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The election big powers want to win

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Orbán's defeat in Hungary would deprive nationalist conservatives around the world of a champion. Opponents see this weekend's vote as a chance to halt autocracy.

For a sense of the wild accusations bandied about ahead of Hungary's pivotal parliamentary election on Sunday, look no further than Viktor Orbán's reaction to an alleged attempt to blow up a cross-border gas pipeline over the Easter weekend.

"I think Hungary is safe now," said the prime minister, a pioneering champion of "illiberal democracy", after rushing to the scene and insinuating that Ukraine was behind the foiled attack.

Foreign interference has been a dominant Orbán motif throughout his campaigning for a contest that Zselyke Csáky at the Centre for European Reform in Budapest terms "the EU's most important election" not just this year but for "quite some time".

Since the outcome will have immediate consequences for Europe and beyond, it is a vote Washington, Moscow, Kyiv and Brussels all want to win.

Defeat for Orbán after 16 years in office would deprive nationalist conservatives across the world of a trailblazer and ideological champion, robbing both the White House and the Kremlin of a highly trusted ally.

For his opponents, the election offers a rare chance to halt the country's long slide into autocracy while assuaging EU worries about corruption and the rule of law, as well as removing a chief obstacle to practical aid for war-torn Ukraine.

They also worry he could use his allegations of outside meddling as a pretext to dispute a bad result. But despite Orbán's talk linking the supposed pipeline plot to "Ukrainian capabilities", the conspiracy theory hit a snag. Security experts, citing Hungarian intelligence sources, had previously warned of a "false flag" sabotage operation targeting energy infrastructure — including on the same pipeline just across the border in Serbia. Serbian authorities said there was no evidence to date of Ukrainian involvement.

Péter Magyar, the man taking on Orbán in Sunday's election, derided the plot as a "low-quality farce" staged by an "operetta government".

At present it is Magyar's Tisza party that has an average 13-point lead in independent opinion polls, even though government-aligned surveys put Orbán's Fidesz party 6.5 points ahead.

Government support has been weakened by three years of almost zero economic growth and inflation that at one point was the highest in the EU. Public resentment is rising at crony capitalism and rigged public procurement contracts favouring Orbán's associates.

This week, US vice-president JD Vance flew to Hungary to help Orban "in this campaign cycle" while decrying "truly disgraceful" foreign interference from Brussels. In a rally he called President Donald Trump and held up the phone to the microphone. "I'm a big fan of Viktor," Trump told the audience.

Defeat for Orbán would also remove a government that is friendly to Beijing and sounds almost servile to Moscow.

"In any matter where I can be of assistance, I'm at your service," Orbán told Russian President Vladimir Putin in a telephone conversation in October, offering to be a "mouse" aiding Russia's "lion", according to a leaked transcript seen by Bloomberg. Foreign minister Péter Szijjártó has appeared to admit to briefing Russian officials about confidential discussions on sanctions policy with his EU counterparts.

Ukraine is the neighbour that would feel the most immediate impact of a change of government in Budapest.

Relations between the two countries have been highly strained by arguments over the rights of the small Hungarian minority living in western Ukraine, energy supplies from Russia and Orbán's pro-Kremlin stance.

In previous campaigns, Orbán whipped up fears of outside interference by attacking liberal philanthropist George Soros, illegal immigrants and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen.

Now Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is touted as the threat to Hungary, his face plastered across Fidesz billboards up and down the country.

More concretely, Orbán has blocked the payment of a €90bn EU loan to Kyiv that he consented to in December. Ukraine could be forced within weeks to take drastic measures to shore up its defences, including printing money, if the funds remain frozen and European governments are not able to tide it over with smaller loans.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz has labelled the veto "a gross act of disloyalty within the European Union" while European Council president António Costa said it breached the principle of "sincere co-operation" binding all EU members.

EU leaders are quietly rooting for a sweeping victory for Magyar and Tisza. A conservative patriot and former member of the governing elite, Magyar is no EU federalist, analysts say. But he has

pledged to restore co-operation with EU institutions, not least to persuade Brussels to release nearly €20bn in funds to Hungary frozen over rule-of-law shortcomings.

