



THE EU VS HUNGARY: A 16-YEAR BATTLE WITH NO WINNERS



SUMMARY

Hungary's government has been at odds with the EU ever since Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz, reclaimed power in 2010. But by all accounts, Hungary has largely benefited from being part of the European project. Why, then, has the prime minister continued his 16-year crusade of attacking and discrediting the EU, while overtly arguing for reversing the integration process?

The answer is simpler than it seems. Since 2010, Orbán has employed a unique 'playbook' that secured his unprecedented longevity. He built a legal-political system designed to entrench power structures and processes that benefited him and his circle – but no one else. The fight with the EU was inherent in consolidating the regime, as 'Brussels' was presented to voters as an enemy of progress and sovereignty, from which only Orbán could protect.

Meanwhile, the EU hasn't shied away from sharply criticising Orbán's regime: the European Commission has launched plenty of infringement proceedings, the European Parliament (EP) voted to classify it an 'electoral autocracy' and the Council continued its annual Article 7(1) TEU hearings for nearly eight years without any results. And yet, the most powerful tool in the shed – Article 7(2) – was deliberately kept in the cupboard.

Here, too, the story goes back years: Orbán long enjoyed the benevolent protection of the European People's Party, which stuck by him for a decade – all to maintain dominance in the institutions, especially the EP. Even after Orbán quit the EPP, he benefitted from the lack of political will to impose riskier sanctions on Hungary as well as the support from other disruptors like Poland under the Law and Justice Party and Slovakia under current prime minister Robert Fico. Finally, the EU's inability to meaningfully respond to the escalating situation in Hungary shows that the treaty framework is poorly equipped to handle the deliberate exploitation and abuse of legal shortcomings. Which means if Orbán goes, the problem will remain, ready for other Eurosceptics and outliers to exploit.

On the eve of the parliamentary elections in Hungary, this CEPS Explainer attempts to explain the whys of the past 16 years, with a combatant, hardline Eurosceptic strongman on one side and a hesitant, weakened integration fighting on multiple fronts on the other.



Júlia Pőcze is a Researcher in the Politics and Institutions unit at CEPS.

CEPS Explainers offer shorter, more bite-sized analyses of a wide range of key policy questions facing Europe. Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed are attributable only to the authors in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which they are associated.

© CEPS 2026

INTRODUCTION – THE ELECTIONS IN CONTEXT

Most of the [eight million](#) Hungarians who are eligible to vote are expected to participate in the legislative elections of 12 April 2026. There's only two parties that are [essentially guaranteed](#) to pass the 5% threshold: Viktor Orbán's FIDESZ-KDNP (aligned with the [Patriots](#) in the European Parliament (EP) and the largest opposition party, TISZA (aligned with the [EPP](#)). Other than that, the extreme right, ultranationalist Our Homeland Movement ([ESN](#)) might have a slim chance of entering the parliament, while the liberal-social-democratic DK ([S&D](#)) will likely slip below the 5 % threshold.

Holding the office of Hungarian Prime Minister for a total of 20 years – 16 consecutively since 2010 – Orbán has undoubtedly [cemented himself](#) as a mainstay of news headlines. One can only guess whether future assessments will resemble the [negative](#) tone of [contemporary](#) ones.

Back in October 2024, for the first time in 18 years – since the [unrest](#) of 2006 – a major pollster [found](#) that Viktor Orbán's Fidesz wasn't the most popular party, coming second to emerging firebrand Péter Magyar's [Tisza](#) that nobody knew existed until he [took over](#) the reins in April 2024.

[Magyar](#), a [friend-turned-foe](#) who managed to secure Tisza [seven seats](#) in the 10th EP a mere few months after [bursting onto the scene](#), has reshaped and replaced the [fragmented](#) scene of the [Hungarian opposition](#) and poses the first real threat to Orbán's regime. Over the past year and a half, [numerous other polls](#) have confirmed this: there's [broad and expanding support](#) for this fairly new political force and [dwindling](#) backing for Fidesz.

As the parliamentary elections loom, it's a moment that the top EU brass has been [quietly waiting for](#)- it's no secret that the institutions have had a new Hungarian government at the top of their wish lists for a very long time.

After all, the 2010s saw Orbán grow into the role of 'Eurosceptic-in-Chief', always ready to throw a wrench into all manner of decisions the other Member States managed to agree on. In many ways, Orbán's metamorphosis into the number one internal foe caught the EU off-guard and the institutions watched with growing concern as things escalated in the country, especially after [the 2015 'refugee crisis'](#).

**IT'S REALLY ONLY TOWARDS THE
END OF ORBÁN'S SECOND TERM
THAT THE EU STARTED TO REACT
BEYOND STRONGLY WORDED
LETTERS AND GOOD OLD
INFRINGEMENTS.**

Other heads of government, as well as the EU leadership, have learned to expect his criticism, threats and eventual veto. For years, the EU did little other than routinely express condemnation. It's really only towards the end of Orbán's second term (2018) that the EU started to react beyond strongly worded letters and good old infringements.

