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Péter MAGYAR

Hungary as a Trailblazer: the Rise of Illiberal Democracy and its Discontents

In the fast-changing political landscape of Europe, Hungary has set a controversial example of a new style of governance^[1]. Viktor Orbán's Hungary is often seen as the pioneer of illiberal democracy, rejecting liberal democratic norms in favour of centralizing power, manipulating narratives, and eroding the checks and balances of the state. Orbán's rise and methods have had a profound impact on the political trajectories of other European nations, influencing populist leaders from Poland to Serbia, but also from France to the Netherlands. Yet, Hungary's transformation and its broader implications for the future of European politics remain largely misunderstood by many in the West.

ORBÁN: THE FIRST TO EMBRACE ILLIBERALISM AND THE COLD CIVIL WAR

Viktor Orbán's political journey is often framed as a break with the democratic traditions of Hungary's post-communist transition. As the leader of the centre-right Fidesz party, Orbán first came to power in the late 1990s, riding the wave of Hungary's desire to shed its communist past and integrate into the European Union. However, by the time he returned to power in 2010, Orbán had shifted dramatically in both tone and policy. He no longer sought to integrate Hungary into the European mainstream; instead, he embraced a vision of an illiberal state, drawing inspiration from a variety of populist leaders and intellectuals who rejected the liberal democratic order.

Orbán's vision of illiberalism manifested in the erosion of judicial independence, the establishment of state-controlled media outlets, and the manipulation of the political narrative to a degree not seen before in democratic societies. Orbán's

use of "fake news" or state-influenced narratives to shape public opinion became a hallmark of his leadership. The Hungarian Prime Minister did not shy away from bending the truth to fit his narrative, constantly reminding us of the leaked diplomatic cable according to which he said his partners should "not focus on what I say, but rather on what I do". This approach fundamentally undermined the very essence of a democratic society, where objective truth and a plurality of voices are seen as essential to maintaining accountability in governance.

Orbán's total takeover of the State, whereby he consolidated power across media, judiciary, and State institutions, foretold a broader shift in European politics. As democracy in Hungary became less liberal, Orbán's model began to influence other political leaders. This was a new reality that many in the West were slow to recognize: a cold civil war was quietly emerging, reshaping Europe's political battlefield.

A NEW POLITICAL REALITY: ORBÁN'S INFLUENCE ON EUROPE

Orbán's approach to governance did not go unnoticed. Across Europe, leaders began to emulate his methods, seeing in Hungary's experiment a potential roadmap for their own political success. Poland's ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS), followed Orbán's example by undermining the judiciary and attacking media independence. Slovakia's Robert Fico and Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić found inspiration in Orbán's strategy of consolidating power through legal and institutional reforms. These leaders, while differing in context, shared Orbán's commitment to a nationalist, illiberal agenda.

^[1] This text was originally published in the "Schuman Report on Europe: The State of the Union 2025", published by Hémisphères edition, Paris, June 2025

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In this sense, Orbán became the first leader to create a new political reality, one where liberal democracy was increasingly seen as inadequate to address the challenges of the modern world. His leadership style was not simply about rejecting liberal democracy in favour of autocracy, but about reshaping the way that political leaders engaged with their societies. Orbán and his imitators recognized that Western-style democratic politics were failing to inspire and mobilize large segments of the electorate. By tapping into nationalist and populist sentiments, they found a way to build political coalitions that were able to bypass traditional forms of political opposition.

While commentators have often compared Orbán's political methods to those of figures like Donald Trump, it is essential to recognize that Orbán's influence predated Trump's rise to power. In fact, figures like Steve Bannon, who would later play a key role in Trump's political ascent, saw Orbán as a precursor, as a model for how populist rhetoric could be paired with institutional power to reshape the political landscape. However, it is crucial not to fall into the trap of focusing too narrowly on these individual comparisons. Orbán's rise was not merely the result of his populist rhetoric; it was also a product of his ability to navigate and manipulate Hungary's economic and institutional crises to his advantage.

