

Wallets, Winners and World Views Key Dimensions of the Hungarian Election

Emelie Thorburn

The Hungarian election in April 2026 is a pivotal moment. For Hungarians, it will decide whether Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz will govern for a fifth consecutive term. For outside observers, it will determine the future of Hungary's external relations: whether a government that often acts as a spoiler in the European Union and maintains close relations with Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin remains in place, or whether one that seeks to repair relations with Brussels takes office.

ON APRIL 12, Hungarians go to the polls. Some aspects of Hungarian elections, including Hungary's unfair media landscape, have already been well covered.¹ This brief instead analyses three particularly interesting aspects of this election: Fidesz's declining economic credibility; the new party landscape in relation to Hungary's electoral laws; and the role of key external relations in each party's election campaign.

A NEW TWO-PARTY LANDSCAPE

In 2026, Hungary's political scene is dominated by two large parties. The incumbent, Fidesz, is seeking a fifth term, while the opposition is largely concentrated in Tisza, a new party that emerged in 2024. Ideologically, the two are similar. Both place themselves in the centre-right, although Fidesz leans more conservative. Tisza's leader, Péter Magyar, formerly held several positions under Orbán's government. After winning seven seats in the last European Parliament election, Tisza joined the centre-right EPP group. Fidesz had previously belonged to the EPP, but left in 2021 following a threat of suspension. Opinion polls from early 2026 place Tisza approximately ten points ahead of Fidesz in the upcoming election, continuing a successful streak for the opposition.

ECONOMIC STRAINS TEST FIDESZ'S CREDIBILITY

Hungarians are often said to vote with their wallets, and polls from January suggest that this election will be no exception. Cost of living and high inflation dominate the agenda, but what stands out this time is signs of Fidesz's declining economic credibility.

In prior elections, voters saw Fidesz as highly credible on economic issues. Welfare benefits, including gas subsidies, state benefits for pensioners, and tax relief for mothers, have also been an integral part of the party's governing policy, especially ahead of elections.

In early 2026, polls indicate that the economy is no longer Fidesz's stronghold and that Tisza is advancing in this area. It remains unclear how far this reflects confidence in Tisza rather than mere discontent with Hungary's current economic situation, but the trend is noteworthy. Hungarians have faced the EU's highest inflation for several years, while their standard of living has declined relative to neighbouring countries. In everyday life, this sense of decline is reinforced by visible strain in the public sector: schools, hospitals, and other state institutions are chronically underfunded and face persistent structural challenges. Tisza has addressed this discontent in its campaign while also pledging to mend relations with the EU and thereby unfreeze Union funding, which would significantly improve Hungarian state finances.

¹ Bátorfy, Attila, and Ágnes Urbán. "State Advertising as an Instrument of Transformation of the Media Market in Hungary." *East European Politics* 36 (1): 44–65, 2019; Bajomi-Lazar, Peter. "Particularistic and Universalistic Media Policies: Inequalities in the Media in Hungary." *Javmost—The Public* 24 (2): 162–72, 2017.

Another salient issue of Tisza's campaign is corruption and democratic decline. Early in the campaign, party leader Magyar drew large crowds by protesting insufficient government transparency. Heading into the election, Tisza has targeted the small group around Orbán that has benefited substantially from questionable state contracts and infrastructure projects. The party also seeks to restore Hungarian democratic institutions, including an independent judicial system.

The Fidesz campaign instead emphasises security and stability. Orbán is reiterating themes from the 2022 election campaign, warning that the opposition, in collaboration with the EU, will drag Hungary into the war in Ukraine. He maintains that his personal relations with other leaders serve as guarantees for stability and peace. Fidesz, he argues, is a tried and tested option in turbulent times. In March 2022, this strategy proved successful.

Fidesz still benefits from its long-term, loyal base and remains more popular among older voters and in rural areas, while Tisza is more popular among younger voters and in cities. Although Tisza leads the polls, many voters are undecided. In 2022, undecided voters swung to Fidesz late in the campaign, which makes the current indications uncertain.

With a month to go before election day, much hangs in the balance. It is still unclear how far foreign policy issues, including relations with the EU, energy dependencies on Russia, and concern for the war in Ukraine, will shape Hungarian voting behaviour, but domestic issues are likely to be more decisive.

FIDESZ'S ELECTORAL SYSTEM COULD BENEFIT TISZA

After winning a two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010, the Fidesz government introduced important electoral reforms that disproportionately benefited the party.² The system, for instance, is skewed in favour of large parties. In 2022, five opposition parties formed a coalition to counter this structural imbalance, but the strategy failed. In the upcoming election, however, the opposition vote is consolidated within a single party, which could strengthen its chances of challenging Fidesz.

