

Political polarization and de-polarization initiatives

Country Report: Hungary¹

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Political Context

Following the transition from communist rule in 1989–1990, Hungary became a parliamentary democracy. The unicameral parliament holds legislative authority, while the prime minister serves as head of government. The president is elected by the parliament with largely ceremonial duties. Since 2010, when the political party Fidesz has received two-third majority of the seats in parliament, significant constitutional and institutional changes have taken place. A new constitution has been introduced in 2011, “Republic” has been removed from the name of the country, executive powers have been expanded, and the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has gained control over the judiciary and media landscape.

In recent years, Hungary’s political landscape has been a showcase example of democratic backsliding. In 2015, the parliament set up crisis legislation due to immigration, which has been extended ever since. In 2020 a case of emergency has been proclaimed in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, and later in reference to the war in Ukraine. The crisis legislation and the state of emergency grant exceptional powers to the government and allow for governance by decrees. The government portrays its model as illiberal democracy, prioritizing national identity, traditional values, and centralized governance. In response to government steps against judicial independence, to institutionalization of corruption, and restrictions on civil society and academic freedom, large-scale protests have taken place frequently in the last decade. The opposition, recently more unified, continues to challenge Fidesz’s dominance but faces structural barriers within the political system, reflecting broader concerns about electoral fairness and democratic accountability. Internationally, the Hungarian government faces tensions with the EU over rule-of-law violations, with ongoing bargains about the suspension of EU funds.

Income Inequality: Gini coefficient

(2024) 27.6 / 100 (Eurostat)

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While income inequality has remained moderate overall, a new elite has gained exceptional wealth. The Hungarian society has become highly polarized politically. The bipolar political sentiment divides society along the urban/rural and geographical core/periphery dimension, education, and age. Affective polarization is fueled by hate rhetoric and government propaganda.

Media System

Since 2010, public broadcasting in Hungary was turned into a propaganda machine. An event that happened at one of several street protests against this process symbolizes the severity of this transformation. In December 2018, representatives of opposition parties in Parliament entered the main building of the public broadcasting institution MTVA referring to their constitutional right to do so. They were kicked out by brutal force and have even been charged for aggression and were targeted in smear campaigns. No opposition opinions have been allowed in public broadcasting now for more than a decade.

At the same time, the private media sphere has been characterized by media capture and government-friendly ownership concentration. All traditionally well-read national daily newspapers – Népszabadság, Magyar Nemzet, and Magyar Hírlap – have been captured and then stopped or transformed into government propaganda channels step by step. Major online news sites – origo.hu and index.hu – went through a similar transition. Regional newspapers, freely distributed dailies, and smaller private TV channels have been first captured and then concentrated within the KESMA (Central European Press and Media) Foundation in 2018, protected by law with a status of “national strategic importance”. The KESMA Foundation ensures efficient political communication and harmonization of content across various medium outlets by the government.

The Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2025 Press Freedom Index ranks Hungary 68th out of 180 countries. In the composite index, the political indicator ranks the country to the 124th place. RSF highlights that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has built a true media empire. In fact, independent media outlets remain present in the TV-market and in online news, but were completely forced out from the markets of regional and national newspapers and from radio stations. As RSF has become the target as well, RSF reports that smear campaigns again independent outlets have become institutionalized.

RSF Press Freedom Index (2025)

68 / 180

According to the 2024 data of V-Dem, Hungary has a 0.49 freedom of expression score out of 1, indicating lower levels of media freedom than anywhere else in the EU.

**V-Dem Freedom of Expression Index
(2024)**

0.49 / 1.00

**Reuters Institute Digital News Report
(2025)**

News Trust: 22%

News Avoidance 41%

According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2025, news trust in Hungary is record low, and news avoidance is moderate (41%). Due to government propaganda through public media and captured private media, distrust in news in general has decreased from low (31% in 2016) to the lowest considering all markets evaluated by Reuters (22% in 2025). The largest distrust is in public broadcasting news (53%) and in captured private channel TV2 (55%) that also lost a significant number of viewers. The remaining independent TV channel RTL has become a clear leader in offline news reach, and independent online sources are leading in online news access (telex.hu, 24.hu, 444.hu, and hvg.hu). Independent outlets online are perceived as credible sources of information by supporters of the opposition and undecided voters, but not by supporters of the government.