ORBÁN'S HUNGARY: ECONOMIC STRUGGLES AND CIVIC REVIVAL OF SORTS

Hungary's transition from a former communist country to a member of the European Union was marked by significant economic turmoil, particularly following the 2008 global financial crisis. Hungary was hit hard by the crisis, facing a dysfunctional State, an empty treasury, and a stagnating economy. Unlike other countries in crisis, like Greece, which faced deep structural economic challenges, Hungary's problems were more directly tied to a fragile state structure and the failure of the political elite to govern effectively.

Orbán's rise came in part because the old political class failed to offer solutions to Hungary's economic woes. The traditional establishment, focused on top-down approaches to governance, lost touch with the realities on the ground. Orbán, however, saw an opportunity to seize power by

using populist rhetoric and offering simple solutions. He learned from the mistakes of his previous tenure (1998-2002) and realized that delivering tangible results through good governance was less important than controlling the narrative and offering a vision of hope, even if that vision was based on half-truths and misinformation.

In addition, Orbán's ability to activate a certain pseudo-civic mindset, where participation and results are both virtual, has been instrumental in his political survival. He has leveraged modern platforms as well as taking over traditional media, creating a direct line to his supporters, unfettered by independent editorial considerations, and allowing him to amplify genuine voices in the political process, but only those that served his agenda. This ability to connect with people on a personal level, through modern language and platforms, has been one of the keys to his political success.

LESSONS FOR EUROPE: THE NEED FOR NEW LEADERSHIP

As Hungary has demonstrated, the political establishment in Europe is facing an existential crisis. The old models of leadership, grounded in traditional party politics, are increasingly failing to meet the needs of a disillusioned electorate. Europe must look beyond the conventional to find new solutions to the challenges of the 21st century. Inspiration can come from unlikely places, and Hungary's experience offers valuable lessons for the future of European leadership.

For Europe to regain its political vitality, it must embrace new forms of leadership that engage with the public in ways that resonate with modern sensibilities. This means using contemporary platforms and language to communicate traditional ideas of solidarity, governance, and community. It requires political leaders to sacrifice the sacred cows of old and focus on building broad coalitions that can unite diverse segments of society, avoiding the trap of culture wars that divide rather than unite.

Moreover, the political elite, particularly those who have benefited from the status quo, must recognize that they, too, are part of the problem. If they continue to live comfortable lives within the established systems while

ignoring the grievances of the public, they will only fuel the rise of populism and extremism.

HUNGARY'S ROAD TO RECOVERY: MY VISION FOR A RENEWED DEMOCRACY

As Hungary stands at a critical juncture, I am committed to guiding our nation back from the brink. With the emergence of TISZA (*Tisztelet és Szabdság Párt*, Respect and Freedom Party)[2], my goal is simple: to lead Hungary into a new era of democratic recovery, restoring the true civic spirit that has long been perverted under the rule of Viktor Orbán. The challenges are enormous, but the potential for change is greater than ever. Together, we can reclaim Hungary's future, and in doing so, set an example for the rest of Europe.

REUNITING HUNGARIANS: THE ROLE OF TISZA IN THE REVIVAL OF CIVIC CONSCIOUSNESS

The political landscape in Hungary has been dominated by a narrative of division for too long. Orbán's illiberal rule has not only undermined our democratic institutions but has also led to a disillusioned population. I believe that it is time for us to restore the lost sense of unity that once defined Hungary. The TISZA movement stands at the forefront of this effort, focusing on healing the divisions and awakening a long-suppressed civic mentality. This is no easy task, but we are determined to create a better future.

