

The Fall of an “Illiberal Democracy”

Lessons to be Learned for Europe
from Orbán's Electoral Defeat

by Ivan Vejvoda

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A historic moment occurred in Europe on April 12, 2026, with the fall from power of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz political party after 16 long years of seeming invincibility.

A beacon of populist, illiberal politics in Europe, Orbán had woven a tight net of relationships with similar political actors in Europe and the Americas. He had made Hungary a political and financial hub for these politicians, their parties and movements. He wanted to change the EU, but only succeeded in blocking a number of its decisions. The values of democracy and the rule of law prevailed among Hungarian voters, bringing the country back into the EU mainstream alongside those pursuing the project of a democratic Europe united in diversity.

In 2013 at a Washington, D.C., think tank, a full-day closed-door discussion took place on the situation in Hungary. High level Hungarian representatives were present along with former governmental officials and members of the Washington expert community.

The Government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had been in office since April 2010 and the overwhelming victory of his Fidesz-KDNP coalition at that election secured a two-thirds “super-majority,” 68% of the seats. Hungary and Poland were the poster-child countries of post-communist transition to democracy in the 1990s. Both joined NATO (in 1999) and the European Union (in 2004).

The model student Hungary and its 2010 elected government then abruptly began to regress on democratic practices and values. Using the two-thirds parliamentary majority the constitution and laws were changed. The separation of powers and checks and balances between the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government were being dismantled.

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At the 2013 Washington, D.C., discussion the Hungarian representatives were staunchly defending their policies arguing the sovereign right of democratically elected governments to do as they saw best in the interest of their nation. The debate was heated and at one moment mid-way through the day, a US senior official who knew Hungary well, had served there and knew the language said: “If most of us [non-Hungarians and former Hungarian officials] are saying to you that your policies are not going in the right direction then something must be wrong.” And political and societal processes did continue to regress. Abuse of power and of public funds went clearly against the public good.

During 16 years since taking office, power has been fully concentrated in the hands of the circle around the Prime Minister. Hungary had become an electoral autocracy, with Orbán's close acolytes amassing huge amounts of wealth, expanding control and oversight over the country's economy. Abuse of EU-funded contracts has led to a suspension of delivery of part of those funds from the EU.

Brussels, Belgium, 19 December 2024:
Viktor Orbán at a Press Conference.



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Control over the media, shutting down or buying out many independent media outlets made the public sphere restrained for open and fully transparent debate. Academic freedom was being assailed so much so that the Central European University had to move, go into exile from Budapest to Vienna. Electoral processes were thus clearly unfair although free. Orbán was determined to showcase his country as a model of sovereigntist illiberalism.

There was resistance to the direction the country was taking. Massive protests occurred against many of these anti-democratic policies over the past 16 years although Prime Minister Orbán kept winning elections in 2014, 2018 and 2022. The opposition did manage to win a significant election victory for the capital city Budapest in 2019 and 2024 by narrow margins and Gergely Karácsony became mayor.

Orbán ruled by constantly inventing enemies, searching for scapegoats to keep his voters in fear of change and desiring continuity. The failures of preceding governments to deliver >

“EU democracy was at stake as Viktor Orbán's Hungary had aspirations to influence and transform the EU.”

greater prosperity and stability, led voters in 2010 to seek more certainty. Orbán's conservative pro-family, anti-LGBT, anti-woke policies and regular generous handouts appealed to a great many voters.

Orbán's ambitions, though, went far beyond Hungary. His ambitions were Europe-wide and even global. Hungary became a hub and support base for right-wing and far-right wing groups, movements and parties. Orbán, his party and his supporters were wary of what they deemed was a loss of sovereignty. Sovereignism led to a desire maybe to leave the EU or change it.

Given that support in Hungary for the EU's remaining within the EU was – and still is – high, as is the case in all other EU member states too, Orbán started changing his policy into reshaping the EU from the inside. This was in synchronicity with similar demands of far-right parties in France, Germany, Austria, Spain, Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic to name just a few.

In June 2024, in Vienna, Orbán, former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the head of the Austrian far-right Freedom Party announced the founding of the Euroskeptic group Patriots for Europe (PfE). Along with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the Europe of Sovereign Nations (ESN) they hold over 20% of seats in the EU Parliament.

Their intent was changing the EU into a conservative, Euroskeptic, right-wing outlet, notably using Hungarian state funds, to create a network of

domestic and international institutions thanks to Orbán's leverage. They thereby pursued the goal to support all those in Hungary, Europe and the US who shared this worldview of the preponderance of national sovereignty, anti-globalism and conservative unity.

The Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), a Budapest-based think tank, and its Brussels antenna were at the core of this effort. The holding of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest on 5 occasions, bringing together 3,000 attendees from all over the world, gave it global heft.

The backsliding of democracy in the EU shook the institution given the unexpected turn that a former communist country would reverse course after a successful transformational path to liberal democracy, constitutionalism and rule of law.