Hungary has a mixed electoral system. Of the 199 seats in parliament, 106 are elected through single-member constituencies in majority elections. This means

that each district elects one representative, the candidate who receives the most votes in one round. The remaining 93 seats are elected through national party lists by proportional representation. Every voter living in Hungary casts two votes, one in their district, and one on the national party list.

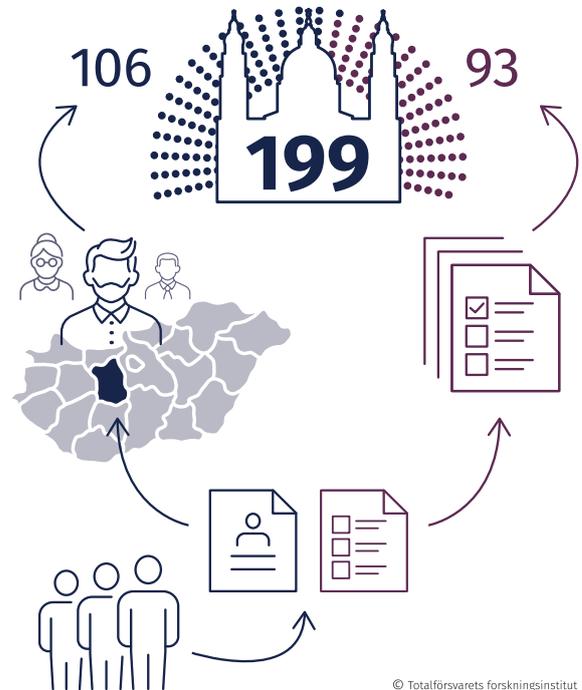


Figure 1. The Hungarian Election System. By Alexander Florencio.

As part of the 2011 electoral law, the government redistricted the entire country through a process that was non-transparent throughout. The new constituencies varied greatly in size, departing significantly from the OSCE recommendation of a maximum 10 per cent deviation. By 2022, Hungarian districts differed in size by up to 35 per cent.³ The government then altered about a third of the 106 constituencies in 2024. Although these changes were partly motivated by demographic shifts, they also raised suspicions of gerrymandering in Fidesz's favour. Notably, districts in pro-Fidesz areas remained unchanged despite declining populations.⁴

Another distinctive feature of the Hungarian electoral system is “winner compensation.” In many countries, votes cast for losing constituency candidates are added to their party's national list in order to minimise

2 Tanács-Mandák, Fanni, and Horváth, Attila. “The ‘hacking’ of a mixed electoral system: A case study of Hungary.” *Public Choice* 204, 75–99, 2025; Kim Lane Scheppele. “How Viktor Orbán Wins.” *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 33, Number 3, July 2022.

3 The Economist. “A wild gerrymandering makes Hungary's Fidesz party hard to dislodge.” 2 April 2022; Scheppele. “How Viktor Orbán Wins.”

4 Ishikawa, Yusuke. “Hungary's Electoral System: Constructing a System Favorable to the Governing Party and Its Future Prospects.” 20 October 2025. Tokyo: Institute of Geoeconomics.

wasted votes, a practice known as “loser compensation.” In Hungary, however, the system also benefits the winner: votes exceeding the number needed to secure a seat are likewise transferred to the national party list. This amplifies victories for the winning party and limits the intended effect of loser compensation. Researchers have found that this mechanism has handed Fidesz around five additional parliamentary seats across the last three elections.⁵

With this in mind, it is evident that some aspects of the 2011 electoral reform ensure that the opposition in Hungary will need more votes to secure the same number of parliamentary seats as Fidesz. Hence, voter support may not directly translate into a parliamentary majority. In 2014 and 2018, Fidesz secured a two-thirds majority in parliament with less than 50 per cent of the votes.⁶ Nevertheless, as Tisza is a large party, it can equally benefit from some aspects of the system, including the winner compensation mechanism. This makes the 2026 election even harder to predict.

