



## Why Hungary Re-Elected a Pro-Putin Regime—And What Factors May Shift That Support

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In April 2022, Hungary's long-time prime minister Viktor Orban defied predictions to win his largest victory yet, in the midst of the war in neighboring Ukraine. In his fourth consecutive bid for office since returning to power in Hungary in 2010, Orban faced his most serious challenge from a broad-spectrum opposition coalition led by Peter Mark-Zay, a conservative, small town mayor. Despite the opposition's focus on the Orban government's corruption and ties to Russia, Orban won more popular votes than ever before (54% to the opposition's 34%, translating into a parliamentary super-majority of 68%); a new far-right party is also entering parliament for the first time with 6% of the vote.

With many Europeans hewing to much sharper anti-Putin views as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, why did Hungarians re-elect an autocratic leader with ties to Putin? Four reasons explain this surprising result: the government's extreme media dominance, an electoral framework created to entrench the governing party's advantage, steady economic growth and large European Union subsidies, and receptivity to Orban's promise of safety and security spurred by fears of the nearby war. These factors made the election almost unwinnable by any opponent.

### The Government's Media Dominance

During Orban's 12 years in power, his government changed Hungary's **media landscape** changed dramatically, with the rising dominance of Orban's national-conservative political party Fidesz. Fidesz-affiliated media outlets now dominate nearly 80% of the media market—and as a result, perhaps one-third of the population receives only government messaging through the expanded public media conglomerate and a commercial conglomerate owned by a close associate of Orban. A third popular commercial television station is foreign-owned and independent, but produces little political coverage. All independent print newspapers have been forced out of business, though a vibrant independent and critical journalism is available on the internet. The current electoral law provides for the opposition prime ministerial candidate to have only a single five minute slot on the public television channel during the entire campaign. At the same time, the fusion of party and state and lack of campaign oversight resulted in a constant stream of publicly funded pro-Fidesz messaging, attacks on the opposition and supposed foreign enemies controlling them, and a pro-Russia line in the state media.

### Electoral Rules Favor Fidesz

Over the last decade, Hungary's election framework has been crafted to advantage the governing party. A system of single-member districts and a single national party list vote by proportional representation, as outlined in the nation's 2012 constitution, has allowed Fidesz to win 2/3 of the seats while winning just 45% of

the popular vote in 2014, and again in 2018 with just 49%. **Extreme gerrymandering** along with unequal district sizes (the population can vary up to 35% among districts) combine to allow a minority party to win a supermajority in parliament, and to amend the constitution at will.

The Orban government further boosted their electoral chances by granting citizenship to thousands of citizens of neighboring states who have Hungarian ancestry but no residence in Hungary, and allowing them to vote by mail in Hungarian elections (about 5% of all registered voters). These new citizens in the near-abroad are eligible for state benefits and in 2018 voted 95% for Fidesz; meanwhile Hungarians abroad temporarily for work or travel (less than 1% of registered voters) are forced to vote in their host country's limited consulate locations. Finally, public spending in support of Fidesz candidates was rampant, with the party and its publically-funded allies **spending** eight times the amount spent by the united opposition coalition on billboard political advertising alone, well above the legal campaign limit even before counting extensive social media advertising.

## **Economic Success Boosts Orban Support**

Orban's support grew following a decade of economic prosperity as Hungary recovered from its own 2006 economic crisis and the global financial crisis of 2008-2010, helped along by large (between 3 and 6% of Gross Domestic Product each year) European Union subsidies beginning in 2009. Hungary has used these subsidies to benefit average citizens, local businesses, and multinational companies alike. Agricultural subsidies from the EU have also funded Orban's family and friends as they buy up auctioned farmland. Orban's creation of an extensive concentration of wealth protected administratively in a form of "**mafia state**" resulted in Transparency International's demoting Hungary by 13 points over the last decade in its annual perceived **corruption index**, to the lowest score (43 of 100) in Central and Eastern Europe next to Bulgaria. Orban further built support in poor rural areas with controlled utilities prices and "public works" jobs at half the minimum wage, offered discretionally by mayors to local citizens. Concerned by the challenge of the newly united opposition, Orban introduced additional huge election-year giveaways, including a full refund of 2021 income taxes for any family with a child under 18 years of age.

## **The War Shifts the Axes of Polarization**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24 upended the campaigning in Hungary, a European Union and NATO member country. Hungarian voters are polarized around several cleavages: relations with Russia, urban vs rural voters, and fundamentally for and against the Orban regime. The initial campaign themes emphasized Fidesz' promise of continued prosperity and protecting Christian family values, while the opposition emphasized the government's corruption and impunity.

After the war began, both campaigns pivoted, with Orban promising "peace, not war," vowing to keep Hungary out of the conflict. He refused to allow NATO to transfer arms to Ukraine through Hungary, rejected sanctions on Russian oil and gas (on which 80% of Hungary's energy needs depend), and refused to condemn Putin directly. Orban recast his former stringent anti-refugee policy to embrace the tens of thousands of Ukrainian refugees flooding across the border from Ukraine, particularly those of Hungarian descent. The opposition meanwhile put out campaign ads posing a choice between Europe and Putin, making clear they are with Europe and NATO (both of which are popular in Hungary) and associating Orban with Putin's aggression in Ukraine, Georgia and Syria.

## What Next?

Up to now, Orban has successfully threaded the needle between his EU and NATO membership and his decades-long pivot toward Putin, including an extreme dependence on Russian oil, gas and a planned nuclear power plant. But Orban is increasingly politically isolated in Europe, and now for the first time a real **threat** to cut Hungary's access to subsidies under a new rule of law conditionality has emerged. With the war raging in Ukraine, however, it is unclear whether the European Council will garner the qualified majority required to punish Hungary.

In the meantime, Orban will face continued rising inflation, a large fiscal deficit, and possible difficulty in accessing Russian oil and gas. Thus, while the election was certainly a blow to the opposition, Orban may for the first time since 2010 be facing a major economic downturn, likely softening his support considerably. If major protests emerge, he may face a choice between resorting to more repressive measures or living within European Union constraints on corruption and human rights abuses. The EU faces a choice about enforcing their own democracy and rule of law norms, or maintaining unanimity, especially in the context of war. And opposition parties face a choice to succumb to an internal blame game and fragmentation, or to continue to build on the advances made in organizing and coordinating to forge stronger ties with voters and civil society organizations, and prepare for the next opportunities to compete.