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# A Turning Point for Europe? Life After Orban

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Part of **RTL**

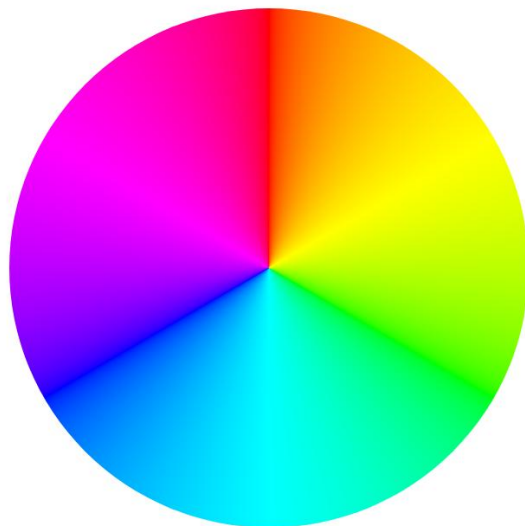
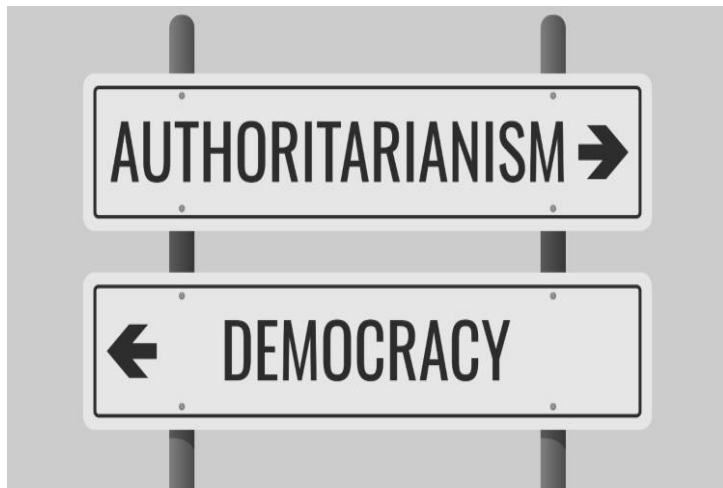
# The Hungarian Icarus came crashing down



## Was Hungary a democracy all along?!

### YES

- elections were regularly held
- multiple parties competed
- voters could, in principle change the government



### BUT

- legal and constitutional engineering favoring the ruling party  
+ emergency governance since 2020
- electoral system favoring the biggest party (~50% = 2/3 majority)
- use of state resources in campaigns (billions of Euros just on billboards!)
- weakening of and checks and balances → no accountability
- media landscape heavily skewed toward the government
- pressure on civil society and academia (chasing away CEU)
- populism turned up to the extreme

# The campaign



M1 (public tv)



During the election campaign Tisza lead a successful,

Gulyasagyü Media

# FAKE NEWS! FAKE NEWS! FAKE NEWS!

**FIDESZ-TÖBBSÉG MARAD A KÖVETKEZŐ ORSZÁGGYŰLÉSSEN IS**



**MANDÁTUMBECSLÉS  
A 2026-OS VÁLASZTÁSI EREDMÉNYRŐL**



I saw it on one of the posts....

FB/ Balazs Nemeth



# What turned the tide?

Orban systematically changed the electoral system:  
 - one-round election, winner compensation, fewer seats



This favors the biggest party (Tisza won 2/3 majority with 53% of the votes)

Orban concentrated power within his own party



Only the faithful stayed around Orban → mistake!

He kept opposition fragmented  
 - newcomers discouraged by smear campaigns  
 - sham parties allowed to run  
 - some "old opposition" bought/blackmailed to run



The "old opposition" has eroded completely  
 - this triggered a rise of a new political power  
 - sham parties **exposed by media**  
 - fake campaigns **exposed by the media**

Populism, based on fear, foreign policy



Peter Magyar outperformed Orban in populism, being much more in touch with the times

Local strongmen bribe/coerce voters, exploiting the most vulnerable



**Independent media** exposed & vigilante groups formed to document voter fraud

Completely changed the media landscape, spending billions on social media, offline newspapers, taking over public media and commercial tv channels



The last remaining **independent media** (RTL, 444, HVG, Telex, Direk36, Partizan, Atlatzso etc) stayed strong and kept exposing the wrongdoings of the government