In July 2014, Victor Orbán declared that he was aspiring for Hungary to be an “illiberal democracy,” explaining that “societies do not have to be liberal to be democratic.” For him, elections are a source of legitimacy and not a manifestation of the rule of law.

The EU was complacent at first and hoped that it would get rid of the problem through alternation, but Orbán kept winning. Meanwhile in Poland the Law and Justice Party (PiS) which had briefly ruled from 2005 to 2007 came back to power in full force from 2015–2023 on a nationalist, socially conservative ticket. The judiciary was brought to heel and the media were put under governmental control.

The problem of democracy made its way onto the EU's agenda. The question put before the EU Council and EU Commission was: How to cope with member states undermining the pillars of the EU, namely democracy, the fundamental democratic values and the rule of law?

Article 7 of the Treaty of EU stipulated that a member state's right could be suspended if they breached these fundamental rights. The Article was triggered for the first time ever by the Commission against Poland in December 2017 and later in September 2018 against Hungary by the European Parliament.

Still, there was an awkward sense that something was happening which undermined the very essence of the EU. Hungary, which was a member of the European People's Party, the biggest and most influential European political family, decided after being threatened to be expelled to leave on its own account.

Hungary had become a disruptor in Europe, in the EU, as well as a disruptor of democracy. Orbán became an inspiration to Donald Trump and right-wing personalities flocked to Budapest to hail Orbán's domestic success and his support to many of them.

Orbán could not be satisfied by merely leading a country of 9.5 million people. He sought satisfaction in promoting “illiberal democracy.” For that purpose, he travelled far and wide and spread his illiberal sermon. When Hungary assumed the rotating Presidency of the EU in July 2024, he probably was over-confident when travelling to Kyiv, Moscow, Beijing and Mar-a-Lago with the intent to mediate between Russia and Ukraine and bring peace. What is more, he thereby upset the other European states as these actions had taken place without consultation or agreement from the EU Council. As Ivan

“Europe celebrates with this Hungarian election the work of democracy and the defeat of an electoral autocracy.”



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Krastev put it, ironically, he behaved in a globalist fashion which seems quite unusual for an anti-globalist.

Orbán blocked decisions of the EU to support Ukraine in its defense against Russian aggression. He put brakes on many decisions related to EU sanctions packages aimed at Russia. With Orbán's election defeat, the €90 billion of aid to Ukraine was finally unlocked after having been stalled for so long.

A landslide victory of Prime Minister Elect Péter Magyar and his party Tisza on April 12 led to a two-thirds majority in Parliament opening the path for reversing many of the decisions of the 16 years of the Orbán government. In the end, alternation in power did come to Hungary, and with it, the restoration of the rule of law and the separation of powers will be foremost. The pursuit and scrutinizing of ill-gained wealth by an independent judiciary will be key. There is already news about the flight of capital and people close to Orbán.

The ups and downs of political dynamics have been both hopeful and unsettling if one just takes the example of the Visegrád four countries. In

Poland the populist PiS government was defeated by Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition in 2023, but the populist Karol Nawrocki won the Presidential elections in 2025. In Slovakia, the populist Robert Fico returned to power after he had been ousted after mass protests sparked by the killing of journalist Ján Kuciak and his partner Maria Kušnírová who had uncovered high-level corruption of Slovak officials linked to the Italian Mafia. In the Czech Republic, the populist billionaire businessman Andrej Babiš and his party ANO won the elections in October 2025.

The elections in Hungary carry decidedly more weight than those in smaller Member States. EU democracy was at stake too as Viktor Orbán's Hungary had aspirations to influence and transform the EU and go even beyond.

Orbán's methods had domestically reached the end of the tether. Declaring that Ukraine was the greatest threat to Hungary simply did not pass muster. Voters saw through the propaganda. More importantly, the economy had not been performing for several years and after 16 years voters decided it was time to change.

Péter Magyar led a very impactful well thought out and prepared campaign. All his actions, statements and appointments after the victory indicate an in-depth approach to the huge challenges that lie ahead. The Polish example can be helpful, but having a two-thirds majority in Parliament can be of even more salience.

The ramifications of the Hungarian elections must not be underestimated in any way, nor should they be overstated. The Hungarians themselves are well aware of the blind alley into which Fidesz had led them as they are of the tough road ahead.

Europe celebrates with this Hungarian election the work of democracy and the defeat of an electoral autocracy. These types of regimes, in Europe at least, seem to have an expiry date. In Poland it was eight years, in Hungary twice as long. One can only take so much authoritarianism at a time. Many lessons are to be learned for the future of Europe.

Ivan Vejvoda is a Senior Researcher at the oip. He was a Permanent Fellow and Interim Rector at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna (2017-2025), Senior Vice President at the German Marshall Fund of the United States in Washington DC (2010-2016), and Senior Foreign Policy Adviser to the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić.