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INTERVIEW WITH GERGELY SZILVAY

'This is how Brussels is trying to influence the elections in Hungary'

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How far can Brussels shape a national vote, directly or indirectly? As Hungary is heading toward parliamentary elections, April 12, this question has gained new urgency—especially after the 2023 Polish elections, when Donald Tusk's return to power

was followed by the swift release of EU funds previously frozen on rule-of-law grounds. For critics of the EU's current governance model, the Polish sequence raised troubling questions about the use of financial, legal, and judicial mechanisms not merely as regulatory tools, but as levers capable of reshaping domestic political balances. With billions of euros still withheld from Budapest and Péter Magyar increasingly presented abroad as a Brussels-friendly alternative to Viktor Orbán, many are now asking whether Hungary could face a similar test.

To better understand how these dynamics are perceived inside the country,

Daily Compass spoke with Gergely Szilvay, writer and political analyst at *Mandiner*, a leading Hungarian conservative outlet. In this interview, Szilvay offers his reading of Brussels' role in Hungary's domestic political climate, the lessons drawn from the Polish precedent, and the stakes of the April vote for Hungary's future within the European Union.

For several years now, Brussels has frozen a significant share of EU funds allocated to Hungary, citing rule-of-law concerns. To what extent do you think these decisions can be perceived as a form of political interference likely to influence the April elections?

It is crystal clear that this is a political tool to oust Viktor Orbán. The value of the suspended subsidies will amount to around €17 billion by early 2026. Of this, approximately €7.4 billion comes from Cohesion Funds, and €9.7 billion from the post-Covid Recovery and Resilience Facility. This is a massive amount of funding at stake—although it is worth noting that EU funds account for only about 3% of Hungary's GDP.

But this is not simply "missing EU money." These payments should not be arbitrarily linked to political aims, yet the EU increasingly ties them to newly invented political objectives. The use of frozen funds as political pressure becomes evident whenever the Orbán government reaches an agreement with the EU on a specific issue—such as Erasmus—and fulfills the required conditions, only for new obligations to be introduced immediately afterward.

Many observers were struck by what happened in Poland in 2023: EU funds that had been frozen under the conservative government were swiftly released after the election of Donald Tusk, who was widely seen as a Brussels-friendly social-democrat candidate. Do you think this Polish precedent is weighing on Hungary's current political debate?

EU funds were released almost immediately after Donald Tusk came to power, even

before Poland had technically fulfilled the EU's demands. This alone shows that the process is entirely politically motivated and is part of a broader conflict between the EU elites' liberal-federalist vision and Viktor Orbán's—and his allies'—vision of a decentralized confederation.

This precedent has made things much clearer in Hungary and has been part of political discussions, even if it is not the leading topic. What is also clear is that what is now happening in Poland—the *Justizmord*, the political capture of the justice system—represents the blueprint for Hungary should the opposition come to power. The way the EU treats Viktor Orbán sends a warning to everyone: do not dare to pursue alternative political paths. The EU elite perceives successful conservative alternatives as an existential threat.

Péter Magyar is often portrayed as a kind of Hungarian Emmanuel Macron or Donald Tusk: a candidate presented as “neither left nor right,” yet coming from within the Fidesz establishment. While he has openly supported Kamala Harris in the U.S. elections and is generally favored by the Hungarian left, some argue that he has a strong conservative background and sensibility. In your view, does Magyar represent a genuine political break, or rather a form of continuity with Hungary’s conservative tradition—albeit one that would be more acceptable to Brussels?

The way Western legacy media portray Péter Magyar is—at best—surprising. Magyar has no real political experience. His background may be conservative, but his tactic is to avoid speaking about any substantial issue, because that would harm the fragile electorate behind him. Politically, he is a black hole.

In practice, he is playing for left-wing voters, and the so-called “experts” around him are the same old-school leftist technocratic circles that have surrounded every left-wing government since 1990. Some of his inexperienced allies have been unusually candid. Last September, for example, the vice president of the Tisza Party, Zoltán Tarr, was caught on camera saying: “I’m not going to tell you everything, because then we’ll fail... We can’t talk about this now. It can be between us, and then, if this comes up, I’ll explain... And there are countless things we can’t talk about. You have to win an election, then anything is possible.”

It is often said that Budapest tends to be more favorable to Péter Magyar, while Viktor Orbán remains strongly supported in the rest of the country. Could this territorial and sociological divide prove decisive in the election? And how does the Hungarian public perceive the role of the EU in this context?

This divide is broadly true, as it is across much of the Western world: large cities tend to

be liberal, while the countryside is more conservative. That said, 30–40 percent of Budapest still supports Viktor Orbán, which is important because Hungarians vote not only for local MPs in individual districts, but also for national party lists. Hungary has a mixed electoral system.

This system, created under Orbán’s government, is often accused of being unbalanced and favoring the winner. It does favor the winner, but far less than “winner-takes-all” systems like those in the U.S. or Great Britain. If Hungary used only individual districts with winner-takes-all rules, Viktor Orbán would hold 86 percent of parliamentary seats, not merely a two-thirds majority.

Claims that the system was “rigged” also ignore the fact that under the old, supposedly more balanced system, Orbán won 98 percent of districts in 2010 while still in opposition. And claims of media oppression are simply false. There is internet and television access in almost every village. Left-wing news portals are among the most popular, and Hungarians have broad access to critical media in both cities and rural areas. There is no media oppression; Hungarians are well informed.

Concretely, what would a victory by Péter Magyar mean for Hungary? Should we expect a rapid release of EU funds—and if so, at what political cost?

Conversely, what would another victory for Viktor Orbán imply in a context of persistent tensions with Brussels, and even growing debates about a potential Hungarian withdrawal from the European Union?

A victory by Péter Magyar would likely lead to a rapid release of EU funds, but at a high political cost. He would comply with every policy of the European Commission and the European People’s Party, of which he is a member. There is also the issue of his parliamentary immunity. After an incident in Budapest in June 2024, when he was expelled from a club by bodyguards and later threw someone’s mobile phone into the Danube, his actions could qualify as a felony. The EPP could potentially use this immunity issue to blackmail him.

Magyar has already stated that Hungary should relinquish part of its sovereignty. He has not appeared in the European Parliament except for the Mercosur vote, despite receiving his MEP salary. He launched his political career by secretly recording his wife, then-Justice Minister Judit Varga, whose testimony suggests he may be aggressive and narcissistic. He initially said he did not want to be a politician—then became one. He said he would not take a seat in the European Parliament—then he did. He declared himself opposed to immunity laws—then sheltered behind immunity. He appears to be clearly unreliable.

An Orbán victory—which I believe is the most likely outcome—would mean continuity: confrontational relations with the EU, but economic stability, lower taxes, extensive

family policies, strong state protection, and a distinctive “Orbánomics,” a kind of third way model. It would also mean continued cooperation with Christian churches and proactive conservative social policy. Despite the infamous “illiberal” speech, Orbán’s approach aligns closely with the Protestant, independentist national-liberal tradition of the 19th century.

Viktor Orbán is also working to bring the Balkans into the EU. Neither he nor the Hungarian people want to leave the Union; they want to reform it. And as the Patriots group grows stronger, it may eventually help change the EU’s course.