

ANALYSIS

How TISZA Won – and What Liberals Should Learn?:

**Credibility, simplicity, and
mobilisation matter more
than ideology in low-trust
environments**

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1. Executive Summary

The Hungarian parliamentary elections of April 2026 marked one of the most significant political turning points in Europe in recent years. The newly formed conservative TISZA party (aligned with the European People's Party (EPP)), led by former Fidesz insider Péter Magyar, secured a landslide victory, winning a constitutional supermajority and ending Viktor Orbán's sixteen-year rule. This result was not only unexpected in scale but also remarkable in speed: within just two years of its emergence, TISZA transformed from a newly formed movement into the dominant force in Hungarian politics.

The election result reflected a broad-based rejection of the Orbán system. Economic stagnation, high inflation, deteriorating public services, and persistent corruption scandals had eroded public trust across social groups. Crucially, this dissatisfaction was not confined to traditional opposition strongholds. Electoral data shows that Fidesz lost support across all types of settlements - from large cities to rural villages - indicating a broad-based erosion of its electoral coalition. At the same time, turnout reached record levels, suggesting that the election functioned as a genuine moment of political mobilisation rather than routine electoral competition. Yet the scale of TISZA's victory cannot be explained by anti-incumbent sentiment alone. Previous opposition forces had failed to capitalise on similar grievances. What distinguishes TISZA is its ability to translate widespread dissatisfaction into a credible and unified political alternative. Rather than constructing a traditional ideological platform or coalition, the party built its campaign around a limited number of broadly shared concerns such as corruption, the decline of public services (especially the health and education systems), and the need for institutional renewal. By avoiding polarising cultural issues and focusing on everyday grievances, TISZA was able to assemble a cross-cutting electoral coalition that extended beyond Hungary's entrenched political divides.

Leadership played a decisive role. Péter Magyar's profile as a former insider of the Orbán system allowed him to combine credibility with outsider appeal. His direct accusations of corruption and his personal break with the regime helped neutralise Fidesz's traditional anti-elite messaging. His campaign style, characterised by extensive in-person campaigning, high-frequency public appearances, and strong digital communication, unconventional for Hungarian politics, enabled TISZA to overcome structural disadvantages in a media environment heavily influenced by the incumbent government.

Organisationally, TISZA adopted a hybrid model combining movement-style mobilisation with volunteer islands. A large-scale volunteer network and decentralised local engagement ("TISZA islands") ensured territorial reach, while the inclusion of experienced figures from business and public life signalled governing competence.

For European liberals, the Hungarian case offers strategically relevant insights, even though TISZA itself is not a liberal party and does not advance a clearly liberal political agenda. Its deliberately ambiguous ideological positioning has allowed it to maximise electoral reach while postponing difficult policy choices.

The core lesson is clear: in polarised and low-trust environments, electoral breakthroughs are driven less by programmatic sophistication and more by credibility, clarity, and organisational reach. TISZA demonstrates that voters respond strongly to political actors who can convincingly embody change, articulate widely shared grievances, and provide a credible vehicle for political transformation. Narrative simplicity, personal leadership, and direct voter engagement proved more decisive than detailed policy platforms or ideological coherence.

The Hungarian case highlights a key risk for liberal parties. If liberals fail to occupy the political space of credible change, it will be filled by actors who are not necessarily committed to liberal principles. TISZA's success shows how quickly a new political force can capture this space when it combines strategic clarity with organisational effectiveness. For liberals, the challenge is therefore not only to defend liberal values, but to embed them within a compelling and electorally viable narrative of change.

Hungary represents both an opportunity and a warning. It demonstrates that even entrenched illiberal systems can be defeated. But it also underlines that the forces capable of defeating them are not automatically liberal. For the European liberal parties, the challenge is therefore clear: to combine ideological clarity with political credibility, and to communicate a compelling, simple, and mobilising vision of change in an increasingly volatile and low-trust environment.

2. Main findings: What This Means for Liberals

The Hungarian case is not a liberal success story in the traditional sense. TISZA is not a liberal party, and its ideological positioning remains deliberately flexible. Yet precisely for this reason, its electoral breakthrough is highly relevant for liberal actors across Europe. It demonstrates how political space can be captured in moments of systemic dissatisfaction and how quickly that space can be occupied by actors who are not rooted in liberal ideology. For the liberal parties, the key question is not whether to emulate TISZA, but what strategic lessons can be drawn from its success without compromising liberal principles.

