HUNGARIAN HELSINKI COMMITTEE

Ensuring Electoral Integrity for Hungary's Democratic Renewal

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The Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC), an independent human rights watchdog founded in 1989, wishes to draw the attention of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its participating States to the need for comprehensive electoral reform following Hungary's parliamentary elections of 12 April 2026. The elections brought a change of government, yet longstanding structural inequalities continued to undermine the fairness of electoral competition.

The OSCE/ODIHR-led International Election Observation Mission found that the electoral contest lacked a level playing field, citing the blurring of state and party functions, widespread misuse of administrative resources, pronounced pro-government bias in media coverage, and serious deficiencies in campaign finance regulation and oversight.[1] While election administration was professional and election day was generally assessed positively, significant shortcomings in electoral safeguards, independent oversight and effective legal remedies persisted.

The change of government presents an important opportunity to address these structural deficiencies but does not, in itself, remedy them. Comprehensive electoral reform should implement longstanding ODIHR recommendations[2] and relevant Venice Commission recommendations[3] through an inclusive and transparent process, ensuring equality of opportunity among contestants, impartial electoral administration and effective legal remedies. Hungary's democratic renewal requires an electoral framework that ensures fair political competition, protects electoral rights and establishes lasting safeguards against abuses of power, irrespective of the governing majority.

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[1] International Election Observation Mission (IEOM), *Hungary – Parliamentary Elections, 12 April 2026: Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, 13 April 2026.
[2] See, for example, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Hungary: Parliamentary Elections and Referendum, 3 April 2022 – ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, 29 July 2022.
[3] See, for example, Venice Commission, *Hungary – Opinion on Act LXXIX of 2024 Amending Certain Laws Relating to Elections*, CDL-AD(2025)018, 16 June 2025.

Blurring of state and party functions

The 2026 campaign demonstrated the persistent blurring of state and party functions.[4] State-funded 'public information' campaigns echoed governing-party messages and targeted political opponents. Public authorities and state-owned enterprises amplified these messages, while official communication channels and state-held contact databases were used for partisan outreach. Mobilisation by ostensibly independent entities further blurred the distinction between official and party activity. A legal exemption for state communications from campaign rules, compounded by weak oversight and restrictive access to judicial review, enabled continuous de facto campaigning at public expense, including outside the formal campaign period. The legal framework should therefore close the loopholes enabling publicly funded partisan campaigning and ensure effective oversight and sanctions against the misuse of state resources for electoral advantage.

Campaign finance, media and the information environment

The 2025 abolition of campaign expenditure limits aggravated longstanding deficiencies in transparency and oversight. Party donations, third-party campaigning and the use of public funds remain insufficiently regulated or scrutinised.[5] Public-service media failed to provide balanced coverage, while government advertising reinforced the ruling party's campaign messages. Manipulative online content, including AI-generated disinformation, and concerns about foreign interference further exposed gaps in institutional responsibilities and co-ordination. Reform should therefore ensure transparent reporting and independent oversight of campaign funding and expenditure, including third-party campaigning, and effective enforcement to prevent the circumvention of campaign finance rules.

Election administration and legal remedies

While election offices administered the elections efficiently and professionally, the composition and functioning of the National Election Commission (NEC) raised concerns about the independence and impartiality of its decision-making.[6] Its politically dominated composition, the lack of voting rights for delegates of parties without parliamentary groups, and the NEC president's exclusive power to propose decisions constrained inclusive and collegial deliberation. Restrictive standing requirements and excessive formalism in the handling of electoral complaints further limited access to effective legal remedies. Reform should therefore strengthen the NEC's independence and impartiality and ensure accessible, timely and effective remedies.

