

BALÁZS BÖCSKEI

Magyar hope, Hungarian uncertainty

Hungary is preparing for a historic election. Since 2010, this will be the fourth parliamentary election that political commentators and opposition figures have described as “historic”. The word historic itself is not an objective or descriptive term, but rather a synonym for hope, “now or never” or “last chance”. The last expressions are undoubtedly based on a fatalistic view of the worst-case scenario, but what awaits us if we miss this ‘last chance’ is rarely explained. Let us accept that the adjective ‘historic’ now means nothing more than that an election is coming, the result of which could be the removal of Viktor Orbán from office.

We could conclude this much in advance, but there is considerable uncertainty about what follows from this. Although opinion polls suggest that, at the time of writing, there is a realistic chance of the Orbán government being voted out of office, in light of the three elections held so far, we know very little about what Hungary can expect in a post-Orbán era. Here, I am referring not only to the deep socio-economic and legal entrenchment of the Orbán regime – which I will discuss later – but also to the lack of a worldview, and thus a public policy outline, for the alternative government. The TISZA Party, led by Péter Magyar, who defected from Orbán’s Fidesz party after failing to make his mark there, is a formation without any values, the current slogan of which (“a functioning and humane Hungary”) is so empty that everyone (lobbyists; markets; economic backers and, of course, citizens somewhere down the line) can fill it with whatever content suits their interests.

This opposition is very different from any opposition since 2010. Compared to the Orbán opposition to date, Magyar’s politics are characterised by a distinctly technocratic populist habitus.¹ The program we know so far does not include any left-wing ideas about radically changing the redistribution system, rethinking fairer access to social goods or regulating the unrestrained market. On the other hand, on issues such as migration, energy independence, Ukraine and sovereignty (i.e., Orbán’s disputes with the European

1 Havlík, V. (2019) “Technocratic populism and political illiberalism in Central Europe”. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 6(66): 369-384; Buřtiková, L. and P. Guasti (2018) “The state as a firm: Understanding the autocratic roots of technocratic populism”. *East European Politics and Societies*, 2(33): 302-330.

Union, he represents positions that are clearly compatible with Fidesz. If we take the voting behaviour of TISZA representatives in the European Parliament as a basis – and in the case of a politician, what else could we use as a yardstick for their worldview other than their actions – we see that the Hungarian right-wing coalition, namely, Fidesz, Mi Hazánk and TISZA, often vote together.

It is difficult to predict how a potential change of government would impact Hungarian-European relations. There are several reasons for this: Magyar is not currently seeking to embed Hungary's vision for the future in a predictable, realistic, and coherent foreign policy and foreign economic strategy. It is not as if he is alone among European leaders in this regard, but after more than 15 years of disputes with the EU, it would be desirable to know where he would break with Orbán's thinking and where he would go from there. Slogan-like plans such as "restoring V4 cooperation" or "joining the eurozone" are not yet strategies, but merely topoi of mainstream Hungarian foreign and economic policy thinking since the fall of communism.

For many years, the Hungarian opposition has promised to "bring home EU funds". Péter Magyar is no different in this regard. What is different, however, is that he makes no mention of his position on the controversial issue of corruption and other normative issues that contravene EU law, which form the background to the blocking of EU funds. On the issues of Ukraine and integration, as well as relations with Russian energy suppliers, he holds a position almost identical to that of Fidesz. These are currently the most important issues on the European stage. These are the issues that define European value politics.

It should be noted that, on these issues, his opinion is contrary to that of the European People's Party – the European mainstream – and it appears that the European People's Party itself is waiting for the 2026 Hungarian elections with strategic silence. The question is whether the People's Party will tolerate the separate TISZA policy if there is a change of government. Or will it rather submit the bill for immunity after the election? The latter is more likely, given the balance of power between the two parties; this is the order of politics. What causes disorder in this order is that Magyar's current foreign policy thinking does not yet reflect this possible turn of events. The question, therefore, is whether we should expect continuity or some kind of compromise policy in this area.

In the event of Orbán's removal, another phenomenon, already existing elsewhere, contributes to the unpredictability of the Central European region. This is the post-liberal trilemma described by Stanley Bill and Ben Stanley in the summer issue of the *Journal of Democracy*² in connection with the Tusk government after PIS. This means meeting voters' expectations that the illiberal state will be dismantled through quick, effective and legally sound democratic solutions. However, as the Polish example shows, in practice, even in the best-case scenario, only two of the three conditions can be met. This, in turn, could further erode democratic resilience. As the authors emphasise, one of the most important legacies of illiberalism is the legal traps deeply rooted in the institutional system, which are

2 Bill, S. and B. Stanley (2025) "Democracy after illiberalism: A warning from Poland". *Journal of Democracy*, 3(36): 16-32.