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Ukraine after Orbán's defeat – restraint and waiting

Péter Magyar's victory and Viktor Orbán's defeat were greeted with cautious optimism in Ukraine. While the disappearance of one of Kyiv's main critics within the EU opens up new opportunities for cooperation, reactions from politicians and experts remain reserved. From a Ukrainian perspective, this represents not a breakthrough, but rather a correction to Budapest's previous, pragmatic policy.

Before the elections. The Hungarian election campaign was closely watched in Ukraine. The entire election debate was dominated here by the Ukrainian perspective, i.e., the question of Hungary's relations with Ukraine following a potential victory for Péter Magyar. Much has been written about him, with extensive analysis of his entire biography, career, and long political experience. His former fascination with Viktor Orbán and his long career with Fidesz were also frequently recalled. However, it was also emphasized that in recent years he had strongly criticized the Hungarian government's ties with Russia, often calling them a relationship between "two dictators." It was also appreciated that, unlike Orbán, he unequivocally assessed the Russian-Ukrainian war, saying that Russia was the aggressor and Ukraine had the right to defend its territory (including during his visit to Kyiv in 2024). At the same time, it was pointed out that Orbán not only based his campaign on extreme anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, personal attacks on Volodymyr Zelensky, and slogans like "this is not our war," but also benefited from broad support from Moscow in his brutal attacks on Magyar.

Diversified post-election reactions. Magyar's victory was greeted with clear satisfaction in Ukraine, but there were also many reserved and nuanced comments. Officially, the Ukrainian authorities welcomed Orbán's defeat. President Zelensky congratulated Magyar, expressing hope and declaring readiness for a new chapter in Ukrainian-Hungarian relations. However, there was a clear divide in public and media reactions, political positions, and expert opinions.

Public and media reactions were initially quite enthusiastic. Magyar's victory was welcomed as good news for Ukraine, often emphasizing the anti-Ukrainian nature of Orbán's election campaign. His defeat was also seen as beneficial for Ukraine given Hungary's previous stance in the European Union, such as blocking aid for Ukraine and sanctions on Russia. In the Ukrainian infosphere, many reactions emerged that were not only critical but also derisive of Orbán, Russia, and even the United States.¹ As time passed, the initial enthusiasm began to give way to a more rational assessment of the situation – also under the influence of a growing number of post-election analyses that cooled emotions. Politicians' reactions were more cautious and measured from the outset. Ukrainian politicians (including Andriy Sybiha, Ruslan Stefanchuk, and Oleksandr Merezhko) commented on Magyar's victory with optimism, emphasizing that it opened a new "window of opportunity" for Ukrainian-Hungarian relations. They also placed a clear emphasis on the unblocking of aid for Ukraine and sanctions against Russia – these issues had previously been a key axis of dispute between Kyiv and Budapest. However, hopes for improved relations with Hungary were not accompanied by euphoria.

The most restrained and pragmatic reactions were from political analysts and commentators. Admittedly, the Hungarian election results were also seen as a success for Ukraine and a strategic defeat for Russia (and, more broadly, the entire populist right, including MAGA).² However, it was clearly warned that this did not herald an imminent breakthrough in relations with Hungary. Any improvement would not be revolutionary, and Hungary would not suddenly become a "friend of Ukraine" and would continue to pursue its own interests. In this context,

¹ Anti-American sentiments are widely visible in Ukrainian society; in the context of the Hungarian elections, such reactions were a response to the support that Donald Trump's administration gave Orbán during the election campaign.

² At the same time, however, the victory of pro-Russian forces in Bulgaria raises many concerns in Ukraine.

it was emphasized that the Hungarian political scene is dominated by conservative and right-wing politicians and parties, meaning Orbán's political opponents (in this case, P. Magyar) are not his antithesis, and the emphasis on these differences stemmed primarily from the logic of the election campaign, not fundamental ideological and worldview differences.