Polarization Context

Polarization has intensified over the past decade in Hungary, driven by the deepening political divide between supporters of the ruling Fidesz party and of the opposition. Since his return to power in 2010, political communication by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has increasingly been characterized by a populist “us versus them” narrative that has permeated institutional and social life. The government’s communication now frequently targets opposition groups, independent media, and NGOs as threats to national sovereignty. This framing has reinforced a moral and cultural dimension to political conflict, making partisanship not just about policy preferences but also about identity and worldview (Enyedi, 2018).

Country-specific issues intensifying polarization include immigration, EU decision making, relations with Russia, and attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community. During the 2015 migration crisis, anti-immigrant rhetoric and securitization policies artificially deepened ideological divisions and were used to mobilize nationalist sentiment. Similarly, government

campaigns against gender studies, civil organizations, NGOs, and independent press sustain everyday polarization between pro-government and opposition-aligned citizens. The Fidesz government now mobilizes its supporters into the Fighter's Club that is supposed to counteract opposition opinions actively and into Digital Civic Circles (DPK) for the facilitation of private posting, sharing, and promoting government-created content on social media.

According to the V-Dem 2024, Hungary scores 2.53 out of 4 on the polarization index, reflecting high levels of affective polarization and social distance between supporters of different parties. Surveys from the *European Social Survey (2022)* also show that Fidesz voters exhibit significantly lower trust in independent institutions and higher skepticism toward multiculturalism and the EU compared to opposition voters. These dynamics suggest that polarization in Hungary is not only political but deeply cultural, manifesting in contrasting attitudes toward corruption, foreign policy, and national identity—divisions that increasingly shape civic life and social trust.

V-Dem Polarization Index (2024)

+2.53 / |4.00|

Initiatives for Reducing Polarization in Hungary

Since 2010, institutional and civic initiatives to reduce political polarization in Hungary have become increasingly constrained as the country's democratic space has narrowed. The *Central European University (CEU)*, the *Open Society Foundation (OSF)*, and the *CEU Democracy Institute* that have devoted a large amount of resources to the development of respectful democratic climate and inclusive society have been chased out of the country. The law that forced CEU to relocate to Vienna in 2018 marked a symbolic moment in the government's campaign against liberal institutions that had long supported pluralism, civic dialogue, and democratic values. Despite these pressures, some organizations and initiatives—primarily from civil society, independent think tanks, and cultural actors—have continued working to counteract social fragmentation, discrimination, and political hostility. While these efforts seldom use the explicit term depolarization, they aim to promote empathy, critical thinking, and inclusive dialogue in an increasingly polarized public sphere.

The *Political Capital Institute* is one of the independent think tanks that has studied and explicitly addresses polarization, radicalization, and political extremism in Hungary.

Political Capital focuses on democratic resilience, populism, and social cohesion through research, policy advocacy, and civic education. In their policy briefs, they conceptualize polarization as a multidimensional threat that undermines democratic norms, weakens institutional trust, and fuels hostility across social and ideological lines. Political Capital links rising polarization to the manipulation of public sentiment through populist rhetoric, media concentration, and targeted disinformation campaigns. Political Capital emphasizes how polarization overlaps with xenophobia and anti-Roma sentiment—issues that reinforce political tribalism and societal exclusion (cf. Kende & Krekó, 2020; Krekó 2022).

Interventions initiated or coordinated by Political Capital are both research- and dialogue-based. Through projects, newsletters, and regularly organized events, the Institute convenes cross-sectoral dialogues among civil society organizations, local governments, international and domestic professional partners and educators. It produces regular polarization and populism indexes, runs monitoring platforms tracking extremist rhetoric and hate speech contributing to early warning systems for radicalization, organizes workshops on digital literacy, and collaborates with international partners to train journalists and teachers in recognizing manipulative narratives. These programs focus on fostering “cognitive empathy” between politically opposed groups through fact-based civic engagement.

Other Hungarian institutes that for long have monitored polarization, disseminated relevant information, and fostered inclusive discourse include the *K-Monitor*, the *Hungarian Helsinki Committee*, *Társaság a Szabadságjogokért (TASZ)*, *Transparency International Hungary*, and the *Eötvös Károly Institute*. *A Hang* plays a major role in mobilizing citizens to identify local problems and get involved in community action. *Tanítanék* focuses on education, stands up for teachers, and calls for reducing polarization through the teaching program and autonomy of education. Several smaller cultural and educational projects also contribute to mitigating polarization indirectly. The *Auróra Community Center* in Budapest, a grassroots civic hub, hosts art exhibitions, youth workshops, and human rights events focused on tolerance and diversity. It frames polarization as a symptom of marginalization and alienation, particularly among young people and minorities. Similarly, *Amnesty International Hungary* and *Háttér Society* (a leading LGBTQ+ rights NGO) organize anti-hate-speech campaigns and school programs promoting empathy and diversity, linking social inclusion with depolarization.

