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Lessons from the Hungarian Revolution



Against the backdrop of the dire situation prevailing across the globe, the defeat of the populist Viktor Orbán in Hungary stands out as a welcome exception. The victory of his opponent, Magyar, was clear-cut and resounding (53% of the vote), leaving no room for dispute. Let us rejoice and try to draw some lessons from this:

- For France first and foremost: one must admire the instinct of the entire left-wing opposition, which, across all parties, decided to withdraw from the electoral contest to ensure the victory of the candidate best placed to win. This sacrifice means they are no longer represented at all in the Hungarian Parliament (they had 35 MPs). Could the French political class not reflect on this example amidst the next presidential election?
- Next, regarding European populism: even though Peter Magyar's victory is excellent news, it would be wrong to see it as the inevitable and irreversible end of populism in Europe. Populism is thriving in several countries, including France, Germany, Italy, etc... The roots of the anti-European and far-right vote lie in economic conditions which impoverish the middle classes, increase social inequalities, and make the risk of future impoverishment a major argument that leads them to take the plunge and vote for populist parties.

The Hungarian example is nevertheless instructive regarding the trajectory of populism, whether in Europe or South America: populism is born out of an ideological victory and dies out of economic failure. When Viktor Orbán began his rise to power in 2009, Hungary was suffering terribly from the crisis that had begun in the United States a year earlier: it was the first European country to receive a €20 billion loan from the IMF, accompanied by conditions of drastic austerity. Victor Orban won the 2010 elections on two slogans: no to 'dictates' from abroad, particularly from Brussels; long live Hungarian nationalism. Sixteen years later, the Hungarian economy is in ruins, corruption has proven to be massive, nepotism reigns, and ultimately the Hungarians have ousted him. Question: will we have to wait sixteen years for the Americans to get rid of Trump or a Trumpist successor? Follow-up question: why are populists so stupid?

- For Ukraine: this event is good news in the short term but does not resolve all the difficulties that lie ahead. Thus, the €90 billion loan promised by the EU in February 2026 will no doubt be released swiftly, although the new prime minister has reaffirmed his country's non-participation in this collective effort. Nevertheless, Hungary's new leader is hostile to Ukraine's accession to the EU, and his country's energy dependencies on Russia will continue to weigh heavily on its relationship with Moscow. As for Putin, he has certainly lost an ally with Orbán's defeat, but he can count on Donald Trump to continue undermining the prospects of a fair and lasting resolution to the conflict in Ukraine.
- For MAGA supporters and other Trumpists: Orbán's defeat is also their defeat. JD Vance, the US Vice-President, had personally travelled to Budapest five days before the vote to support his ally Orbán: it was one trip too many. However, they can still count on their Slovak and Czech supporters; above all, they can step up their support for the British, German and French far right, which is not good news.
- For the EU: the democratic outlook is brightening, three years after the defeat of the PiS in Poland, but it must be acknowledged that it played only a marginal role in this revolution. The credit for such a result lies solely with the courage, or the sheer exasperation, of the Hungarians. The Member States, on the other hand, stood out due to their timidity: it was indeed in 2018 that the European Parliament called on the Council to activate Article 7 of the Treaty regarding serious breaches of the EU's founding values by a Member State. In 2025, however, the Council, after several meetings, had still not issued its conclusions nor identified any 'clear signs' of a breach of the rule of law in Hungary... One wonders where it was looking... Consequently, there followed neither sanctions, nor the suspension of voting rights, nor any stigmatization of Hungary. The only measure taken by the EU was to freeze funds due to the country under the Treaty: some €17 billion. But the decision came very late, on the one hand (ten years after Viktor Orbán came to power); on the other hand, it penalized the population above all, largely due to corruption within the ruling clique.

Looking ahead, should there be any unfortunate developments in certain other countries, we hope for greater courage and democratic resolve on the part of the Union's leaders: let us not forget that the next parliamentary elections in Poland are due to take place in autumn 2027, and the populists of the PiS are already ready for battle.