But even after Article 7(1) proceedings – the 'lighter' option of Article 7, which can lead to determining 'risks' to EU values but no sanctions – were [opened](#) in 2018 and [conditionality measures](#) led to certain EU funds being suspended from 2022 onwards, the EU could never quite find the antidote to Orbán's constant onslaught of anti-EU attacks and dissent in crucial policy areas.

Any time Brussels retaliated one way or the other, it gave Orbán more ammunition to throw the EU under the bus back home. An increase in the number of [asylum seekers](#) or immigrants, support for [LGBTIQ+ equality](#) and transgender rights, the [cost of living crisis](#) and even the [abysmal salaries](#) of Hungarian teachers were all presented as attacks orchestrated by Brussels.

To this day, Orbán remains the biggest thorn in the EU's side and there's no doubt that a potentially victorious Péter Magyar would be welcomed with open arms. Should Orbán be defeated, the Berlaymont may consider it a moment of 'all's well that ends well' – but can a change in government be the quick fix for the woes this feud exposed both within the EU and in Hungary?

VIKTOR ORBÁN'S ROAD TO ILLIBERALISM AND HIS 'PLAYBOOK' FOR UNPRECEDENT INFLUENCE

STEP ONE: THE ROAD TO POWER

There's a somewhat well-known story about a young Viktor Orbán before he entered politics. Back in the 1980s, as a law student in Budapest, he was [said](#) to have a meltdown over learning that he was excluded from becoming the President of the United States due to not being born on US territory. Arguably the most influential job of our time – for better or worse – the Oval Office could have very well been a dream for a man with an insatiable appetite for power. Alas, he had to 'make do' with Hungary.

This little anecdote is the key to understand Orbán: a cunning, ambitious man who will do whatever's necessary to gain and maintain power, to shape and influence decision-making processes on a larger scale than any of his modern predecessors ever could.

Everything that has happened since [Fidesz](#)' earliest days – which he originally co-founded as a [liberal](#), pro-Europe movement of 'young democrats' – from his steady move towards the right in the 1990s and then national-conservatism in the 2000s, to his far-right, Eurosceptic populist stance of the past decade, was all meticulously strategic rather than due to a changing worldview.

Orbán – and Fidesz – moved along the political spectrum less with conviction and more with an eye for 'vacancies'. The move to the right coincided with the slow, but gradual weakening (and eventual dissolution) of the traditionally [right-of-centre, conservative MDF](#). Then, in 2014, when the previously extreme-right, radical Jobbik began a process of [transitioning](#) to a more moderate position, Orbán steered Fidesz further to the right. It's therefore reasonable to assume that none of these stances ever really coincided with his personal political beliefs and were rather mere strategic manoeuvres to exploit seemingly vacant positions across the political spectrum.

In the Orbán playbook, acceding to power was only the **first step**. Steps two and three were to consolidate his power at home – i.e. making it extremely difficult to remove the government by electoral means – and achieve ultimate influence abroad. He failed at step two once: the image of him declaring that the ['nation can't be in opposition'](#) after his 2002 defeat is likely a core memory for many Hungarians.

However, the 2010 electoral landslide – his first two-thirds majority – set the stage for a more successful stab at achieving **step two**.

STEP TWO: BUILDING A NEW SYSTEM TO ENTRENCH POWER

In 2010, virtually every constitutional tool and the necessary popular backing were at his disposal to re-shape the political system in a way that wouldn't only serve him but ensure he could remain in power for as long as possible.

First the Fidesz majority passed the [Declaration on National Cooperation](#) in June 2010, which proudly declared Orbán's election win a 'revolution'. This gave a 'democratic' pretext to the next agenda item, which was a complete legal overhaul. This included adopting a new constitution with lightning speed. Famously, former MEP Szájer claimed to have written it on an [iPad](#), which speaks volumes of the qualitative legal considerations that went into creating such an all-important supreme law.

The [Fundamental Law](#) – constantly amended in its 13 years of life, including [the explicit recognition](#) of only two genders – though [slammed](#) by constitutional experts, was

presented as a product of democracy. It kicked things off with a ‘national avowal’, an ardent Christian-nationalist rhapsody, which gives the reader the impression that the constitutional overhaul was a whole-of-society endeavour.

That certainly isn’t true. Orbán did achieve a two-thirds majority but the drafting and adoption of the new constitution saw no participation from opposition parties, NGOs or citizens. In fact, the government made a deliberate choice not to organise a referendum, citing [concerns](#) that voters couldn’t have ‘made an informed decision’ about the 60-page document. Instead, Orbán [opted](#) for his favourite faux-participation tool, a ‘[national consultation](#)’, to gather public opinion on his constitutional project.

