

# Disciplined Normalization

*How Hungary's new government can recalibrate relations with Ukraine*

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**Hungary–Ukraine  
Reconciliation  
Initiative**

**Working Paper June 2026**

## Introduction

The German Marshall Fund of the United States launched its Hungary–Ukraine Reconciliation Initiative in early 2026 to facilitate a structured dialogue between Hungarian and Ukrainian academics and policy experts to develop a vision for a degree of normalization in the relations between the two countries. The landslide victory of the Tisza party in the April 2026 parliamentary elections has since fundamentally changed the political situation in Hungary, which had previously undermined the relationship and affected the country’s relations within the EU and NATO.

The expected political transformation in Hungary under its new government offers choices for changing the engagement between the two countries and the underlying dynamics. Based on an overview of controversies between them in the past decade, this working paper identifies four contentious issues that need to be addressed, which can lead to the recalibration of relations by the new government:

- Ensuring the security of natural gas and oil supply.
- Solving minority-rights concerns.
- Addressing economic and trade concerns.
- Supporting Ukraine’s defense and Euro-Atlantic integration.

An overarching dimension must also be addressed: moving from the securitized political, media, and societal enemy-oriented discourse that Hungary’s previous government built to de-securitized relations, in which constructive political negotiations are the rule, not the exception, and potential conflicts of interests are resolved rather than reinforced.

The medium-term recalibration of relations should be defined as a “disciplined normalization”, relying on international legal and political frameworks with normal rules of engagement and conduct, and gradually addressing conflicts in a disciplined fashion.

This working paper primarily addresses the question of how Hungarian–Ukrainian relations can be improved by identifying a step-by-step process rather than by formulating thematic policy proposals. The first part offers an overview of the four contentious issues that were securitized. The second part identifies how a stable normalization process can be established, and it formulates recommendations for further constructive engagement for Hungary’s government and state-related and civilian actors. The timeline covers the next six months as deliverables should be defined and expected in the short to medium term, even though normalization will be a long-term strategic process.

The fact that the securitization was primarily driven by domestic politics in both countries indicates that, with the new government in Hungary, things can change swiftly to bring about normalization. In recent months, there were early positive signaling and reciprocal steps between Hungary and Ukraine (including before the Tisza government took office), kick-starting a promising agenda for normalization:

- On April 21, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that the Druzhba oil pipeline, which had been damaged by a Russian airstrike in January, had been repaired and its operation resumed.
- The next day, Hungary lifted its vetoes on the EU’s €90 billion loan to Ukraine and 20th sanctions package targeting Russia.<sup>1</sup>
- On April 28, Prime Minister Péter Magyar informally proposed to Zelensky to meet in the largest ethnic Hungarian-inhabited settlement in Ukraine’s Zakarpattia oblast in June, which the latter welcomed.

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Henley, “EU agrees to unblock €90bn loan for Ukraine after Hungary lifts veto”, The Guardian, April 22, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/apr/22/eu-unblocks-loan-ukraine-new-sanctions-russia-hungary-lifts-veto>

- On May 6, cash and gold of Ukraine’s Oschadbank that had been seized by the Hungarian special services in March, amid allegations of money laundering, during a regular transfer from Austria to Kyiv, were returned to Ukraine.
- On May 18, Hungary’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Anita Orbán announced the start of expert-level negotiations to resolve the concerns with regard to the ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine. Magyar framed this process as a precondition for Hungary’s approval for opening the first chapter of the EU accession process for Ukraine.
- On June 2, Magyar signaled that he would be ready to meet Zelensky as soon as possible.
- On June 3, Magyar announced a break-through in the minority-rights negotiations, and subsequently Hungary lifted its veto on opening Ukraine’s EU accession talks with the first negotiation chapter.

### Contentious Issues

From the mid-2010s, relations between Hungary and Ukraine gradually became strained in a process primarily driven by domestic politics in both countries.