Challenge	TISZA Model	Transferable Strategy	Strategic Takeaway
Leadership credibility challenge	Insider-defector leadership	Build visible, credible, and knowledgeable experienced leadership figures	Trust precedes policy
Overly complex messaging	Single dominant narrative ("system is broken")	Reduce to 2–3 core messages	Clarity beats complexity
Weak emotional connection	Anger + renewal framing	Embed emotion into liberal narratives	Emotion drives mobilisation
Fragmented positioning	"Only credible alternative"	Occupy space between system & populism	Be the <i>default alternative</i>
Limited mobilisation	Hybrid movement-party model	Invest in grassroots + direct contact	Cohesion strengthens mobilisation
Technocratic image	Personalised campaigning	Humanise leadership	People connect before policies

2.2 Credibility Beats Ideology- At Least Initially

TISZA's victory underscores a fundamental dynamic: in contexts of deep political distrust, voters prioritise **credible challengers over coherent programmes**. For many Hungarian voters, the central question was not which party offered the most refined policy platform, but which actor could realistically deliver change. Péter Magyar's personal credibility, rooted in his insider background and public break with the regime, provided a convincing answer to that question.

For liberal parties, this has important implications. Liberalism often relies on detailed policy proposals, institutional arguments, and programmatic consistency. While these remain essential, they are insufficient in environments where voters doubt that any political actor can deliver on promises. **In low-trust environments, voters do not start with policies; they start with trust.** Without credibility, even the strongest programme will fail to resonate.

2.3 Narrative Simplicity Is a Strategic Advantage

A second lesson concerns the importance of **narrative clarity and simplicity**.

TISZA's campaign was built around a highly focused message: the system is corrupt, it has failed, and it must be replaced. This narrative was consistent, emotionally resonant, and easy to understand. It provided voters with a clear diagnosis of the problem and a clear direction for change.

This stands in contrast to the tendency to communicate through complex, multi-layered policy arguments. The Hungarian example reinforces this lesson from a different angle, as TISZA succeeded with **one dominant narrative**.

For the liberals, this implies that strategic communication should prioritise a limited number of core ideas, repeated consistently and framed in ways that are emotionally and cognitively accessible. At the same time, these broader

narratives must be translated into locally relevant examples and concerns, allowing voters to connect national policy goals with their everyday experiences.

2.4 Personal Leadership Matters More Than Party Brand

TISZA's campaign highlights the centrality of **candidate-centred politics** in contemporary electoral competition. Péter Magyar was not only the face of the campaign, but he was also its primary vehicle. His personal story, credibility, and communication style shaped the party's entire political identity. Voters did not simply support TISZA as an organisation; they supported Magyar as a representative of change.

For liberal parties, this presents a strategic challenge. While these attributes remain valuable, they must be complemented by **visible, credible, and relatable leadership figures**. In low-trust environments, voters connect with people before they connect with parties.

2.5 Emotional Connection Outperforms Technocratic Messaging

Another key lesson concerns the role of **emotion in political communication**. TISZA's campaign was not primarily technocratic. It did not attempt to persuade voters through detailed policy analysis or economic modelling. Instead, it focused on emotions that were already present in the electorate: frustration, anger, and a desire for change. These emotions were channelled into a narrative of accountability and renewal. Magyar's communication style - direct, personal, and often confrontational - reinforced this emotional connection.

Emotional resonance is not optional; it is a prerequisite for political relevance. For liberal parties, this does not mean abandoning rational argument or policy depth. It means embedding these elements within narratives that connect with voters' experiences, aspirations, and concerns.

2.6 The Critical Boundary: Do Not Copy Populist Ambiguity

While TISZA offers valuable strategic lessons, it also highlights a clear boundary that liberal parties should not cross. A central feature of TISZA's success was its **ideological ambiguity**. By avoiding clear positions on divisive issues, the party was able to assemble a broad and heterogeneous coalition. This flexibility maximised electoral reach, but it also postpones difficult policy choices.

Liberalism is not only a political strategy - it is a set of

principles grounded in individual rights, the rule of law, and open societies. Diluting these principles for short-term electoral gain would undermine the very identity that distinguishes liberal actors from both populist and illiberal alternatives. **TISZA shows how to capture attention and win elections in a moment of rupture.**

The strategic task for the liberals is therefore to combine the strengths of **clarity, credibility, and mobilisation capacity** while maintaining **ideological coherence and long-term vision**.

2.7 Strategic Implications for the liberals

The Hungarian case ultimately highlights a broader risk for liberal parties across Europe - if liberals fail to present themselves as credible agents of change, the political space for transformation will be occupied by others.

TISZA did not win because it was liberal. It won because it was **convincingly different, credible, and capable of mobilising voters at scale**.

For the liberals, the lesson is therefore not about imitation, but about adaptation. Liberal parties must ensure that their commitment to freedom, rule of law, and economic openness is not communicated as abstract principles, but as a **clear, compelling, and emotionally resonant vision of change**.

Only then can they compete effectively in political environments defined by distrust, volatility, and demand for renewal.

3. Political Context: Why Hungary Was Ripe for Disruption

The 2026 Hungarian parliamentary elections did not occur in a political vacuum. TISZA's landslide victory was the culmination of long-term structural developments that had gradually eroded the foundations of the Orbán regime. While the scale and speed of the outcome were surprising, the underlying conditions that enabled such a breakthrough had been building for years.

3.1 Orbán's Dominance and the Limits of Longevity

Since returning to power in 2010, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party have constructed one of the most stable and

enduring political systems in Europe. Through successive electoral victories, often with constitutional majorities, the government consolidated control over key institutions, including the judiciary, media, and regulatory bodies. This system, frequently described as an “illiberal democracy” or “electoral autocracy,” combined formal electoral competition with structural advantages that consistently favoured the incumbent.

For a long time, this model proved resilient. Fidesz maintained a broad electoral coalition, particularly strong in rural areas and among older voters, supported by a combination of economic redistribution, identity politics, and extensive patronage networks. However, the very longevity of this system gradually became a liability. After sixteen years in power, the regime increasingly appeared stagnant, over-centralised, and disconnected from the everyday concerns of citizens. What had once been framed as stability began to be perceived as inertia.

3.2 Economic Strain and Erosion of Performance Legitimacy

A critical turning point in this process was the deterioration of economic conditions. In recent years, Hungary experienced sluggish growth, high inflation, and declining living standards relative to regional peers. Public services, particularly healthcare, education, and social infrastructure, showed visible signs of underinvestment and dysfunction.

This shift mattered because Fidesz’s legitimacy was not based solely on ideology, but also on performance. As long as the government could deliver relative economic stability and incremental prosperity, voters were willing to tolerate institutional centralisation and democratic backsliding. Once this performance legitimacy weakened, however, dissatisfaction spread across social groups.

Importantly, this discontent was not limited to traditional opposition constituencies. Evidence from the 2026 election shows that Fidesz lost support across all types of settlements - from urban centres to small rural villages - indicating that economic frustration and dissatisfaction with governance had become widespread and structurally embedded.

3.3 Fragmented and Discredited Opposition

Despite growing dissatisfaction, the Hungarian opposition had, until recently, been unable to translate this into electoral success. For more than a decade, opposition parties suffered from fragmentation and limited territorial reach. Even attempts at coordination, most notably in the 2022 elections, where several opposition parties, including the liberal Momentum Movement, ran on a joint list, failed to produce a credible alternative to Fidesz.

Two structural weaknesses were particularly significant. First, **opposition parties struggled to communicate beyond urban strongholds**. In a media environment heavily influenced by the government, their ability to reach voters in rural areas was limited, particularly in regions where government-aligned local media dominate and digital access and literacy are more constrained. This reinforced Fidesz’s advantage outside major cities and contributed to the perception that the opposition represented a narrow, metropolitan electorate.

Second, the opposition accumulated substantial reputational baggage. **Frequent internal conflicts, inconsistent messaging, and perceived lack of competence** undermined voter trust. Rather than appearing as a viable governing alternative, opposition coalitions were often seen as tactical arrangements driven by anti-Orbán sentiment rather than a coherent political project. As a result, even when dissatisfaction with the government increased, there was no actor capable of capturing and organising it at scale.

3.4 Collapse of Trust and the Search for Credibility

By the mid-2020s, Hungary faced a broader crisis of political trust. Confidence in institutions had been eroded by years of centralisation, corruption scandals, and declining transparency. At the same time, trust in opposition actors remained low due to their perceived ineffectiveness.

This created a political vacuum. Voters were not only dissatisfied with the government, but they were also sceptical of the alternatives. In such an environment, the key barrier to political change was not the absence of grievances, but the absence of a credible vehicle to represent them. The 2026 election marks the moment this barrier was overcome.