These consultations, which have become a fixture of governmental communications, lends the decidedly top-down, non-partisan decision-making process a [false veneer](#) of deliberative democratic legitimacy. In reality, such consultations – that tend to [cost](#) the taxpayers billions year after year – are heavily [biased](#) and the results routinely reported by the government not only inspire scepticism, but also completely misrepresent usually nuanced political realities.

This wholly new fundamental legal framework and the establishment of a seemingly participatory process allowed Fidesz to cement its power for years and manufacture public consent for its [illiberal, anti-EU turn](#) over the course of the 2010s.

Consolidating power also included building an all-encompassing [media empire](#) that parrots [disinformation](#) and [propaganda](#) while opposition voices were [forced out](#). His iron grip on audiovisual and print media – with the help of his cronies – has ensured that large parts of the country could only mostly access biased and deliberately misleading, unreliable ‘news’ sources. At the same time, dissenting voices have been subjected to increased [surveillance](#), while advocacy groups, particularly [civil society](#) organisations representing marginalised communities and rights defenders, have been systematically bled dry and bullied into [silence](#).

Even with access to impartial political information, the government strived to interfere with genuine democratic participation at every single level. Continuous Fidesz victories were locked in through a complete overhaul of electoral legislation and [excessive gerrymandering](#). Blatantly unlawful efforts to [influence](#) or even [buy](#) votes, as well as to [suppress](#) them, have been uncovered by the [dozens](#).

Civil society wasn’t the only victim of financial abuse: Orbán and his cronies – thanks to an inextricable web of shell companies – have become obscenely wealthy through [corrupt public procurement](#) practices. His close [friends](#) and [family members](#) built [empires worth billions](#) seemingly out of thin air, but really from [tax payer money](#) and public [funds](#). With a row of sycophants occupying the [highest offices](#) within the public administration and

the apex courts, investigations into government corruption [could never go anywhere](#) and allowed the most prolific [systemic theft of public money](#) in Hungarian history to proceed with impunity.

Even though a growing sense of [dissatisfaction](#) among the general public has been palpable for a while now, Orbán and his team brilliantly played public opinion like a fiddle, following the [Arthur Finkelstein-playbook](#) to a T: he managed to unite the masses against new enemies every electoral cycle. By creating [scapegoats](#), [red herrings](#) and [false threats](#), he was able to redirect public dissatisfaction and [stroke fears](#), even if it meant inciting hatred against Muslims, Jews, refugees, LGBTIQ+ people or the transgender community.

BY 2014, ORBÁN HAD ACHIEVED HIS MASTERPIECE: HIS LONG-TERM POWER WAS SECURED BY TRANSFORMING HUNGARY INTO AN ELECTORAL AUTOCRACY AND A KLEPTOCRATIC SYSTEM OF CRONY CAPITALISM, WITH HIS RULE BECOMING SYNONYMOUS WITH THE HUNGARIAN 'NATION'.

By 2014, Orbán had achieved his masterpiece: his long-term power was secured by transforming Hungary into an [electoral autocracy](#) and a [kleptocratic](#) system of crony capitalism, with his rule becoming synonymous with the Hungarian 'nation'. It was shortly after he

secured his second supermajority that he publicly used the term ['illiberal state'](#) to describe the regime he was building.

STEP THREE: THE EU AS THE 'NECESSARY' ENEMY

With a rock-solid power structure all but guaranteeing one electoral victory after another, *step three* was maximising influence abroad – which is where the EU comes in.

For the past 16 years, Orbán gained fame and notoriety across the EU, largely thanks to his frequent and vehement wielding of the [veto right](#) to torpedo consensus-based decisions in the Council. These [vetoes](#) serve no real purpose – despite what he publicly [claims](#) – and it's certainly not about any desire to better the lives of Hungarians. Instead, it's entirely self-serving: his increasingly extreme stance on the European stage was nothing but a vehicle to propel him into the centre of every room and maximise his level of influence.

Consider this: in the ['EU Bubble'](#), even the most well-informed experts might struggle naming all incumbent EU leaders, particularly the ones leading smaller eastern Member States. Yet everyone knows Orbán thanks to his never-ending showdown with the top EU brass. Meanwhile, in the ultimate demonstration of power, fellow leaders have had no choice but to anticipate his every move, try to find compromise or even be forced to make concessions to him.

This is what all the anti-EU [incendiary language](#), [propaganda billboards](#) and the self-proclaimed [‘struggle for freedom’](#) against Brussels’ [oppression](#) is all about: his name remains in the headlines while he can convince his loyal supporters that he is only trying to defend their interests and freedoms. What his playbook shows is a simultaneously more nuanced and straightforward picture of Orbán’s politics. His Euroscepticism isn’t an ideologically rooted, genuinely held belief, but a key part of an opportunistic strategy.