Legal framework

The 2024 redrawing of single-member constituencies, adopted without meaningful consultation, raised concerns about politically motivated boundary delimitation.[7] Another concern is the

[4] See IEOM, *Preliminary Findings and Conclusions (2026)*. See also HHC, *Entrenched State–Party Fusion Ahead of Hungary's 2026 Parliamentary Elections*, April 2026.
[5] IEOM, *Preliminary Findings and Conclusions (2026)*, pp. 3, 15–17. See also HHC et al., *Hungarian Citizen Election Report II: General Elections – Hungary*, April 2026.
[6] For more information, see HHC, *The Case of the Hungarian National Election Commission*, 12 December 2025.
[7] Venice Commission, *Hungary – Opinion on Act LXXIX of 2024 Amending Certain Laws Relating to Elections*, CDL-AD(2025)018, 16 June 2025, §§ 39–40.

requirement to field candidates in at least two-thirds of single-member constituencies to register a national party list, which places undue barriers on smaller parties. Comprehensive electoral reform should address these distinct shortcomings and review the electoral system's broader effects on fair competition, representation and political pluralism, in line with ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations.

Different voting arrangements for citizens abroad continue to raise concerns about equal suffrage and electoral integrity, compounded by inaccuracies in postal voter registers and inadequate safeguards for the distribution, collection and return of postal ballots. The national minority voting system has yet to be brought into line with the European Court of Human Rights' judgment in *Bakirdzi and E.C. v. Hungary*.[8] The preferential threshold is effectively unattainable for most national minorities, while restrictions on electoral choice and insufficient safeguards for ballot secrecy persist.

Despite repeated recommendations, the law still does not provide for domestic non-partisan election observation. This limits opportunities for independent citizen oversight of the electoral process, contrary to OSCE commitments and international good practice. Legislation should provide for effective access to all stages of the electoral process, subject to clear and proportionate rules on observer accreditation, impartiality and conduct.

Undue influence and the protection of voters

Particular concerns arose over undue influence on voters in socially vulnerable communities, including reported pressure linked to public employment and social services, as well as vote buying.[9] Inadequate safeguards against the misuse of voters' personal data for campaign purposes further compounded these risks. These concerns require effective preventive measures, impartial investigation of alleged violations and proportionate sanctions, alongside stronger safeguards for voter privacy and the free expression of voters' will.

Recommendations

The HHC call on the OSCE and OSCE participating States to:

1. Pursue systematic follow-up to the 2026 election observation findings and longstanding ODIHR recommendations, including through dialogue with Hungarian authorities and technical assistance.
2. Support a transparent, inclusive electoral reform process informed by ODIHR and Venice Commission expertise and the findings of independent domestic civil society.

The HHC calls on the OSCE and OSCE participating States to encourage the Hungarian Government to:

1. Conduct a comprehensive and transparent review of the electoral framework, with meaningful participation by independent experts, civil society and national minority representatives. Align reforms with the broader constitutional renewal, and adopt amendments well ahead of the next elections.

[8] See the latest Rule 9.2 communication by the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union and the HHC in *Bakirdzi and E.C. v. Hungary* (Application No. 49636/14): DH-DD(2026)148, 28 January 2026.
[9] See, for example, IEOM, *Preliminary Findings and Conclusions (2026)*, pp. 3, 15. See also DE! Action Community, *The Price of a Vote (A szavazat ára)*, documentary, 26 March 2026.

2. Prohibit and effectively sanction the partisan misuse of public office, administrative resources, official communications and voters' personal data, including outside formal campaign periods.
3. Reintroduce proportionate campaign expenditure limits, ensure timely disclosure of donations and spending, regulate third-party campaigning and establish effective, independent supervision of political finance.
4. Safeguard the impartiality of public-service media, improve transparency of state advertising and ensure co-ordinated, rights-respecting responses to online manipulation and foreign interference.
5. Strengthen the independence and impartiality of election commissions, provide effective and timely remedies, and establish a legal framework for domestic non-partisan observation of all stages of elections.
6. Establish a legal framework enabling independent, non-partisan citizen election observation, guaranteeing observers effective access to all stages of the electoral process in line with OSCE commitments and international good practice.
7. Review the electoral system and restrictive party-list nomination requirements; establish impartial, periodic constituency delimitation; and ensure equal, accessible and secure voting arrangements, including for voters abroad.
8. Implement the *Bakirdzi and E.C.* judgment without delay and strengthen safeguards against undue influence, vote buying and other practices compromising the secrecy and freedom of the vote.