3.5 Demand for a Credible Challenger

TISZA’s emergence must be viewed against this backdrop. The party did not create the dissatisfaction that drove voters away from Fidesz. Nor did it fundamentally reshape the underlying grievances. Instead, its central achievement was to position itself as a **credible and unified challenger capable of channeling existing discontent**.

This distinction is crucial. Previous opposition efforts had attempted to construct winning coalitions through negotiation and coordination among established parties. TISZA, by contrast, bypassed this model entirely. It presented itself as a new political force, unburdened by the failures of the past and capable of representing a broad spectrum of voters. By doing so, it transformed latent dissatisfaction into electoral mobilisation.

The Hungarian case illustrates a broader dynamic

relevant across Europe: political change does not occur simply because voters are dissatisfied. It requires a **political actor that can credibly embody that dissatisfaction and translate it into a coherent electoral project**. TISZA succeeded where others failed, not because the context suddenly changed, but because it was the first actor able to fully exploit it.

4. The TISZA Phenomenon: Candidate & Movement

At the centre of TISZA's rapid rise stands its leader, Péter Magyar. While structural conditions created the opportunity for political change, it was Magyar's unique profile and the movement built around him that transformed this opportunity into a decisive electoral breakthrough. Understanding this combination of leadership and organisational form is essential to explaining TISZA's success.

4.1 Péter Magyar: From Insider to Challenger

Péter Magyar's political trajectory is central to TISZA's appeal. Unlike traditional opposition figures, he did not emerge from the established anti-Orbán camp. Instead, he was a product of the system he ultimately helped dismantle. A former Fidesz insider with close ties to the political and institutional elite, Magyar **possessed detailed knowledge of how the regime operated** - from patronage networks to decision-making structures. His break with Fidesz in 2024, triggered by the political fallout surrounding a controversial presidential pardon in a child abuse case and the involvement of his ex-wife, Judit Varga, who was serving as Minister of Justice at that time, was therefore not merely a political repositioning but a symbolic rupture. By publicly exposing internal practices and criticising the system from within, he was able to reframe himself as both a credible witness and a reformist outsider. This dual identity proved highly effective. As an insider, Magyar could not easily be dismissed using the regime's standard narratives against opposition actors, such as accusations of foreign influence or ideological extremism. At the same time, his defection allowed him to embody a broader narrative of disillusionment: if even insiders had lost faith in the system, then change appeared both necessary and legitimate.

Magyar's leadership represents a distinct model of political credibility as his appeal was rooted in what can be described as **"defector-insider credibility"**. His

authority derived not only from expertise or vision, but from his personal break with the regime and his ability to expose its inner workings.

4.2 Personal Credibility as Political Capital

Magyar's campaign capitalised on this credibility with remarkable consistency. His **messaging focused heavily on corruption, institutional decay, and the need to dismantle what he described as a captured state**. These themes were not presented as abstract policy concerns but as lived realities that he had personally witnessed.

This approach had two effects. First, it reinforced authenticity. In an environment characterised by low trust in political actors, Magyar's personal narrative provided a powerful signal that he was not simply another career politician. His critique of the system appeared grounded in experience rather than ideology, making it more persuasive across diverse voter groups.

Second, it allowed him to neutralise one of Fidesz's core strengths: its anti-elite rhetoric. For years, Orbán had positioned himself as a defender of the Hungarian people against external and domestic elites. Magyar disrupted this narrative by reframing the regime itself as the true elite, corrupt, self-serving, and detached from society. As a former insider, he was uniquely positioned to make this argument credible. The result was a campaign in which **personal credibility functioned as the primary political resource, often outweighing programmatic detail or ideological clarity**.

4.3 A Movement, Not Just a Party

While Magyar's leadership was central, TISZA's success cannot be reduced to personal charisma alone. Equally important was the organisational model that emerged around him.

Rather than developing as a traditional party with a hierarchical structure and long-established membership base, TISZA evolved as a hybrid between a political movement and a professional organisation. Its growth was rapid and decentralised, relying heavily on volunteer mobilisation and local engagement.

One of the defining features of this model was the creation of **loosely organised local networks**, often referred to as "TISZA islands" - a reference to the Tisza, Hungary's second-longest river and the namesake of the movement. These networks enabled the party to establish a **presence across the country, including in rural areas that had previously been difficult for opposition actors to reach**. They also fostered a sense of ownership among supporters, who were not merely passive voters but active participants in the campaign.