Poland's Civic Platform (PO) has made strides in challenging the dominance of the PiS party, and while their efforts are encouraging, Hungary faces a unique set of challenges. Orbán's control over the state apparatus has left deep scars in Hungary, and recovery will require a comprehensive approach. We are determined to be the first to come back from the brink, and I am confident that Hungary can serve as a model for democratic renewal in Europe.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND GRASSROOTS POWER: MOBILIZING A NEW POLITICAL FORCE

What sets TISZA apart from previous opposition movements is our approach to political engagement. We are committed to rebuilding Hungary through grassroots

activism and reaching a large number of people through social media, bypassing the outdated structures of state-controlled media that have been used to manipulate public opinion for years. Through modern platforms, we connect directly with the people of Hungary, particularly the younger generations, who are tired of the status quo.

Hungary's political future lies in the hands of its people, and I am focused on activating a civic consciousness that has long been dormant. The success of TISZA relies not just on top-down politics, but on the empowerment of ordinary Hungarians. We are building a movement that speaks directly to the struggles and hopes of the people, and it is resonating across the nation.

ECONOMIC MALAISE: A FOCUS ON PRAGMATIC SOLUTIONS

Hungary's economy is in crisis. Orbán's mismanagement has left the country struggling with stagnation and growing inequality. It is clear to me that the only way forward is through economic renewal, and this requires pragmatic solutions that address the real problems facing Hungarians today. I am committed to focusing on economic recovery because, *"It's the economy, stupid."*

Unlike Orbán, who thrives on divisive rhetoric, I believe that Hungary's future hinges on cooperation, not conflict. Our movement's focus is on building a stronger economy that works for everyone — not just the elite few. By restoring stability, creating jobs, and implementing smart policies, I am confident that Hungary can rise from the ashes of economic mismanagement.

A NEW APPROACH: ALL-IN, 24/7 COMMITMENT TO THE PEOPLE

I am in this fight for the long haul. Unlike traditional politicians who come and go, my commitment to Hungary is 24/7. I don't see my role as one of occasional speeches or empty promises. I am here to stay, to engage directly with the electorate, and to ensure that the voices of ordinary Hungarians are heard. Through social media, live streams, and community events, I am always present, always listening, and always ready to act.

[2] The [latest poll](#) published on 25 March shows the Tisza Party with a significant lead over the FIDESZ Party.

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This is not about grand speeches or political games — it is about creating real change that improves people's lives. I have dedicated myself fully to this cause, and I am constantly in touch with the people of Hungary, listening to their concerns and inspiring action. Together, we will rebuild Hungary, one community at a time.

WEAVING TRADITIONAL VALUES INTO MODERN PLATFORMS

One of the most powerful aspects of our movement is how we bring traditional values of solidarity, governance, and community into the modern era. We use modern platforms to tell traditional stories of Hungary's history, our collective identity, and our shared future. These values are not outdated; they are essential to building a strong and united Hungary.

Through digital platforms, we weave a narrative of cooperation, mutual respect, and a shared commitment to Hungary's prosperity. The modern world demands modern solutions, but it also calls for a return to the principles that make us strong as a nation. In my leadership, I aim to offer both: a vision rooted in tradition, but forward-looking in its embrace of technology and new ways of doing politics.

INSPIRING ACTION: THE POWER OF GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION

Perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is that politics is not just about promises—it is about action. Our movement has inspired Hungarians to rise up, to take part in the political process, and to demand change. We are not waiting for others to fix the problems facing Hungary; we are mobilizing at the grassroots level to make it happen.

My message is clear: Hungary can recover, but only if we work together. I am inspired by the resilience of our people, and I know that, through hard work and determination, we can overcome the challenges that lie ahead.

CONCLUSION: A NEW PATH FORWARD FOR HUNGARY

Hungary's future is not written yet, but I believe that together, we can chart a new course for our nation. With TISZA, we are not just fighting against Orbán's illiberal regime; we are fighting for a better Hungary, one that is civic minded, democratic, prosperous, and united. Through grassroots engagement, and a focus on pragmatic solutions, we will build a Hungary that is stronger, more inclusive, and more just. This is our moment, and together, we will seize it.

Péter Magyar

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