In Hungary, the Fidesz government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán painted Ukraine as a growing threat to the security of the country and ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine in the socio-political (minority rights) and economic (energy, aid) dimensions of security—rather than Russia in the military realm. It decided that this securitization was an effective tool for political mobilization. In this, Ukraine and Zelensky joined other actors that the government built up as threatening external “enemies”, such as the “Soros network”, the European Commission, and migrants. Orbán and Fidesz presented themselves as ready to defend Hungary and Hungarians by all means necessary, in mostly symbolic or sometimes real and futile political conflicts waged for years. They developed a narrative that elevated contentious issues from normal political discourse on conflicting interests to an extraordinary level of securitization, particularly since 2022.

In Ukraine, the securitization began as fallout from the first phase of Russia’s war in 2014–2015. The war simultaneously raised the country’s importance and vulnerability as an energy transit corridor for Hungary. Equally important was the government’s restrictive minority policies intended to scale back the Russian cultural presence and societal influence in the country, which affected the ethnic Hungarian minority’s language rights. The full-scale invasion in 2022 then brought about a significant change, with the Fidesz government taking an outlier position within the EU and NATO regarding Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> This hampered consensual decision-making in these institutions and limited Ukraine’s access to support.

Hungary’s expressions of solidarity and support for Ukraine were rather weak. While EU and NATO leaders often visited Kyiv to demonstrate political support and to increase the visibility of Ukraine’s war of self-defense to their domestic audiences, there were only a few such instances by Hungarian leaders. In November 2022, President Katalin Novák visited Kyiv to show support for the Black Sea Grain Agreement, and in August 2023 she participated in the meeting of the Crimea Platform (an informal international coordination mechanism focusing on restoring Russia–Ukraine relations and on security and economic issues in the Black Sea).

In July 2022, Romulusz Ruszin-Szendi, the commander-in-chief of the Hungarian Defense Forces (now the minister of defense in the Tisza government) secretly went to Ukraine where he met his counterpart, Valery Zaluzhnyi, and visited the front line and sites of former fighting. No further high-level military visits have taken place since then.

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<sup>2</sup> Csiki Varga Tamás, “Az orosz–ukrán háború hatása Magyarországra” [The impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Hungary], *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 2024, <https://folyoirat.ludovika.hu/index.php/neb/article/view/7657/6221>

In January 2024, Foreign Ministers Péter Szijjártó and Dmytro Kuleba met in Zakarpattia oblast, with the Ukrainian side calling for Orbán to meet Zelensky and to visit the site of the Bucha massacre. Hungary's prime minister had not accepted the president's invitation during the first two years of the war and they had only spoken on the phone on June 21, 2022. The two leaders met in July 2024, soon after Hungary had taken over the Presidency of the Council of the EU—followed by Orbán's trips to Russia, China, and the United States—without tangible impact.

During these years, four issues contributed to the deterioration of relations between Hungary and Ukraine: energy security, minority rights, economic and trade issues, and Ukraine's defense and Euro-Atlantic integration. These were securitized, in a process primarily determined by domestic politics.

### *Natural Gas and Oil Supply*

From 2022, a key concern of the Fidesz government was how to maintain natural gas and oil imports from Russia, as well as keeping alive the project for the Russian-built Paks-2 nuclear power plant. The reasons for this were fourfold. First, the government aimed to strengthen re-industrialization and to develop the highly energy-intensive car manufacturing and electronic battery industries throughout the 2010s, intensifying the demand for hydrocarbons and increasing the dependence on Russia for 70–80% of supplies. Second, relatively cheap energy was a key competitiveness factor for an economy that struggled for growth from 2022. Third, cheap household energy through subsidies was one of the main pillars of the popularity of the government since 2014. Fourth, Paks-2 is essential for Hungary for providing substitute capacity for the ageing Paks-1 blocks that will reach the end of their lifecycles in the 2030s and for generating electricity to cover the growing needs of industry and household consumption.

The direct role of Ukraine in the energy issue is limited to maintaining the security of supply by ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of related infrastructure from Russia via its territory to Central Europe. This is why this dimension only became central to the conflictual relations when the Druzhba oil pipeline was damaged by a Russian strike and subsequent fire in January 2026 and stopped supplying oil to Hungary (and Slovakia) for three months. Even though supply had been stopped and restored for short periods and for various reasons on more than 20 occasions in previous years, this time the Fidesz government accused Zelensky of political blackmail through economic pressure before Hungary's elections. Budapest introduced retaliatory measures, such as stopping the supply of diesel fuel to Ukraine and blocking the €90 billion EU loan.