TISZA incorporated elements of professionalisation.

Magyar **surrounded himself with experts from business, civil society, and public administration** who could signal competence and readiness to govern. This combination of grassroots mobilisation and elite expertise helped address a key weakness of previous opposition efforts: the perceived gap between mobilisation and governability.

4.4 Beyond Traditional Party Structures

TISZA's organisational approach also reflected a deliberate strategic choice to distance itself from the established opposition. By refusing formal alliances and avoiding integration into existing party structures, the movement reinforced its image as a genuine break with the past.

This independence was particularly important in a context where traditional opposition parties were widely seen as ineffective or compromised. By positioning itself outside these structures, TISZA avoided inheriting their reputational burdens and was able to attract voters from across the political spectrum, including those who had previously supported Fidesz. In effect, TISZA **replaced the fragmented opposition landscape with a single, centralised vehicle for political change.**

4.5 A Distinct Model of Political Leadership

Taken together, the combination of Magyar's personal trajectory and TISZA's organisational model represents a

distinct form of political mobilisation. It differs both from traditional party-building and from purely populist movements.

At its core lies a specific type of leadership: one that combines **insider knowledge with outsider positioning**, personal credibility with anti-elite rhetoric, and movement-style mobilisation with signals of professional competence. This hybrid model proved particularly effective in Hungary's political environment, where distrust of institutions and political actors had created a strong demand for a credible and unifying challenger.

For European liberals, this model is analytically significant. It demonstrates that political credibility can be constructed through pathways that differ markedly from the technocratic or programmatic approaches often associated with liberal parties. However, it raises important questions about sustainability: whether a movement built around personal credibility and organisational flexibility can maintain coherence and effectiveness once in government.

These questions will become central as TISZA transitions from opposition to power. For now, however, the Hungarian case provides a clear lesson: in contexts of deep political distrust, leadership and credibility are not secondary to programme, they are the precondition for it.

5. Campaign Strategy: Why It Worked

TISZA's electoral breakthrough was not only the result of favourable political conditions or leadership credibility. It was also the product of a **highly effective campaign strategy that combined narrative discipline, personalised communication, strategic positioning, and broad coalition-building.** Taken together, these elements allowed the party to convert diffuse dissatisfaction into a decisive electoral mandate.

5.1 Narrative: Anti-System Without Extremism

At the heart of TISZA's campaign was a clear and disciplined narrative: Hungary needed systemic change because the existing political order had become corrupt, dysfunctional, and self-serving. This narrative was

framed not in ideological terms, but in moral and experiential ones.

Rather than presenting a detailed ideological programme, TISZA focused on a limited set of widely shared grievances - **corruption, the decline of public services, and the erosion of institutional integrity.** These issues were framed as matters of fairness, accountability, and national renewal. The campaign consistently communicated a simple message: the system is broken, and it must be repaired.

Crucially, this framing avoided the pitfalls of both technocratic abstraction and ideological polarisation. Unlike previous opposition campaigns, TISZA did not attempt to counter Fidesz on divisive cultural issues such as migration or identity politics - areas where the incumbent held a structural advantage. Instead, it **shifted the terrain of political competition toward governance and integrity.**

Péter Magyar's personal story reinforced this narrative. His background as a former insider allowed him to credibly claim: *"I know how the system works."* This transformed the campaign's anti-corruption message

into a form of testimony rather than accusation. Corruption was not presented as a distant structural issue, but as a lived reality that had been exposed from within.

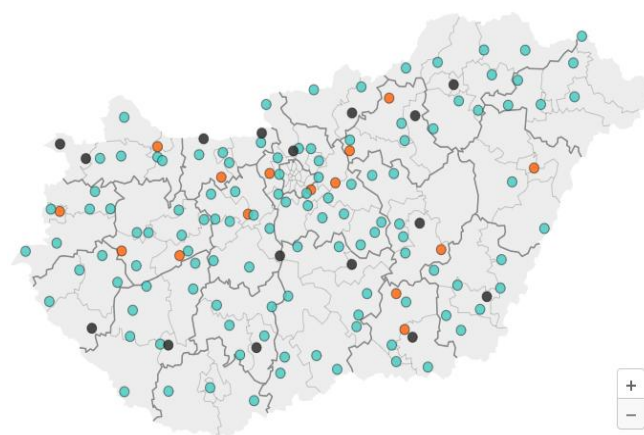
In this sense, TISZA's narrative can be described as **anti-system but not extremist**. It channelled anger and frustration without adopting radical or exclusionary rhetoric. This distinguishes it from many populist movements that rely on cultural conflict or scapegoating.

