

# The End of Illiberal Democracy? Orbán's Governance Model and the Path to Democratic Restoration in Hungary

Daria Tymchenko

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## Introduction

On the 12th of April 2026 Hungarian voters delivered a historic verdict: following 16 years of power, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party were swept from office in a landslide election. Péter Magyar's centre-right Tisza party secured a constitutional supermajority with 138 parliament seats out of 199, effectively ending the era of what Orbán proudly called "illiberal democracy".<sup>1</sup> The results sent shockwaves across Europe and beyond, depriving Russia's Vladimir Putin and the global far right movement of one of their most prominent European allies. Yet the election result alone does not undo the institutional damage accumulated over more than a decade. This article aims to analyse Orbán's illiberal governance model as a deliberate and coherent policy framework, examine its implications for Hungary and the European Union, and propose the policy reforms the new Magyar government must prioritize to restore democratic standards.

The research question guiding this paper is the following: to what extent has Orbán's illiberal governance model undermined Hungary's democratic institutions, and what policy reforms must Magyar's government prioritise to restore rule-of-law compliance within the European Union?

## Background

Viktor Orbán first came to power in 1998 as a liberal reformer before undergoing a radical ideological transformation in opposition. Returning to government in 2010 with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, he used democracy as a tool to dismantle the checks and balances that democracy depends on.<sup>2</sup> This included new laws, constitutional amendments and electoral reforms. This democratic backsliding which political scientist Nancy Bermea terms "executive aggrandizement", is different from outright coups: the process is slow and legal, strategically used to avoid international response.<sup>3</sup>

In 2011, Fidesz unilaterally rewrote the Hungarian Constitution; critics described the change as purposefully entrenching the party's grip on power regardless of electoral outcomes. The new rules allowed Fidesz to pack the Constitutional Court and lower the mandatory retirement age of judges to force out

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<sup>1</sup> Al Jazeera, "Peter Magyar Wins Hungary Election, Unseating Viktor Orban after 16 Years," Al Jazeera, April 12, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/12/hungary-election-early-results-show-magyars-tisza-ahead-of-orbans-fidesz>.

<sup>2</sup> Democratic Erosion Consortium, "How to Erode a Democracy: Hungary's Illiberal Turn Under Orbán," Democratic Erosion, April 18, 2025, <https://democratic-erosion.org/2025/04/18/how-to-erode-a-democracy-hungarys-illiberal-turn-under-orban/>.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.

independent officer holders.<sup>4</sup> Media independence was similarly dismantled with public broadcasters being brought under government control and a new media regulatory body composed of Fidesz allies was brought to power to impose large fines on outlets.<sup>5</sup>

By 2014, Orbán had explicitly articulated his vision. In a speech at Băile Tuşnad, Romania, he had declared that Hungary had abandoned liberal principles and would instead build a state modelled on “international stars”, which included: China, Russia and Turkey. His state vision included a work based society that prioritized strong central leadership over individual and liberal democratic values.<sup>6</sup> Reflecting this shift, Freedom House now rates Hungary as “partly free”, while the V-Dem Institute classifies it as an “electoral autocracy” as although elections take place, democratic standards are weakened.<sup>7</sup>

## Analysis

The consequences of Orbán’s power model have been felt across three interconnected domains: judicial independence, media freedom, and EU relations.

### I. Judicial Independence:

Hungary’s judiciary has been progressively subordinated to executive power. The lowering of the mandatory retirement age for judges back in 2012 was only partially reversed by the European Court of Justice. The reform allowed the government to replace hundreds of experienced judges with loyalists.<sup>8</sup> The Constitutional Court, which might have limited government power, was expanded and filled with judges aligned with the ruling Fidesz party.<sup>8</sup> In the April 2022 election, Fidesz received 54% of the vote but secured 83% of the seats in parliament, showing how the electoral system had been adjusted to strongly benefit the ruling party.<sup>9</sup>

### II. Media and Civil Society

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4 illiberalism.org, “Dismantling Democracy: The Orbánization of Hungary,” illiberalism.org, October 13, 2021,

<https://www.illiberalism.org/dismantling-democracy-the-orbanization-of-hungary/>.

5 Briar Stewart, “Viktor Orbán Spent 16 Years Building Hungary’s ‘Illiberal’ Democracy. On Sunday, He May Be Voted Out,” CBC News, April 11, 2026,

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/hungary-election-orban-9.7160593>

6 “Illiberal Democracy in Hungary: Social Background and Practical Steps of Building an Illiberal State,” CIDOB, accessed April 26, 2026,

<https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/illiberal-democracy-hungary-social-background-and-practical-steps-building-illiberal>.

7 Stewart, “Viktor Orbán Spent 16 Years.”

8 illiberalism.org, “Dismantling Democracy.”