# 28 years of RTL – 20 under Orbán

- 1998-2002: relatively undisturbed, arguably the best out of his five terms in terms of media freedom
- 2002 defeat: „make no mistake” again:
  - Beginning with their 2010 victory, Orbán began taking control of media.
  - Over the past 16 years, Fidesz shaped the media environment: financial pressure, corporate buyouts
  - Replacing the independent broadcasting authority, staffing it **exclusively with Fidesz appointees.**
  - Complete control over public media



Photo: Christophe Karaba/ dpa

## RTL's main competitor TV2

- Fidesz-affiliated interests took completely control between 2015 and 2019

**ESemények**



**TISZA PÁRT**

**BRÜSSZEL**





**FIDESZ**

**NEMZETI KORMÁNY**



**ÁPRILIS 12-ÉN LESZNEK A VÁLASZTÁSOK!**



>>> I will vote for Viktor Orbán <<<

## Media capture continues

- Open attack against RTL – media law tailored so that it only destroys RTL revenue
- Ratings: TV2 – news and in general - had managed to close the gap, head to head in recent years
- RTL News has never been a political weapon
  - strict codex, counting SOT seconds
  - keepign distance, staying objective
  - writing clearly, simply, without adjectives, as much as possible.
- Reuters report 2025: together with Greece, Hungary had the lowest trust in news (22%)
- Public opinion on brand trust: **RTL had the highest (47%)** in 2025
- Social media feedbacks after elections: „Thank you for your hard work” (could be interpreted maliciously)



Reporters Without Borders report 2024



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Instagram/Peter Magyar

And then came  
election night...

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Instagram/Peter Magyar

# ENEX Slack channel during campaign

- 33 members – email and phone requests re-routed here
- Info updated on the fly
- Individual threads for extra requests

☆ **hungary-elections** 33 members 🔒 🔊 🔔 🔍 ⋮

Messages Files Hungary Elections - What ... Pins Agenda +

**Lajos SZEL** 8:49 AM Monday, April 13th

You'll need it I suppose 😊 - how to pronounce Péter MAGYAR (edited)

Audio

0:03 1x

👍 👍 2 🗨️

**Lajos SZEL** 10:37 AM

**International election observers for Hungary's parliamentary elections to hold press conference on Monday**

BUDAPEST International observers will hold a press conference to present their preliminary conclusions following the 12 April parliamentary elections in Hungary.

**What:**

- A press conference of the international election observation mission for the parliamentary elections in Hungary
- You can also follow the livestream [here and www.oscepa.org](http://www.oscepa.org)

**Who:**

- Sargis Khandanyan, Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission
- Pablo Hispan, Head of the delegation from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)
- Rupa Huq, Head of the delegation from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA)
- Eoghan Murphy, Head of the ODIHR election observation mission

**When:**

- 15:00 local time (CEST) on 13 April 2026

**Where:**

- Bartók Conference Room, Budapest Congress Center, Jegello ut 1-3, Budapest

**Registration:**

- No registration is necessary if you are attending the press conference in person, but only questions from journalists will be taken (edited)

# Election night at RTL

- 17 incoming live signals – party hubs & main cities
- 3 outgoing live signals to ENEX
- Still on the ENEX agenda days later

R T L

“The atmosphere was indescribable. We started our coverage in what was widely described as an illiberal political system and ended it in a new one – a truly historic moment.”

**Róbert Kotroczó**

News Director at RTL Hungary



# Is this a turning point for Europe?

- a long-entrenched illiberal governments can still be removed through democratic elections
- the most prominent pro-Russian and anti-EU voice inside the European Union GONE
- strengthens EU cohesion on Ukraine, sanctions, and rule-of-law enforcement
- symbolic setback for the broader illiberal nationalist movement in Europe
- the intensity of the bounce-back of democracy in Hungary is stunning
- populism remains strong in Europe despite Orban's defeat
- Slovakia's Robert Fico returned to power on a nationalist, pro-Russian platform
- Romania has seen rising support for nationalist and anti-establishment parties such as AUR
- right-wing populist parties continue gaining ground in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Austria
- economic insecurity (looming crisis), migration fears, and distrust of elites still fuel inequality, polarization, identity politics, distrust in institutions - boosted by social media, AI

**A temporary electoral setback for one leader OR the beginning of the end for the populist wave?**

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**Thank you**