5.2 Communication Style: Personalisation and Direct Engagement

TISZA's communication strategy was characterised by a high degree of **personalisation, combining intensive on-the-ground campaigning with strong digital outreach**. Péter Magyar himself was the central communication vehicle. His campaign involved an **exceptionally high number of public appearances, often holding multiple rallies per day and travelling extensively across the country**, including areas traditionally dominated by Fidesz. This physical presence was critical in a media environment where access to traditional channels was limited.

Map: Péter Magyar and Viktor Orbán's 2026 tour locations between January 31 and March 26, and the places both of them visited

Legend: Magyar Péter, both of them, Orbán Viktor



Source: [BNF / Telex.hu](#)Map data: © NVI Embed Software used to create the map: Datawrapper

Direct contact with voters became a substitute for media visibility. By engaging face-to-face with citizens in towns, villages, and public spaces, TISZA was able to build trust and credibility in areas where opposition actors had previously struggled to gain traction.

This offline strategy was reinforced by an active digital presence, particularly on social media platforms such as Facebook. Digital communication allowed the campaign to bypass hostile or inaccessible media intermediaries, maintain continuous engagement with supporters, and amplify key messages in real time.

Personalisation was central to both channels. The campaign consistently foregrounded Magyar as an individual - his story, his voice, and his interactions with voters. This approach helped **humanise the campaign** and created a direct emotional connection with the electorate.

In this respect, TISZA shares an important feature with the Portuguese liberal campaign of Iniciativa Liberal: the centrality of personalisation. However, the tone and purpose differ significantly. In the Portuguese case, personalisation supported a narrative of **optimism and future-oriented leadership**. In Hungary, personalisation was used to convey **authenticity, confrontation, and exposure**.

Magyar's communication style was often direct, critical, and revealing. Rather than projecting institutional calm or aspirational vision, it emphasised urgency and the need to confront entrenched problems. This gave the campaign emotional intensity while maintaining credibility through consistency and restraint.

In May 2025, for instance, Magyar walked from Budapest to Transylvania, specifically to Oradea (*Nagyvárad*), under the slogan "One Million Steps for Peace and National Unity". The journey covered approximately 300 kilometres and lasted around 11 days. Politically, this was a deliberately crafted gesture aimed at reaching both rural and economically disadvantaged regions in eastern Hungary and the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, while also reclaiming and reshaping the narrative of national unity. At the same time, the march took place during a particularly significant political period: Hungary was one year after the European Parliament elections and one year before the parliamentary elections. During this period, Magyar managed to dominate the country's political debate for months. This once again proved that Magyar broke with the traditional opposition strategy by proactively and repeatedly engaging with voters in rural areas, rather than focusing primarily on urban constituencies.



Source: [Melegh Noémi Napsugár / Telex](#): Péter Magyar with Ervin Nagy, Award-winning Hungarian actor, TISZA Member of the National Assembly and current State Secretary for Culture



Source: [Melegh Noémi Napsugár / Telex](#): Péter Magyar crossing the Hungarian-Romanian border together with Tisza Party Vice President and MP Márk Radnai, current Minister of Defence Romulusz Ruszin-Szendy, and Zoltán Tarr, current Minister of Social Relations and Culture



Source: [Melegh Noémi Napsugár / Telex](#): Péter Magyar greeting a supporter during his march to Transylvania.

5.3 Positioning: The Space Between System and Opposition

One of TISZA's most decisive strategic choices was its positioning within the Hungarian political landscape. The party deliberately placed itself between two discredited poles: the dominant but increasingly unpopular Fidesz regime, and the fragmented, ineffective traditional opposition. This positioning allowed TISZA to occupy a unique political space, that of the **only credible alternative capable of delivering change**.

Unlike previous opposition coalitions, TISZA refused to integrate into existing party structures or form alliances with established actors. This independence was not only organisational, but also symbolic. It reinforced the perception that TISZA represented a genuine break with both the ruling system and the failed opposition strategies of the past.