9 Kim Lane Scheppele, “How Viktor Orbán Wins,” *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 3 (2022): 32,

<https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/how-viktor-orban-wins/>.

The Hungarian media landscape has been reshaped to an extent unparalleled within the EU context. The public broadcaster was effectively shut down and replaced with a pro-government outlet, while many private TV and radio stations were taken over by business groups closely linked to the ruling Fidesz party.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, civil society organisations receiving funding from abroad faced strict new laws inspired by Russia's "foreign agents" rules. The Central European University was also pushed out of Budapest in 2019.<sup>11</sup>

### III. EU Relations

Orbán's governance model has had profound implications beyond Hungary's borders. His use of Hungary's EU veto to block sanctions on Russia and obstruct aid packages to war-torn Ukraine made Orbán uniquely close to the Kremlin within the EU's consensus-based decision-making architecture.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, the European Commission froze 10 Billion Euros in cohesion and recovery funds over rule-of-law concerns, funds that the Magyar government has pledged to unlock through institutional reform.<sup>13</sup> The European Parliament's 2022 resolution, which declared Hungary "no longer a full democracy", marked institutional rupture and triggered large scrutiny under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union.<sup>14</sup>

### Policy Solutions

Magyar's election victory, secured with a constitutional supermajority, created a rare window of opportunity for reform. However, as analysts at the European Policy Center have noted, removing an illiberal government is considerably easier than rebuilding the rule of law it dismantled.<sup>15</sup> Three priority areas demand immediate action: judicial reform and constitutional revision, the restoration of pluralism within the media, and the reform of the electoral system.

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<sup>10</sup> Stewart, "Viktor Orbán Spent 16 Years."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Times of Israel, "After 16 Years in Power, Hungary's Orban Concedes Defeat to Centre-Right Opposition," Times of Israel, April 12, 2026, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hungarys-orban-concedes-landmark-defeat-to-center-right-opposition/>.

<sup>13</sup> Euronews, "Newsletter: Cautious Optimism in Brussels as Orbán Ousted in Hungary," Euronews, April 13, 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/04/13/newsletter-cautious-optimism-in-brussels-as-orban-ousted-in-landslide-hungarian-opposition>.

<sup>14</sup> European Parliament, "MEPs: Hungary Can No Longer Be Considered a Full Democracy," European Parliament, September 15, 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Maurice, "Hungary after Orbán?: The Case for Phased Rule-of-Law Conditionality," European Policy Centre, April 2026, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/hungary-after-orban-the-case-for-phased-rule-of-law-conditionality/>.

### I. Judicial reform and constitutional revision

The new government must introduce constitutional amendments to restore the independence of the judiciary. This requires depoliticising the appointment process for Constitutional Court judges through a transparent and merit-based selection procedure involving an independent nomination committee with the representation of civil society. The National Judicial Office should be replaced with an autonomous body. The EU should adopt the phased-out approach as proposed by the European Policy Center: progressively unlocking frozen funds gradually as Hungary meets clear reform goals, ensuring continued pressure for change.<sup>16</sup>

### II. Restoring pluralism within media

To restore a democratic system, Hungary needs to restore an independent public broadcaster and a media regulator free of political control. A lack of impartial and reliable information weakens meaningful democratic participation both for citizens and civil society groups. Media companies with close ties to the Fidesz party should be reviewed under competition laws, with the aim of breaking up excessive pro-government dominance. Additionally, this process must be carried out transparently to ensure it is seen as fair and not as politically driven redistribution.

### III. Electoral system reform

Most importantly, as Hungary's electoral system has been shaped to benefit the ruling party, the new party should order an independent review of electoral district boundaries and rules using standards from the Council of Europe as a guide. Any reforms made should be developed through a broad and inclusive consultation process in order to ensure fairness as opposed to serving the interests of the party in favor.

## Conclusion

Orban's electoral loss represents a significant moment not only for Hungary but for liberal democracy in Europe. For 16 years, Hungary was watched by analysts and policymakers, reflecting on how democratic institutions were weakened slowly but surely through legal and political changes.<sup>17</sup> The Hungarian voter's rejection of this illiberal state, as reflected in the Tisza's constitutional supermajority, largely shows that

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<sup>16</sup> Maurice, "Hungary after Orbán?"

<sup>17</sup> Euronews, "Cautious Optimism in Brussels."

democratic backsliding can be reversed. However, undoing these changes will take long-term commitment and efforts, careful institutional reforms and continued cooperation with EU institutions.

The reforms proposed in this paper, including making the judiciary independent, ensuring media diversity, and reforming the electoral system, are all necessary steps, but cannot stand on their own. They must be supported by open implementation, meaningful conversations and involvement with civil society, and European oversight. If successful, Hungary's recovery could become an example of how democracies can be rebuilt after erosion instead of simply how they decline.

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