THE EU INSTITUTIONS FAMOUSLY STRUGGLE TO CONNECT WITH VOTERS THOUSANDS OF KILOMETRES AWAY, SO IT WAS ALMOST TOO EASY FOR ORBÁN TO BLAME BRUSSELS FOR UNLEASHING FEARSOME ENEMIES – REFUGEES, TRANSGENDER PEOPLE, GEORGE SOROS – UPON THE UNASSUMING HUNGARIANS.

The playbook’s two threads merge seamlessly: the anti-EU crusade also helped him to consolidate power back home as the ‘Brussels bureaucracy’ represented a convenient scapegoat. The institutions famously struggle to connect with voters thousands of kilometres away, so it was almost too easy for Orbán to blame Brussels for unleashing fearsome enemies – refugees, transgender people, George Soros – upon the unassuming Hungarians.

In many ways, Orbán appealed to collective Hungarian memory of revolutions and freedom fights – most famously from [1703](#), [1848](#) and [1956](#) – and presented himself as the modern iteration of the revered revolutionary firebrands of the past. And just as those revolutionaries fought for Hungarian self-determination and independence against the likes of the Habsburgs or the Soviets, Orbán situated himself as the only viable leader and fearless protector, able to measure up to the EU’s ‘tyranny’ that threaten Hungary’s sovereignty and ‘Christian’ values.

Thus, the EU inadvertently appears as a necessary foe that helped Orbán facilitate his quest for international influence and hold to onto power on home soil. Never mind that the post-2010 kleptocratic paradise was largely financed by the same misappropriated EU funds, considering Hungary has been [one of the largest per-capita net beneficiaries](#) of Union funding since its accession in 2004. And never mind that despite all of this, most Hungarians remain [supportive](#) of the country’s EU membership.

It’s clear that for his playbook to work, Orbán needed the EU. However, it might be surprising to hear that the EU needed him almost just as much.

A UNION OF 'VALUES' THAT TOOK ITS SWEET TIME

EARLY CONDEMNATIONS – THE EP DOES THE HEAVY LIFTING

It was a sunny day on 15 March 2011, when Viktor Orbán – celebrating the [national day](#) commemorating the 1848 revolution – [vowed](#) that no one, especially Brussels, would be allowed to 'dictate' to Hungary. His defiant tone came following harsh EU criticism on the sweeping new Media Act, which foretold the painful demise of media pluralism and independence, as well as some other equally controversial early measures like the judiciary reform that gutted apex courts and paved the way for benches packed full of loyalists.

At that point Orbán was holding the Council's rotating presidency for the first time. Reflecting on this, Orbán [bragged](#) in July 2011 that he 'gave the European Parliament's restless hecklers a few slaps, knocked a few hats off, and handed out a few friendly swats on the back of the head', which drew enormous backlash at home.

By 2012, with the Fundamental Law firmly in place and a slew of new measures adapted that sounded alarm bells over the rule of law in Hungary, the murmurs of concern within the EU started growing louder. Those early worries culminated in the EP [adopting](#) a resolution in February 2012, where MEPs expressed serious concerns about Hungary's deteriorating democratic rule of law and respect for common values.

Enter the [Tavares Report](#), the first major, comprehensive response to the developments of Orbán's early years. MEP Rui Tavares, who acted as the file's Rapporteur in the EP's LIBE Committee, penned a comprehensive [report](#) that detailed severe democratic backsliding driven by a sweeping electoral reform law, the deterioration of checks and balances and judicial independence, as well as weakened protection and respect for the rights of minorities.

Crucially, Tavares drew attention to the EU's 'Copenhagen dilemma', namely the EU's alarming double standards about its common values: while the Union is strict about compliance when it comes to candidate countries, it 'lacks effective monitoring and sanctioning tools' for those that are already part of the club. The report called on the EP's Conference of Presidents to already start considering Article 7(1) and recommended that the Commission take appropriate measures to establish something akin to a 'Copenhagen Commission' tasked with ensuring Member States' compliance with Article 2 values.

In his conclusions, Tavares acknowledged that some of the measures assessed in the report – particularly the Fundamental Law that was being constantly modified – weren't compatible with Article 2 and warned that if not addressed quickly enough, the country's trajectory 'will result in a clear risk of a serious breach' of common values. Though the EP

adopted the Report, we now know that the key recommendations weren't implemented and neither was an Article 7(1) inquiry launched.

Tavares' report was followed by MEP [Judith Sargentini's](#) five years later, which included a laundry list of concerns that had grown exponentially since 2013. Sargentini, who, [much like Tavares](#), was at the receiving end of [hateful, disparaging comments](#) from Orbán's government, concluded that there was a 'clear risk of a serious breach' of the EU's founding values. The EP [urged the Council](#) to trigger Article 7(1) and investigate the risk of such a breach, resulting in the Council [launching](#) formal proceedings against Hungary.

