

● European Power

## The morning after: Lessons from Poland for a post-Orban Hungary

Hungarians have a new leader who promises to heal the country after 16 years of democratic backsliding. Lessons from the Polish experience suggest this is easier said than done



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### The hard part begins

This morning, Hungarians woke to a new country. Peter Magyar's resounding victory in Sunday's parliamentary election has ended 16 years of Viktor Orban's rule. His campaign promised to reverse Hungary's entrenched illiberal system and anti-EU direction under Orban, but this is far easier said than done.

Magyar and his Tisza party are not the first to make this attempt. Since 2023 Poland's liberal-conservative government led by Donald Tusk has been trying to undo the eight years of democratic backsliding under the populist and Orban-friendly predecessors, the Law and Justice party (PiS). It has been an uphill

battle. After more than two years in power the major reforms required to fully restore the system based on the rule of law are far from complete. And the country is torn apart by deep political polarisation which hinders Warsaw's room for manoeuvre and influence in the EU. Tisza's tremendous success—so far with 138 seats to Orban's Fidesz party's 55—give Magyar the constitutional majority that Tusk never had. While this means he can clear more hurdles, Magyar has a lot to learn from the Polish experience. Meanwhile, those in Brussels and European capitals need to manage their expectations. A post-Orban Hungary will not become a liberal, pro-EU beacon overnight.

## Democratic repair

Even though Orban conceded defeat, he will likely use all available means to undermine Magyar's government and legitimacy. In Poland, PiS went so far as to question the legality of the law PiS itself had previously adopted in order to denounce Tusk's allegedly "authoritarian" ambitions. Restoring and respecting the rule of law proves extremely difficult in post-illiberal systems. Ousting Orban loyalists from the Budget Council or media supervisory institutions before the end of their terms would be politically legitimate, but may make legal purists raise their eyebrows—and Orban will cry wolf for sure.

The Polish lesson is this: one needs to act quickly and decisively on implementing reforms, using the momentum and the enormous confidence of voters. The revolutionary moment does not last long and the patience of the electorate is finite.

Transparency and communication are also crucial. Magyar needs to manage expectations by being clear about what is possible and what is not and be very precise about how his reforms will improve the rule of law standards in practice. The latter is indispensable for the release of billions in EU money. In the Polish case, the European Commission unfroze funds on the basis of political commitments (which were solid and convincing), not actual reforms (which were impossible to achieve due to the obstruction of the PiS-affiliated president). The EU should engage quickly with the new Hungarian government, as soon as it is in place, and give it a helping hand while insisting on a clear reform plan.

## Back towards Brussels

With Magyar's Tisza party gaining 54% of votes and a constitutional majority it has the opportunity to reshape the political system in Hungary by removing

Orban's cronies, restoring the rule of law and changing the institutional set-up. Magyar portrayed the election as a choice between East and West and once in office he will try to mend fences with Brussels and key EU member states. His first visit will be to Warsaw—a symbolic move underscoring the parallel journeys of the two leaders. The main indicator of Magyar's pro-European turn would be the lifting of Budapest's opposition to the €90bn loan for Ukraine and the opening of the first cluster of Kyiv's accession negotiations.

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