CAMPAIGNING ON ALLIANCES AND SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Orbán and US President Donald Trump both emphasise their special relationship, shared values, and worldview. In late 2025, Trump endorsed Orbán’s campaign, granted Hungary a unique exemption from US sanctions on Russian oil and gas and approved a USD 600 million contract for American liquefied natural gas.⁷ In February 2026, Secretary of State Marco Rubio followed up with a visit to Budapest, where he signed a bilateral agreement on trade and nuclear energy and even suggested additional US financial support for Hungary if needed.⁸

This fits the US’s declared aim of supporting political forces in Europe that share Trump’s values and worldview.⁹ A defeat for Fidesz could therefore be seen as a blow to Trump’s domestic power base, the MAGA movement. By highlighting their special relationship, Trump and Orbán imply that a change of government

could jeopardise not only bilateral agreements but also their value-based political community. At the same time, Rubio has pledged that the US will work constructively with any Hungarian government.

Hungary’s relationship with Russia is also likely to change with a new government, as it partly hinges on Orbán’s personal relationship with President Putin. The Fidesz government’s policies on energy, the EU, and the war in Ukraine align closely with Russian interests.¹⁰ Putin has not explicitly endorsed Orbán, but speaks of him appreciatively. Tisza, on the other hand, wants to end Hungary’s dependence on Russian energy by 2035.¹¹

European partners, by contrast, have more in common with Magyar. Tisza’s programme pledges to end the “swing policy” and return decisively to Western alliances. Such a shift would mark a return to pre-2014 Hungarian foreign policy, with Hungary firmly anchored in the West as a reliable partner in NATO and the EU.¹² The party also wants to improve Hungary’s regional relations, especially with Poland. At the same time, Tisza is careful to stress that rebuilding ties with the EU is first and foremost in Hungarians’ own interest, partly to avoid accusations that it is carrying out Brussels’ agenda.

With many interested parties, the risk of external interference in the election is high. There are already signs of Russian influence attempts, for example through warnings that Hungary risks being dragged into the war in Ukraine,¹³ a message that closely mirrors Fidesz’s campaign line. Another form of interference could emerge after the vote. What if Trump calls the election early and congratulates Orbán pre-emptively? Such support could prove useful for Orbán if the result is contested. Another issue concerns the EU’s required democratic standards. If the election is judged neither free nor fair, what coercive measures are available to the Union? In the past, the EU has used both legal and financial instruments to pressure Hungary to reverse its democratic decline, but their effect remains disputed.

5 The elections in 2014, 2018, and 2022. Tanács-Mandák, and Horváth. “The ‘hacking’ of a mixed electoral system.” 75–99.

6 In 2022, Fidesz achieved this with 54%. Charvát, Jakub. “Manufacturing the Monopoly of Power: The Electoral System Change under Orbán,” in *The Politics of Electoral Reform in Central Europe since 1989*. Springer: 2023.

7 Mason, Jeff, and Nandita Bose. “US grants Hungary exemption on Russia sanctions after warm Trump-Orban meeting.” *Reuters*. 8 November 2025.

8 US Department of State. *Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban at a Joint Press Availability*. 16 February 2026.

9 The White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. November 2025.

10 Thorburn, Emelie. “Beyond ‘Russia Friendly’: Hungary’s Foreign Policy Rationales.” Stockholm: *Swedish Defence Research Agency* (FOI), 2024.

11 Tisza. Party Program: *A Működő és Emberséges Magyarország Alapjai*. February 2026. <https://magyartisza.hu/program>.

12 Végh, Zsuzsanna. “Tisza’s foreign policy offer: Plans for a post-Orban Hungary.” Berlin: *European Council on Foreign Relations* (ECFR). February 2026.

13 Political Capital. *Russian interference influencing the Hungarian election has reached a new level*. 3 February 2026.

ISSUES TIED TOGETHER ON THE BALLOT

Hungary's 2026 election is particularly significant because it brings together decisive political issues, peculiarities in the electoral system, and relations with external partners within the current bipolar party landscape.

These themes are closely interconnected. Tisza's campaign makes explicit the link between Hungary's weak economy and access to EU funding, which gives its pledge to repair democratic institutions a clear economic dimension. Fidesz, by contrast, stresses the financial benefits Hungary derives from Orbán's special

relationships with Trump and Putin, primarily in the energy sector. Orbán is trying to persuade voters that his policy of diversified trading relations better protects both the Hungarian economy and Hungarian sovereignty than yielding to EU pressure.

Both parties' campaigns thus show how closely Hungary's external relations are tied to key domestic issues. As a result, this election represents a crossroads for the country, shaping not only its international posture but, more importantly, the future of its democratic institutions and economic prosperity. ■

Emelie Thorburn, MA in Political Science from the Swedish Defence University, is a Researcher at FOI's Department for Euro-Atlantic Security Policy.