This logic resembles a 'third way' positioning: presenting itself as the only credible alternative between two discredited poles. TISZA, in this case, relied on **strategic flexibility and ideological ambiguity**. Magyar deliberately **avoided taking strong positions on polarising issues**, allowing the party to maximise its electoral reach. This ambiguity enabled TISZA to attract voters from across the political spectrum, but it also means that its long-term ideological direction remains uncertain.

For liberal parties, this distinction is highly relevant. It raises the question of whether electoral success in highly polarised environments requires a temporary relaxation of ideological clarity or whether such ambiguity carries long-term risks.

5.4 Voter Coalition: A Broad and Cross-Ideological Alliance

TISZA's strategy resulted in the formation of a remarkably broad electoral coalition. Its support base cut across traditional political, social, and geographic divides. Three key groups can be identified:

- **Disillusioned Fidesz voters**, particularly those affected by economic stagnation and corruption, who were open to an alternative that did not come from the traditional opposition.
- **Opposition voters, frustrated with fragmentation**, willing to consolidate behind a single credible challenger.
- **Previously disengaged or first-time voters**, including younger cohorts, were mobilised by the perception that the election represented a genuine opportunity for change.

This coalition was not unified by ideology, but by a **shared desire for political and institutional renewal**. TISZA's

focus on cross-cutting grievances, rather than divisive issues, enabled it to act as a common platform for these otherwise heterogeneous groups.

High voter turnout across the country, including in regions traditionally dominated by Fidesz, suggests that the campaign was particularly successful in activating new and previously passive segments of the electorate.

At the same time, it also highlights a strategic dilemma. While such coalitions are effective for winning elections, they may be more difficult to sustain in government, particularly when policy trade-offs require clearer ideological positioning.

5.5 Strategic Synthesis

Taken together, TISZA's campaign strategy is a coherent model built around four reinforcing elements:

- highly personalised and direct communication
- a simple and morally framed anti-system narrative
- strategic positioning as the only credible alternative
- and the mobilisation of a broad, cross-ideological voter coalition

This model proved highly effective in a context characterised by political distrust, institutional imbalance, and widespread dissatisfaction.

For liberal parties, the key insight is not to replicate this model mechanically, but to understand the underlying dynamics. TISZA's success demonstrates that in contemporary European politics, **clarity, credibility, and connection often matter more than programmatic depth**, particularly in moments of systemic political change.

6. Strengths and Risks of the Model

TISZA's campaign model proved highly effective in achieving rapid electoral success under challenging political conditions. However, the very features that enabled this breakthrough also generate significant uncertainties as the movement transitions from opposition to governance. Understanding both the strengths and the structural risks of this model is essential, not only for assessing Hungary's political trajectory, but also for drawing meaningful lessons for liberal actors across Europe.

6.1 Strengths: Speed, Credibility, and

Breakthrough Capacity

One of the most striking features of TISZA's success is the **speed of mobilisation**. Within a remarkably short period, the party built a nationwide presence, assembled a large volunteer network, and translated it into electoral dominance. This rapid scaling was made possible by a **combination of decentralised organisation, strong leadership, and a clear narrative that resonated across diverse voter groups**.

In contrast to traditional party-building, which often requires years of organisational development, TISZA demonstrated that, under certain conditions, political movements can achieve mass mobilisation quickly if they effectively capture existing public sentiment.

A second key strength lies in **credibility through personal narrative**. Péter Magyar's background as a former insider provided a powerful foundation for trust. His break with the Fidesz system was not perceived as opportunistic repositioning, but as a credible act of defection grounded in experience. This allowed the campaign to frame its anti-corruption message in concrete and persuasive terms.

In an environment characterised by low institutional trust, this form of personal credibility proved more effective than traditional programmatic appeals. It enabled TISZA to overcome scepticism toward political actors and to position itself as a genuine alternative rather than just another opposition force.

Third, TISZA succeeded in achieving a **breakthrough in a structurally stagnant system**. For over a decade, Hungary's political landscape had been defined by the dominance of Fidesz and the weakness of the opposition. By bypassing existing party structures and creating a new political vehicle, TISZA was able to reset the competitive dynamic entirely.

This breakthrough has broader implications. It demonstrates that even entrenched political systems, characterised by institutional asymmetries and media imbalance, are not immune to disruption if a credible and well-organised challenger emerges.

