

Hungarian election

Who is Péter Magyar, the man who ended the Orbán era?

Ally-turned-foe has unseated Hungary's long-serving leader

Marton Dunai in Budapest

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Twenty years ago, a young lawyer joined anti-corruption protests led by then-opposition leader Viktor Orbán and helped set up a legal defence group for demonstrators called “Do not be afraid”.

Péter Magyar, once a ruling party insider who married a rising figure in Orbán's circle, has since turned against Hungary's prime minister. He used that same “do not be afraid” motto as he broke with the Orbán regime, denouncing it as being marred by graft and clientelism.

“It is a great story, the youngest prince, the people's prodigal son, David versus Goliath. Everyone can associate with that,” said Bálint Ruff, a strategist and editor of the political show *Veto*.

This account of Magyar's arc, from Orbán ally to his arch-nemesis and now elected as his successor after a [landslide election win](#) on Sunday, draws on conversations with people close to both men as well as party insiders.

The 45-year-old [Magyar](#) comes from a well-to-do conservative family in the hills of Budapest. His relatives include prominent lawyers and judges, as well as former president Ferenc Mádly, who was elected during Orbán's first term as premier.

Magyar joined Orbán's Fidesz party in 2003, married fellow conservative Judit Varga in 2006 and had three sons. They spent several years in Brussels, where she worked for a Fidesz MEP, while he held diplomatic roles.

They returned to [Hungary](#) in 2018. The following year, she became justice minister — a job she gave up in 2023 to lead the Fidesz campaign for the European parliament election.

Her political career ended abruptly a year later when Orbán made her take the fall over a cover-up in a widening child sex abuse scandal. Varga resigned amid [mounting outrage](#) over the pardon of a former official convicted of helping cover up abuse at a children's home.

By then, the couple's turbulent marriage had ended acrimoniously with allegations of domestic abuse against him, which he has denied. Varga accused Magyar of betrayal after he published recordings of their private conversations, in which she complained about government interference in politically sensitive court cases.

The child sex abuse scandal and Varga's downfall prompted Magyar to leave Fidesz, accusing it of corruption, moral decline and scapegoating of women. Alongside his ex-wife the country's president at the time, Katalin Novák, was also forced to resign over the same scandal.

“For a long time I believed in the ideal of a patriotic, sovereign Hungary,” Magyar wrote in 2024. “But in recent years I had to realise it is nothing but a political product, sugar coating . . . the perpetuation of power and the accumulation of enormous wealth.”

Magyar said Orbán and his chief of staff Antal Rogán were “hiding behind women's skirts”.



Protests in Budapest in 2024 over the child sex abuse scandal © Janos Kummer/Getty Images

Varga has remained loyal to Orbán but largely steered clear of political mudslinging. In a rare public comment about her ex-husband last year, she said: “I want no part of a race where this creature called Péter Magyar can score points.”

She has learnt carpentry and started a company with her new partner, László Windisch, head of the Hungarian State Audit Office. Last year, Orbán made overtures, saying Varga “possesses prime ministerial skills”. She has not returned to politics.

Unlike her, Magyar seems to thrive in the toxic environment of Orbán-dominated media.

Mocked for wearing tight trousers in pro-government videos focusing on his crotch, Magyar responded by posing with bananas and making banana shakes. The posts quickly went viral. He also uses the clown emoji to signal disdain for the government.

“He responds to unfounded attacks by reframing rather than contesting them,” said Tamás Topolánszky, a filmmaker who chronicled Magyar’s rise in a recent documentary, *Spring Wind*. He described the approach as “unconventional but effective”.

“He knows how to provoke the establishment to keep his name on the agenda . . . He is extremely fast, does his own social media and understands what makes a meme, how to benefit from viral content.”

Liberals and leftists have previously banded together but none came close to threatening Orbán’s grip on power. By contrast, Magyar “was at the right place at the right time, lifting off amid the outrage over the child sex abuse case”, Ruff said. “He is extremely driven. Others have had the tools, but he went all in and did the legwork.”

His largely domestic agenda — improving social services, reviving a stagnant economy, and tackling high inflation and corruption — struck a nerve with voters.

He vowed to restore democratic checks and balances and said he would prosecute members of the Orbán elite who have enriched themselves. “Comrades: it’s over,” he said at a recent rally — a message directed at Orbán. He urged the crowd: “Repeat after me: handcuffs, handcuffs, bars, bars!”

Less antagonistic towards the EU and Ukraine than Orbán, Magyar has said he would create a predictable business environment to appeal to western investors — in contrast to Orbán’s incentives for Russian and Chinese projects.



Péter Magyar on a march through the village of Tápíószentmárton © Marton Monus/Reuters

But the opposition leader also remains a nationalist, stressing he will not automatically toe the EU line. Like Orbán, he wants to retain the option of cheap Russian energy imports he deems essential for European recovery.

At another Magyar rally, Imre, a 45-year-old entrepreneur from Tura, a small town outside Budapest, complained about the yawning wealth gaps between the premier's associates and ordinary people. Orbán's son-in-law István Tiborcz bought a château and turned it into a boutique hotel in Tura.

"Nobody in town can afford to stay at that hotel," Imre said. "The château is a perfect example of how divorced from reality Orbán is."

Magyar is "honest, doesn't lie, and is not corrupt", Imre said. "He is clean despite the best efforts of Fidesz, who have tried to smear him for two years, to no avail. That is more than anyone in Fidesz can say."

Among them is a recent scandal involving a former girlfriend, Evelin Vogel, who Magyar says was secretly working for Fidesz. He recently released excerpts of a 2025 police investigation report showing that senior Fidesz campaign figures directed her to spy on him in what he said was "a smear campaign".

Pro-Orbán media outlets said the pair had an intimate drug-fuelled encounter in 2024 which was secretly recorded and which an unidentified opponent threatened to release. Magyar accused Fidesz of organising the set-up and filed a police complaint. He said the encounter took place — at a time when he was single — and that narcotics were present. But he denied personal use and took a drug test at a lab in Vienna to prove he was clean.

Vogel told local media 444 she had no knowledge of the recording and was also a victim of illegal surveillance. She did not comment on the accusations that she was spying for Fidesz.

Film producer Claudia Sümeghy, who has spent a long time with Magyar, said he respected women. “There are loads of women in the community, including leaders of Tisza” branches, Sümeghy said. “He treats them as equals.”

At the recent Magyar rally, women acknowledged Magyar was “no saint” but said they would still vote for him.

“I don’t want to marry Magyar,” said Olga, a 63-year-old teacher. “I just want him to get rid of Orbán.”

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