That procedure is still open today and is yet to produce [any substantive results](#), even though Tavares, Sargentini and then subsequent rapporteurs [Gwendoline Delbos-Corfield](#) and [Tineke Strik](#) all provided a mountain of evidence that would have merited not only a 'risk' in line with Article 7(1) but a 'serious and persistent breach' as dictated by [Article 7\(2\)](#) that could have led to the suspension of Hungary's voting rights.

It's also noteworthy that the EP was quick to sound the alarm over the developments in Hungary and helped develop that 'mountain of evidence', which the Commission mostly failed to properly follow up until much, much later.

STRONGER RESPONSES – THE COMMISSION STEPS UP AND STEPS IN

It's not that nothing was *ever* done by the Commission to respond to Hungary's deepening rule of law crisis and corruption problem. The EU executive successfully brought Hungary to court several times: the CJEU found a plethora of legal violations in the [anti-NGO 'transparency' law](#), the higher education law dubbed '[Lex CEU](#)', the country's [asylum policy](#), and the exclusion of the opposition radio station '[Klubrádió](#)' from analogue frequencies. Meanwhile, two important cases concerning the [anti-LGBTIQ 'child protection' law](#) and the Stasi-style [Sovereignty Protection Office](#) are still [pending](#).

[Conditionality measures](#) were also imposed on Hungary for Charter non-compliance and [rule of law violations](#), which led to the (partial) [suspension](#) of certain cohesion funds, the post-Covid Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), as well as most Hungarian universities' exclusion from the [Erasmus and Horizon](#) programmes.

The issue is that none of these measures forced Orbán to change his mind. Particularly with conditionality, it was [final beneficiaries](#) like oppositional municipalities (especially Budapest, an opposition stronghold), SMEs, students and researchers who had to shoulder the worst consequences, while the regime continued its corrupt ways.

Article 7(2), meanwhile, would have been the only real road towards punishing Orbán. It's clear that the fate of those disadvantaged by the conditionality measures didn't faze him; in fact, he could even use it as another [propaganda weapon](#) to attack the 'oppressors'

in the Berlaymont. However, had the Commission pushed the Member States to determine that Orbán's government 'seriously and persistently' breached EU values, the case could have proceeded to the sanctioning stage. According to Article 7(3), such breaches could be sanctioned with measures like suspending the government's voting rights in the Council.

This would have been the strike to Orbán's Achilles heel: suspending his voting rights would have stripped him of his ability to veto and block decisions. After all, he lives and breathes having power and influence on the biggest political stages by virtue of torpedoing consensus. As a bonus, being sanctioned would have had fewer consequences for the average Hungarian, unlike the loss of cohesion-based reimbursements or access to student mobility programmes.

It's evident that the Commission wanted to get rid of Orbán, as highlighted not only by infringement cases and the triggering of Article 7(1). A recent [investigative report](#) disclosed that since at least 2019, there have been covert attempts to 'organise resistance' against the regime in Hungary. This sensitive [internal 'project proposal'](#) prepared within the Commission's Directorate-General for Home Affairs (DG HOME) sought to covertly organise 'resistance' through what it called a 'permanent coordination forum'. Needless to say, the Commission, the supposedly non-partisan, technocratic executor of EU law, doesn't have any competence whatsoever to directly meddle in Member States' internal political affairs.

Though this didn't go anywhere, it begs the question: if the Commission wanted Orbán gone so badly – for the sake of restoring the liberal democratic rule of law in Hungary as envisaged by EU law – then why didn't it make full use of the sanctioning tools and measures allocated to it in the Treaties? Why would it consider untransparent and frankly unlawful underground action when it had an entire arsenal of countermeasures in its toolbox that it could've lawfully used? Why wait until 2018 to trigger Article 7(1) and then let the procedure rumble on without any results?

FAMILY ABOVE ALL ELSE – THE EPP CONNECTION

On top of the list is the [European People's Party](#) (EPP), which used to be home to Fidesz' MEPs. Until 2018, the EPP largely [shielded Fidesz](#) from the more severe consequences of its illiberal mission. To be sure, they occasionally made [critical overtures](#). For instance, in 2015, then-Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, whose candidacy Viktor Orbán had [vehemently opposed](#), once called Orbán a '[dictator](#)' in public and appeared to jokingly [slap](#) him.

For almost a decade, the EPP [strained](#) to justify its ongoing support for Orbán while he continued to cross every single supposed red line drawn by the party. Despite nominal

commitment to upholding EU values, the EPP turned one blind eye after the other to Orbán's antics simply to retain the [partisan advantages and continued dominance](#) in the EP that having Fidesz' [numerous MEPs](#) provided.