He is opposed to accelerated EU membership for Ukraine but Brussels hopes he will lift Orbán's block on the start of negotiations.

A fifth successive term for the prime minister, on the other hand, would deepen fears of Hungarian obstruction over EU foreign policy and in negotiations over the next seven-year EU budget, which would enable Budapest to hold the bloc to ransom.

In such circumstances, the EU would have few options, since it lacks effective legal tools for reversing a slide to autocracy. Its ultimate sanction of stripping a member state of its voting rights requires the unanimous support of the other 26 member states, unlikely given Orbán's allies hold power in Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Italy.

Fidesz insiders say the party has a solid base of 1.5mn core voters and can persuade a few hundred thousand more to stick with it. But it would have to "mobilise" another 500,000 inactive or disengaged voters to win.

Mayors, local non-profit organisations, opposition activists and representatives of the country's large Roma community have warned that vote buying is under way already, with millions of euros' worth of cash spread around the country, to favour Fidesz come election day, although such allegations are notoriously difficult to prove.

"This can decide the elections," says Antal Máté, the opposition party mayor of Nyírbátor in eastern Hungary, where vote-buying in a large Roma slum is alleged to have helped deliver the Fidesz parliamentary candidate an 83 per cent vote share four years ago.

Several government spokespersons and Fidesz representatives did not reply to repeated requests for comment.

Orbán has also tilted elections in his favour by tightening control over the media and using government resources for electioneering. Pre-election giveaways will cost 2.2 per cent of GDP.

Such moves are part of the prime minister's established playbook. But what is new in the campaign is the outlandishness of the government's allegations about foreign meddling — particularly about Ukraine. Some intelligence experts worry that the country most likely to interfere in the race is Russia, but it is Kyiv and Brussels that are at the heart of Orbán's claims.

Yesterday, the Hungarian prime minister claimed his opponents would "stop at nothing to seize power", accusing them of "colluding with foreign intelligence services".

Earlier this year, Hungarian authorities claimed more than a dozen schools had received bomb threats written in Ukrainian, allegations relayed by pro-government media. No bombs were found and no evidence of any threat was detected

Last month, Hungarian anti-terror police intercepted a van transporting cash and gold from an Austrian bank to a Ukrainian one. Hungarian officials suggested the money was intended for nefarious purposes. It was impounded and an anti-money laundering investigation was launched. The two lenders said it was a routine liquidity operation, a line supported by the European Central Bank. News of the “golden van” incident appeared to goad Zelenskyy into issuing what sounded like a physical threat to the Hungarian leader. Alluding to Orbán, the Ukrainian president said he would “give this person’s address to our armed forces”.

His outburst delighted the Fidesz campaign. “Mr Zelenskyy is one of the biggest supporters of Orbán. He’s really done a lot to help his re-election,” says an adviser who claims internet polls may underestimate Orbán’s support.

Magyar has himself been the target of a string of smear campaigns.

Unnamed opponents threatened to release a secretly recorded video of him having sex with his girlfriend after attending a party in a rented apartment where other guests had illegal drugs. Magyar admitted to being lured into a “honey trap” but denied taking drugs. He gave hair and urine samples to an Austrian clinic and published the results showing he was clean.

To date, Magyar has appeared to have a Teflon quality that has made him Orbán’s most formidable opponent in years. He has united most anti-government forces and built a grassroots movement, handling his own social media and campaigning indefatigably in an effort to circumvent Orbán’s control of traditional outlets.

It would be a stretch to call an Orbán defeat the end of illiberalism in Hungary, says Csáky of the CER. Fidesz has captured so many state institutions that Orbán would have multiple ways to thwart a new government’s actions.

Nor has Magyar yet established his liberal reform credentials — at home or abroad. “Hungary won’t return to Europe like the prodigal son,” says an EU diplomat. “It will be more like the return of the cheating husband.”