The prospects. Experts' opinions were borne out when, in line with their predictions regarding Magyar's pragmatism and "Hungarian-centricity," he called (even before officially assuming power) on President Zelensky to restart the Druzhba (Friendship) pipeline, which supplies Russian crude oil to Hungary. At the same time, he emphasized, following Orbán's lead, that this was one of the conditions for rebuilding trust between Budapest and Kyiv (in practice: Hungary's unblocking of the EU loan to Ukraine). Such actions, however, are not anti-Ukrainian in nature – a fact the Ukrainian authorities are aware of. Under Orbán's rule, Hungary's energy dependence on Russia has steadily deepened, and it is currently impossible to achieve independence in this regard by the deadline set by the European Union, i.e., by 2027. Peter Magyar has repeatedly stated (even before the elections) that he supports Hungary's independence from Russian energy sources, but for objective reasons, this will not be possible before 2035 (["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 1594](#)).

Hungary's new prime minister will also not support Ukraine in its efforts to join quickly and unconditionally the European Union. The EU's decision to launch the procedure to unblock a €90 billion loan to Ukraine and impose the 20th package of sanctions on Russia, made possible by Hungary's change of stance (which had previously blocked these EU actions), is not the result of Hungary adopting a pro-Ukrainian stance. Budapest's shift in policy towards the EU stems from domestic circumstances: P. Magyar sees Hungary's role and position in Europe differently than V. Orbán. The winner of the Hungarian elections is a supporter of the European Union and, unlike his predecessor, is positively received in Brussels. Statements from his circle suggest that the new Hungarian prime minister will strive to end the confrontation with Brussels, make Hungary a "constructive partner" for the EU, and unblock EU funds. However, these changes are not ideological, but pragmatic – Orbán's rule has led to the erosion of state institutions, corruption flourishing, economic stagnation, and Hungary's political isolation in Europe – these very issues, increasingly irritating Hungarians, were skilfully exploited by Magyar in his election campaign (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 1585](#)).

However, as Ukrainian commentators clearly emphasize, the Hungarian parliament is composed exclusively of right-wing parties. P. Magyar himself comes directly from Fidesz and falls into the same part of the political spectrum. As Ukrainian political scientist Yevhen Mahda notes, Magyar "will advocate for a certain kind of nationalism, even if it's a light version." Ukrainian reticence toward Magyar stems from the fact that under his rule, Hungary likely won't see a change in its ideological direction, only a correction.

Moreover, Orbán's campaign was based on instilling fear and scaring the public—largely about Ukraine and the war. Magyar, therefore, focused on reassuring and promising, thus better sensing and playing on public sentiment. This factor, the domestic situation, will likely determine the policy of the new Hungarian government towards Ukraine. However, as Ukrainian analysts emphasize, P. Magyar is neither pro-Ukrainian nor anti-Ukrainian, and will never be.

In the context of internal Hungarian sentiment, it's also worth remembering that the issue of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia is a constant source of tension between Budapest and Kyiv. This issue stirs emotions on both sides of the border, but while Ukraine tries to tone them down, Orbán has exploited them instrumentally in his policies and anti-Ukrainian rhetoric. Nevertheless Magyar, during his intense election campaign, also repeatedly addressed the Hungarian minority (and not just in Ukraine) – it is a crucial issue for Hungarians, one that no Hungarian politician can ignore.

Conclusions. Ukraine's positive, albeit reserved, reception of P. Magyar's election victory is justified. The departure of the pro-Russian V. Orbán offers an opportunity to improve Ukrainian-Hungarian relations and a reason for satisfaction for Ukrainians. However, Hungary's foreign policy will not be "pro-Ukrainian" – it will be pragmatic, and no fundamental or revolutionary changes should be expected. This applies to all directions of this policy, including Ukraine and Russia. It seems that it is understood and accepted in Kyiv that the new Hungarian

prime minister will be neutral towards Ukraine. This is undoubtedly preferable to the rule of the openly anti-Ukrainian Orbán, especially since Magyar has already announced his willingness to meet with Zelensky.

Perhaps the changes will be more pronounced in relations with the European Union, where Magyar, who constantly emphasizes Hungary's affiliation with Europe and the Western world, has a radically different attitude than Orbán. However, in the case of Ukraine, the differences will not disappear, nor will the disputes over the Hungarian minority. It's worth noting that Orbán's pro-Russian narrative irritated Hungarian voters not because it was simultaneously anti-Ukrainian, but because they considered it harmful to their country and its interests (and the main reason for Orbán's defeat was the financial abuses of the ruling elite). The internal problems left by Orbán's team pose another and probably crucial, challenge for the new government in Budapest.