It [wasn't](#) civil liberties, academic freedom, attacking the EU and civil society or any such issue that eventually led to the dissolution of the Fidesz-EPP marriage. From 2018 onwards, increasing tensions led to wavering support and then, perhaps shamefully for the EPP, Fidesz quitting the EPP instead of being expelled. The real [red line](#) was when Orbán resorted to personally attacking EPP leaders, including calling some of them ['useful idiots'](#). Moreover, Orbán's hatred for his party-mate Juncker never wavered during his five-year tenure as Commission President, which eventually went as far as Juncker becoming George Soros' unwilling co-star in [propaganda billboards](#) that were plastered all over the country.

Those billboards were the final nail in the coffin – in early 2019, the EPP [suspended](#) Fidesz from its ranks until the party fell back in line with 'EPP values'. Almost instantly, Orbán retaliated by [withdrawing support](#) for Manfred Weber, the EPP's 2019 lead candidate. Weber ultimately lost out on the role of Commission president – due to lacking the European Council's overall support, not just Orbán's – and Ursula von der Leyen was selected instead.

In the end, the suspension was never lifted; in 2021, Fidesz [quit](#) the EPP after the party changed internal rules that would have allowed Fidesz MEPs to be excluded from the parliamentary group. For the next three years, they remained non-affiliated and then in 2024, co-founded the Patriots for Europe (PfE) group that emerged from the ruins of the extreme-right Identity & Democracy party. As for the EPP, it has continued to turn a blind eye to other members' [scandals and corruption](#) the same way it did with Orbán – all in the name of retaining their political dominance.

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH – THE LISBON PROBLEM

Another clear reason for the lack of meaningful sanctions was the spectre of the unanimity clause in Article 7(2). Once some political will for sanctions materialised – so only from 2018 onwards – it was first [Poland's](#) and then later, [Slovakia's](#) support for the Hungarian government that made unanimity impossible. This rings true: the Council couldn't even find a four-fifths majority to issue mere 'recommendations' for rule of law compliance under Article 7(1), let alone full unanimity for the severe sanctions that could follow Article 7(2) being invoked.

On the other side of the institutional coin, the EU's Orbán problem triggered heated rows between the Commission and the EP, with the latter [launching two lawsuits](#) against the former for failing to properly enforce conditionality rules regarding Hungary. Whether

deliberately or not, Orbán managed to directly cause conflict within and between all the EU institutions.

Beyond all these reasons, there's also the issue of co-dependency that prevented a timely and appropriate response. As explained above, Orbán needed the EU to help keep his country alive amid staggering levels of state-sponsored corruption. He also needed Brussels as the 'oppressor' so that he could pose as the freedom fighter merely protecting his people.

Meanwhile, the EU also needed Orbán for several reasons. Especially in the wake of Brexit, seeking consensus and compromise wasn't just legally mandated across certain policy areas, it likely also served the purpose of maintaining an image of stability to the rest of the world. To a certain extent, the EU's hand was also forced by its own straining legal framework, which remains ill-equipped to properly address a government that is systematically exploiting the unanimity requirement for political gain.

The Treaties have been drafted, signed and ratified not merely with the understanding that EU law trumps national law, but that integration rests – both explicitly and implicitly – on the idea of mutual trust and sincere cooperation across all common matters. After all, EU membership isn't mandatory and the entire accession process presupposes that those looking to join agree with and strive to foster the same values shared by the Community. Thus, it's not surprising that integration could be partially paralysed when one Member State deliberately took advantage of a system designed to operate on the notion of reciprocal good faith.

And perhaps, in a small but not unimportant way, the EU needed Orbán because there is no yin without yang; his crusade allowed the Union to portray itself as the protagonist to his villainous ways. As counterintuitive it may sound, there's truth to this. Orbán challenged and pushed the institutions like no one before him, lighting the spark needed to stretch the treaties to their absolute limits.

In no small part thanks to this feud, the Commissions stepped up [its use of the Charter](#) of Fundamental Rights in infringement proceedings before the Courts, argued for the [justiciability of Article 2 TEU](#) for the very first time, adopted a comprehensive (albeit relatively weak) rule of law [monitoring](#) framework, tied budgetary commitments to the notion of rule of law conditionality and Charter compliance, while enacting important laws like the European Media Freedom Act and the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertisements Regulation.

All the above were, at least indirectly, a response to the situation in Hungary. Thus, ironically, Orbán's exit may be his final checkmate in his feud with the EU. Because once he's no longer in office, all the systemic deficiencies and inter-institutional shortcomings

he exposed will still be there; the weaknesses of the Lisbon framework won't be magically solved the moment someone else takes over as Hungary's head of government.

With that, the EU is due a reckoning, whether Orbán stays or not. But especially if his time in office is coming to an end, reforms must be tabled to ensure that one person, one Member State can never again exploit the flaws inherent to the system as he did.