6.2 Risks: Ambiguity, Fragility, and Governance Challenges

The TISZA model carries significant risks that may become more pronounced in the governing phase. The most immediate is the **lack of ideological clarity**. TISZA's strategic ambiguity was an asset during the campaign, allowing the party to build a broad and heterogeneous coalition. However, this ambiguity may become a liability when concrete policy decisions are required. Governing inevitably involves trade-offs - on economic policy, social

issues, foreign relations, and institutional reform. Without a clearly defined ideological framework, maintaining internal coherence and voter support may prove difficult, particularly if different segments of the coalition have conflicting expectations.

A second risk concerns the **high degree of personalisation**. While Péter Magyar's leadership was central to TISZA's success, it also created structural fragility. Movements built around a single figure are inherently vulnerable to shifts in public perception, leadership fatigue, or political missteps. Moreover, strong personal leadership can complicate the institutionalisation of the party. The transition from a leader-driven campaign to a stable governing organisation requires the development of internal structures, decision-making processes, and second-tier leadership - all of which remain relatively underdeveloped in TISZA's case.

Third, there are **uncertainties regarding governance capacity**. While the movement successfully signalled competence by incorporating professionals from business and public life, it has limited experience in managing state institutions. This challenge is particularly acute in Hungary, where key institutions have been shaped by more than a decade of Fidesz control. The new government will face the complex task of reforming or rebuilding these institutions while maintaining political stability and meeting high public expectations. The scale of the electoral mandate, while providing political opportunity, also increases the pressure to deliver rapid and visible results.

Finally, there is the broader risk of **drifting into another form of populist politics**. Although TISZA's campaign avoided extremist rhetoric, its emphasis on anti-elite messaging, personal leadership, and broad but loosely defined grievances shares some characteristics with populist mobilisation. Without clear institutional and ideological anchoring, there is a risk that the movement could replicate certain dynamics it initially opposed, particularly if short-term political pressures incentivise simplified narratives or centralised decision-making.

6.3 A Model Between Disruption and Consolidation

Taken together, these strengths and risks highlight a fundamental tension within the TISZA model. It is highly effective as a vehicle for political disruption, but its long-term viability depends on its ability to transition into a stable and coherent governing force.

For liberal actors, this tension is particularly instructive. TISZA demonstrates how electoral breakthroughs can be achieved through credibility, simplicity, and mobilisation. At the same time, it underscores the importance of institutional depth, ideological clarity, and sustainable organisational structures - areas where liberal parties traditionally have a comparative advantage.

The Hungarian case, therefore, does not offer a blueprint to be copied, but rather a model to be critically assessed. Its success reveals what is possible in moments of political rupture; its risks indicate what is required to transform such moments into durable political outcomes.

7. Conclusion: Opportunity or Warning?

The 2026 Hungarian election is often framed as a political breakthrough, and rightly so. It ended sixteen years of entrenched rule and demonstrated that even highly centralised, illiberal systems are not immune to electoral defeat. Yet for European liberals, the more important question is not what TISZA achieved, but what its success reveals about the current state of democratic politics.

TISZA should be understood primarily as a symptom, not a solution. Its rise reflects a deeper transformation in voter behaviour: a collapse of trust in established political actors, growing frustration with governance failures, and an increasing demand for credible alternatives capable of delivering tangible change. Hungarian voters did not simply vote against Orbán; they voted for a political actor who appeared capable of replacing him.

The election highlights a structural shift. Political competition is no longer defined primarily by ideological alignment, but by credibility, clarity, and perceived capacity to act. Voters are willing to support new and untested actors if they convincingly embody change, especially when existing parties fail to do so.

This creates both an opportunity and a warning for liberal parties. The opportunity lies in the fact that political systems, even those that appear stable and dominated by incumbents, can change rapidly when a credible challenger emerges. The demand for renewal is real, widespread, and politically decisive.

The warning is that this space for change is not inherently liberal. TISZA's success shows how quickly it can be occupied by actors who prioritise strategic flexibility over ideological clarity. While such an approach may be effective in winning elections, it does not guarantee a commitment to liberal democratic principles in the long term.

For the European liberal parties, the strategic implication is clear. It is no longer sufficient to rely on programmatic strength, institutional credibility, or ideological consistency alone. These remain essential, but they must be complemented by the ability to communicate clearly, lead credibly, and mobilise effectively. Liberalism must not only be right, but it must also be politically competitive.

The Hungarian case ultimately poses a simple but urgent question: who will represent change in an era of distrust? If liberals do not occupy the space of credible change, non-liberal actors will.

