands.

Until recently, I say, because something happened on February 11, 2024, which fundamentally changed the political landscape in Hungary and made the elections on April 12 much more open. On that significant February 11, a young man close to the government walked into the studio of an opposition channel and criticized his own government. This young man was *Péter Magyar*, whose name was known to very few people at the time. The reason for the interview was the so-called "pardon scandal". In short, the President granted, and the Minister of Justice countersigned, a pardon to a man convicted of complicity in paedophilia, and when this was made public, they both resigned due to enormous social outrage. They were two ladies, one of them the ex-wife of Péter Magyar. Magyar went into the opposition studio in anger to accuse the government of "hiding behind women's skirts" so that Orbán could stay in power.

The interview went viral and to this day has been watched by more than 2.8 million people. Many began to look at Magyar as the new opposition leader. And indeed, three months later, he filled the Kossuth square and announced that he was going on a rally in the country, during which he visited all the counties. It was a gamechanger because the Hungarian countryside, especially the villages, were the strongest bastions of Orbán's party, where the opposition has never been able to penetrate.

It is no wonder that he was immediately targeted by the ruling party: the industrial-sized propaganda machine launched a devastating campaign against him. But he seems to be untouchable, even though his personality has many weaknesses. In June 2024's European parliamentary elections, Tisza, Magyar's newly-founded party, achieved nearly 30% compared to Fidesz's 45%. With this, he suddenly became a powerful challenger to Orbán in the eyes of the entire country.

With persuasive power and good rhetorical skills, he listed the government's faults in his speeches. The essence of his message: in the last 16 years, Orbán has reduced Hungary from top student to the poorest and most corrupt country in the European Union, while all his family members and close friends became millionaires. Magyar also says that corruption is the primary reason why the EU has suspended the payment of funds to Hungary, which are now having a serious negative impact on the economy. Orbán constantly uses his right of veto, and he proudly says that he is "*the stick in the spokes*".

Magyar's accusations find fertile ground among his listeners. The people already feel that the economy has been stagnant for 4 years with high taxes, rising food prices, and long waiting lists at hospitals. Magyar's main claim is that the state is unable to function properly in the Orbán system. It is no wonder that a staggering number of people have left the country in recent years. Magyar promises to bring home the EU funds, crack down on corruption, join the European Public Prosecutor's Office and spend the money on education and healthcare.



Orbán's Fidesz party does not respond to Magyar's criticisms or show their achievements. Their campaign is tied to a broader narrative that presents Orbán as a responsible European politician, a leader of "pro-peace" forces opposed to European leaders who are "pro-war". In this narrative, Ukraine is the troublemaker, and the EU supports them, thereby prolonging the war. Orbán has gone so far as to speak of Ukraine "our enemy" having "attacked us". The main element of his campaign is to create fear in society – in this war situation, only a strong leader can lead the country safely, so best not to take any risk with a new leader.

This war narrative was successful for Orbán in the 2022 elections, but it seems to be failing now. The latest poll results, 40 days before the elections, show that Magyar's Tisza Party leads Fidesz by a convincing 20% among decided voters. Support for the other parties is low. The left-wing Demokratikus Koalíció, the far-right Mi Hazánk, and the joke party Kétfarkú Kutypárt struggle to reach the 5% parliamentary threshold. However, most small parties have announced their withdrawal from the elections to help Magyar win.

The Hungarian elections on April 12 will have only one question: Orbán or Magyar? In other words: will Hungarian society grant Orbán a new mandate to continue his current policy, or give Magyar a chance to dismantle Orbán's system and build – hopefully – a more democratic one? The elections will also be important for the European Union: whether they will have to keep working with an anti-EU Hungarian leadership or with a more cooperative, although also critical one?

It will be an important election also because Orbán has many followers in the Western world, they like him because of his conservative radicalism, his political defence of Christian values and his relentlessness on the refugee issue. If he wins again, these powers will be strengthened (see the Patriots for Europe Group in the EU); if he loses, they will be weakened. If Orbán wins, observing the trends of recent years, Hungary will enter a more direct conflict with the Western world, strengthen relations with Russia and China, which will lead to possible exclusion from the EU. This may result in young people emigrating and taking Hungary's future with them.

Prayer points:

- for wisdom for the Hungarian people, to make the right choice on election day;
- for sanity for the part of society that is on the losing side in the elections, so that the elections are not followed by unrest in the country;
- for the Hungarian economy to get stronger and to get access to the much-needed EU funds.

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