But here, too, the lack of unanimity remains the biggest hindrance to treaty change. And yet, if the EU won't act to reform Lisbon, another Orbán will pop up very soon – maybe it [already has](#) in the likes of Slovakia's Robert Fico or the Czech Republic's Andrej Babiš – with a different name but the same quest: to use the EU's weaknesses to their own advantage.

THE STAKES: A NEW CHAPTER FOR HUNGARIANS AND THE EU

This case has been the textbook definition of a toxic relationship, in which both parties realise how dysfunctional things have got yet cannot live without one another.

But amid the escalation and both sides scrambling to one-up the other, there's one consideration that got lost in translation: what of the Hungarian people?

Once all is said and done, they are undoubtedly the biggest losers of the battle. For one, Orbán built a regime that benefits him and his tight-knit circle of cronies while the population, particularly those without substantial wealth or socially and politically marginalised, are in many ways worse off than ever before.

AN ABYSMAL PERFORMANCE REVIEW

The quality of public education has been in a constant state of freefall – the [more recent PISA scores](#) are the worst in the country's history – there's a massive [shortage](#) of teachers and the ones who are still teaching are [underpaid](#) and overworked. In terms of increasing the number of young adults with a university education, Hungary remains [way below](#) the EU's [2030 target](#) (29.4 % instead of 45 %) or the EU average (43 %). The country is also one of the weakest performers in the entire EU when it comes to [foreign language proficiency](#) – less than half the adult population (25-64) knows at least one foreign language (48.6 %), which puts Hungary behind every Member State but Bulgaria (48.2 %).

Meanwhile, the healthcare system is in shambles. Hungary has the [highest](#) cancer mortality and the [second highest Covid mortality rate](#) per one million inhabitants in the EU. The [waiting list](#) for scheduled operations (like knee and hip replacements) is extremely long, with some having to wait up to *six or seven years*. There's a staggering [shortage](#) of

qualified healthcare staff, which has led to a [decrease](#) in beds and entire wards being closed.

It shouldn't be a surprise that social welfare has also reached new lows. 2023 recorded the highest rate of [inflation](#) in over two decades, [individual consumption](#) tanked, the [minimum wage](#) has little purchasing power and [youth poverty](#) remains one of the highest in the EU. Against all the above, it's no wonder that emigration from Hungary has [accelerated](#), accompanied by the [highest demographic decline](#) in Europe.

These facts and figures are what make the story tragic, not the political battles. While Brussels and Budapest were trading threats, vetoes and sanctions, the average Hungarian's situation has quietly deteriorated. Without a doubt, the bulk of this abysmal socio-economic situation is a result of Orbán's self-serving policies. At the same time, whatever comes next, the EU should bear some of the responsibility of ensuring that the genuine interests of the public are brought back into focus.

WHAT FUTURE FOR THE EU-HUNGARY RELATIONSHIP?

It's imperative for the success of a potential Magyar-led government that the EU becomes its good faith partner. After all, should he win, he'll be in for the fight of his life: breaking down an ironclad system designed over 16 years to realise one man's unquenchable thirst for influence is going to be incredibly difficult.

On the one hand, many of his electoral promises, including a comprehensive system change, hinge on a constitutional supermajority (two-thirds of all parliamentary seats, or 133 of 199 MPs). Though [surveys](#) conducted by independent research institutions show that Tisza's campaign has been successful in gaining even more support, the chances of such an electoral sweep remain slim, albeit not impossible. Suppose Magyar delivers the supermajority – even then, he might struggle to enact reforms quickly enough to meet the looming [deadline](#) to meet RRF milestones, while also trying to unlock as much of the rest of the frozen funds as possible.

It's not only Magyar but the entire population that'll need the EU's goodwill. Magyar's meteoric rise from a lesser-known Fidesz ally to the only person with a real shot at defeating Orbán clearly highlights the levels of [dissatisfaction](#) with the regime. All the people who have stood up behind Magyar have one thing in common and it's not their ideological allegiance: rather, it's the recognition that Tisza is the sole viable alternative to another four years of Orbán. He has built a broad, [diverse](#) coalition of citizens craving meaningful change and for Hungary to regain the trust of the EU27 – not to mention the funding that could help municipalities like Budapest.

Scepticism about letting Hungary access all EU funds would, of course, be warranted based on recent history. The EU is only supposed to unlock those commitments if and when all legal requirements – or ‘super milestones’ for the RRF – are sufficiently met. Yet the EU hasn’t exactly been consistent with enforcing those criteria, famously even unblocking some EUR 10 billion [in a deal with Orbán](#) back in 2023.

