

# Illiberalism Is Not Inevitable

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In the end, the defeat of Viktor Orbán, Hungary's autocratic prime minister, required not just an ordinary election campaign or new messaging but rather the construction of a broad, diverse, and patriotic grassroots social movement. And by building exactly that, Hungary's opposition changed politics around the world.

Orbán's loss brings to an end the assumption of inevitability that has pervaded the MAGA movement, as well as the belief—also present in Russian President Vladimir Putin's rhetoric—that illiberal parties are somehow destined not just to win but to hold power forever, because they have the support of the “real” people. As it turns out, history doesn't work like that. “Real” people grow tired of their rulers. Old ideas become stale. Younger people question orthodoxy. Illiberalism leads to corruption. And if Orbán can lose, then his Russian and American admirers can lose too.

Péter Magyar, the opposition leader and likely next Hungarian prime minister, has now won by a substantial margin, giving him and his party, Tisza, a constitutional majority. To do so, they had to overcome obstacles not usually present in European democracies. After 16 years of what Orbán himself described as an illiberal regime, the Hungarian leader's political party, Fidesz, had come to control much of the judiciary, bureaucracy, and universities, as well as a group of oligarchic companies that in turn controlled a good chunk of the economy.

Orbán used his control of the state to build an extraordinary web of international illiberal and far-right supporters, and funding mechanisms to support some of them. In the last weeks of the campaign, these friends and beneficiaries rallied round. Orbán received visits or verbal support from Donald Trump, J. D. Vance, Benjamin Netanyahu, Marine Le Pen (the leader of the French far right), Alice Weidel (the leader of the German far right), and other illiberal leaders from Argentina, Poland, Slovakia, Brazil, and more. Both Hungarian and American news organizations [reported](#) that a Russian intelligence team had set up in Budapest to amplify Orbán's social-media campaign, and perhaps to stage provocations.

By contrast, Magyar had very little access to Hungarian media, the overwhelming majority of which is owned either by the state or by Fidesz oligarchs. He and his party had limited access even to billboard space, both because they had less money than the ruling party and because many advertising spaces are controlled by the government. Tisza leaders and supporters faced personal obstacles as well. A year ago, I met a Tisza politician who told me that his wife had lost her job and his friends began to stay away after he announced his support for Magyar. Tisza's database [was at one point hacked](#) and posted online, apparently to encourage harassment of party members. Even three weeks ago, many Tisza leaders in Budapest would speak only off the record.

Magyar and his team fought back on the ground. Knowing he could not win if he stuck to Budapest and other large cities, Magyar has been traveling the country since 2024, visiting small towns and villages, many more than once. In the last few days of the campaign, he was holding five or six election meetings every day. He avoided the themes that Orbán chose to promote—global politics, the war in Ukraine, the conspiracy that Ukraine was [somehow colluding](#) against or might even invade Hungary—and focused his campaign speeches and social media on the economy, health care, and schools. As a former member of Fidesz himself, he was able to speak with extra conviction about Fidesz's corruption. He portrayed himself as a part of the European, democratic, law-abiding center-right. He waved a lot of Hungarian flags, as did his supporters.

Despite enormous restrictions and both financial and political pressure, the tiny number of journalists who were still able to report in Hungary also made a difference. In the past few weeks, the investigative journalist Szabolcs Panyi, along with his colleagues at the website [Direkt26](#), one of the few independent outlets in the country, patiently debunked Orbán's anti-Ukrainian propaganda, producing leaked transcripts and audio that revealed Orbán and his foreign minister colluding with Putin and the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov. These tapes exposed what Panyi described to me as the “big lie that Orbán was a sovereigntist prime minister.” Indeed: Orbán boasted and talked a big game about Hungarian traditions and Hungarian nationalism, but when he spoke on the phone with the Russian leader, he [described himself](#) as a mouse and Putin as a lion. For years Orbán has claimed to be fighting shadowy foreign forces—George Soros, the European Union, migrants—but in fact he was himself dependent on foreigners all along.

Those stories resonated, especially with younger Hungarians. At a rock concert in Heroes' Square in central Budapest

[on Friday](#), tens of thousands of them started chanting “Russians, go home”—the same chant that their grandparents used when Soviet soldiers invaded their country in 1956.

Although results are not final, Tisza appears to have won more than two-thirds of the seats in Parliament. That would give Magyar a constitutional majority that should allow him to pick apart some of the damage that Orbán has done to the Hungarian constitution and to public life. In his victory speech, he called for the resignation of the president, the prosecutor general, the president of the constitutional court, and other institutions. He said he would rejoin the European legal system. In response, [according to one witness](#), Hungarians at his rally chanted, “Europe, Europe, Europe.”

Nobody is pretending this will be easy. Fidesz still dominates many Hungarian institutions and businesses, and the party’s friends and supporters will do their best to undermine a Tisza government. Orbán also leaves behind a fiscal mess, which [the analyst Dalibor Rohac suggests](#) Orbán might be happy to abandon while plotting his comeback. “Letting the opposition deal with the economic fallout of the last 16 years might well facilitate Orbán’s return to power in the future,” Rohac wrote earlier this week. Some in the opposition are still expecting dirty tricks in the next days and weeks, before Orbán formally hands over power.

But whatever happens next, this election represents a real turning point. For most European governments, this result is a relief: We can’t know yet what kind of government Tisza will create, but it won’t be one that functions as Russia’s puppet in Europe, blocking EU funding for Ukraine or European sanctions on Russia. Nor will it be a regime that serves as a model for Americans or Europeans who want to capture their own states, or take apart their own checks and balances, or impose their own illiberal ideologies on people who don’t accept them.