Independent media initiatives such as *Lakmusz.hu* (Hungary’s leading fact-checking platform, launched in partnership with 444.hu) and *Atlatszo.hu* work to reduce misinformation-driven polarization. They produce media literacy guides, investigative reports, and interactive fact-checking tools for social media users. These projects treat

polarization as the consequence of “informational asymmetry” and aim to rebuild a shared factual basis for public debate. Although their reach is limited compared to pro-government outlets, they play a critical role in maintaining pluralistic information flows.

In the arts, organizations like the *Off-Biennale Budapest* and the *Jurányi House* cultural center facilitate depolarization through participatory art. They stage performances and exhibitions that engage with political memory, migration, and identity from multiple perspectives, reframing conflict through creative expression rather than confrontation. Such initiatives portray art as a non-partisan medium that can restore empathy and understanding between polarized audiences.

One can find rare examples in the pro-government intellectual sphere that would recognize polarization as a problem and would facilitate open discussions and debate. The *Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC)* is a think tank and educational foundation generously funded by the government that has grown enormously since 2019, promoting conservative intellectual exchange among students and professionals. Its annual *MCC Fest* in Tihany—often referred to as a “festival of ideas”—has become a key public platform for dialogue, inviting a range of speakers from across the ideological spectrum, sometimes including liberal and opposition figures. While MCC is generally associated with educating the youth into government narratives, the MCC Fest has framed polarization as a social pathology caused by “echo chambers,” media bias, and the erosion of civil discourse. Though critics claim that the event serves soft-power goals, MCC publicly presents its mission as fostering the “exchange of opposing viewpoints in a respectful environment.”

From the political parties, the *Kétfarkú Kutyapárt (Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party)* is a creative grassroots community that acts with humor and direct integrative actions, such as painting the walls of a bus stop together. In its webpage, it articulates it as its first goal: “We must stop with civil-war logics. Most voters aren’t satisfied with having to choose between Fidesz-Notfidesz” and further emphasizes the focus on free and meaningful civil cooperation.

A more recent and politically embedded initiative comes from the *Tisza Party*, founded in 2024 by Péter Magyar who exited the Fidesz elite loudly. The Tisza Party’s discourse explicitly promotes “*normal politics*”, advocating a culture of respectful disagreement and civic cooperation across partisan lines. The Tisza Party frames polarization as a systemic outcome of a “toxic elite culture” that profits from hostility between camps. It presents Hungarian society as “emotionally exhausted” by a decade of political warfare, where institutions, media, and families are divided along partisan loyalties. The movement’s rhetoric highlights the need to “rebuild mutual respect” and restore public trust in democratic processes. This framing implicitly acknowledges the psychological and social

roots of polarization, beyond institutional dysfunction. Tisza Party is organized in civic branches called Tisza Islands. Affiliated volunteer networks run local forums, community-building events, and public listening sessions designed to create safe spaces for citizens of diverse political views. These resemble civic dialogue initiatives seen in other polarized democracies.

Conclusion

Overall, depolarization efforts in Hungary are fragmented, fragile, face a politically hostile environment, and often directly constrained by the government, institutions, and rules. Together, these initiatives frame polarization as both a structural and emotional problem—rooted in media manipulation, populist rhetoric, and loss of trust—but seek to address it through dialogue, critical literacy, arts, and community rebuilding. Their long-term effectiveness will largely depend on whether political competition is sustained in Hungary and whether the institutional environment becomes liberated to allow open political discussions.

Research and initiatives often rely on foreign support, which is stigmatized by the LXXVI Law since 2017. These initiatives are cautiously monitored by the Office for the Protection of Sovereignty (Szuverenitásvédelmi Hivatal) established in 2024. In May 2025, a new bill on transparency in public life has been submitted to Parliament, which would introduce serious restrictions and penalties against organizations that are deemed to receive support from abroad. Many depolarization civic initiatives reviewed above would at least partially fall under the scope of this law.

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