In Poland’s somewhat similar case, once Donald Tusk’s [new coalition government](#) took office, the EU was quick to act in good faith and took Tusk’s election promises of [a ‘democratic turnaround’](#) at face value. Within just a few months, Poland gained [access](#) to the RRF and partial cohesion funds, while the Article 7(1) process was also [closed](#), despite admissions that there was ‘more work to be done’ and reforms were yet to be fully implemented.

It was enough for the Commission’s vote of confidence that Tusk’s government presented clear political will and comprehensive plans for reforms to meet conditionality criteria and the supermilestones. Time and reality proved the Commission wrong – despite dedicated efforts, the expectations of sweeping institutional reforms didn’t materialise. Many of Tusk’s planned measures were blocked by presidential vetoes, leaving the country in a state of [paralysis](#).

What the Polish case shows is that conditionality measures are, above all else, political sanctions and that they can’t only be lifted because of legal reforms, but also as a symbolic gesture of political goodwill. However, the Commission backed itself into a corner, as its own backroom deal with Orbán in 2023 and the unblocking Poland’s access to funds in 2024 established that, first, there’s willingness to bend applicable rules to the detriment of legal obligations, and second, that ‘bigger picture’ political interests outweigh the letter of the law when assessing Member States’ progress on reforms.

There is, consequently, a precedent of inconsistency when it comes to the [enforcing conditionality rules](#). That’s why the Commission must make a tough choice: either give a potential Magyar government the Poland treatment or stay faithful to the set of laws it’s supposed to protect. If the Commission chooses the latter – which would be the lawful option in accordance with the rule of law – then it risks looking like it’s punishing Hungary unfairly compared to Poland and could quickly sour the fragile relationship with a new government attempting to bring the country back into the European mainstream.

Choosing the former option would extend a Tisza-led government the same courtesy that Donald Tusk received, but then the already bruised and battered rule of law would take yet another hit. While there’s no way the EU can make a right choice, if the overall goal is to help Hungary get back on track and normalise relationships with its government, the Commission’s next move should be clear. That’s not to say the EU should simply disregard its own laws and internal rules – which it really [shouldn’t keep doing](#) – yet the

Commission's own precedent of regarding conditionality as mostly a political matter makes it likely that the law is but another tool in the political arsenal.

In the end, it all comes down to this: Orbán built a system specifically to entrench power structures that personally benefit him. Without the EU's backing, politically *and* financially, overhauling it will be next to impossible. Likewise, undoing the damage to Hungary's reputation among the EU27 will also be a tall order without the Union's active assistance.

CONCLUSIONS – THE TIME IS NOW

At the end of the day, what will probably be decisive for our collective futures will not merely be the Commission's approach to a new Hungarian government. Though Brussels [probably has a favoured outcome](#), a new chapter of the EU-Hungary relationship will be written regardless of the election results. But even more importantly, more will hinge on how the EU handles its own failures and mounting issues that will persist with or without Orbán.

Overall, whether we're about to witness the messiest breakup since Brexit or wake up on 13 April to a new instalment of a long drawn out saga, the institutions are due a bit of self-reflection. All the above, though at times reminiscent of a soap opera, have shown that Viktor Orbán skilfully exposed the EU's greatest structural weaknesses. Perhaps one can even argue that Orbán did the EU a favour: he's shown time and time again that even though countries that hope to join the EU are forced to meet all its strict and demanding criteria, the EU has miserably failed to ensure that those same requirements remain respected even after accession.

That's the [cold, hard truth](#): the EU can and will go on long after the sun sets over Orbán's semi-autocratic regime. But that future is in jeopardy if the same systemic issues that enabled and sustained his continuous quarrels with the institutions aren't properly addressed. Even if Orbán loses, the EU cannot rest on its laurels and must act to fix what's broken – particularly when it comes to decision-making majorities and other procedural hurdles. If it doesn't, others will be emboldened to exploit those same weaknesses for personal political gain. There are some leaders who are already starting to follow the Orbán playbook and yet the EU is still hesitant to draw clear lines to prevent it.

The EU's values – democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights, dignity and equality – look good on paper. But they're not just ideals that are meant to be shown to candidate countries and then forgotten once they join the club. Our 'values' are principles that demand active enforcement and non-negotiable adherence from all sides. Without that commitment, the EU's entire foundation is weakened and empowers the destruction of European integration from within.

The words of the Tavares report still ring true: the Copenhagen mechanism needs to be applied even after accession for each and every Member State. And the Commission must step up and use the tools made available by the Treaties instead of allowing political conflicts to deteriorate *in lieu* of resolute action.

The time is now to address the shortcomings Orbán helped lay bare. Change is not only inescapable for Hungary but also for the EU: to secure ever-deepening, Europe-wide integration and learn from the mistakes of the past and present, the institutions, their legal framework and their inconsistent ways need to evolve and adapt to survive.

CEPS
Place du Congrès 1
B-1000 Brussels