In April, Zelensky announced that the pipeline had been repaired and its operation resumed. This move resolved this problem in relations and paved the way for further steps. This is the case even though the security of supply of energy transiting through Ukraine largely rests on Russia, rather than Ukraine, in terms of fulfilling contractual obligations toward Hungary and of refraining from damaging the infrastructure again.

### *Minority Rights*

Politically the most charged and heated issue that strained relations has been the situation of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia. When, as a result of the first phase of Russia's war in 2014–2015, Ukraine's government sought to restrict the cultural and societal influence of Russians and people with Russian identity living in the country, the language rights of the ethnic Hungarian minority, estimated at 135,000 before the war (and currently at between 60,000 and 80,000) fell victim to this. The Fidesz government loudly and relentlessly demanded the restoration of the rights of this group regarding public media, education, and administration. It particularly criticized the 2017 education law for curbing the rights of ethnic Hungarians to use their mother tongue in the public sphere, such as in schools and local administration. Minority rights remained high on the agenda after the full-scale invasion and even after Ukraine amended many of the relevant laws to satisfy Hungary's requests in 2023.

To keep these concerns on the agenda and unresolved, the Fidesz government issued a list of 11 further demands in January 2024, with negotiations following without much progress. Meeting at least one of these requests would have required amending Ukraine's constitution, which is technically not possible under the wartime state of emergency. Thus, political blackmail and a structural impasse became integral parts of bilateral relations.

The lack of political willingness in Budapest to find a compromise changed rapidly after the Tisza government took office. In June, Magyar announced a breakthrough in the expert-level negotiations on minority rights begun in the previous month, as a result of which the education, language, cultural, and political rights of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine will be addressed and restored. Ukraine also committed itself to including these measures in its EU accession process as parts of its minorities action plan.

### *Economic and Trade Concerns*

Economic and trade concerns have repeatedly affected relations. Ukraine introduced symbolic measures against Hungary's OTP Bank for maintaining its operations in Russia beyond 2022 by adding it to the list of "countries and entities sponsoring Russia's illegal war", and considered doing the same for the pharmaceutical company Richter. Even though this step did not have meaningful effects on the bank's operations in Ukraine as in practice it was not restrictive, it provoked harsh political criticism by the Fidesz government. Hungary referred to this issue when it blocked on several occasions EU financial support to Ukraine or the use of military resources to be provided from the European Peace Facility (EPF), until OTP was removed from the list a couple of months later.

The Fidesz government also aimed to protect the interests of Hungarian farmers and producers in relation to Ukraine. In 2023, it banned imports from the country of more than 20 agricultural and agri-food product categories (mostly grain and meat). Imports resumed briefly when the different emergency regulations of the Fidesz government were phased out by the Tisza government, but these specific restrictions were reintroduced within a few days. This issue should not undermine the trend of improving relations and cooperation, however. While trade will remain an important issue in Hungarian politics, the restrictions are an acceptable cost for Ukraine (as with the ones in place in Poland, with which trade is much greater).

### *Ukraine's Defense and Euro-Atlantic Integration*

The Fidesz government's stance on support for Ukraine's defense could be characterized as low-key, restrained, and at times hindering. Direct support was limited and primarily humanitarian. According to the Kiel Institute's Ukraine Support Tracker, Hungary had provided no bilateral economic or military support since the start of the full invasion in 2022.<sup>3</sup> According to the latest data from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 65,770 Ukrainian refugees had made an asylum application or requested temporary protection in Hungary by March 2026.<sup>4</sup> As of June 2026, the country's government had spent €0.05 billion for humanitarian purposes in more than four years, the third-lowest amount among EU member states, after Cyprus and Malta, which did not provide any support. It is Hungary's civil and religious aid organizations that have been active in aiding refugees and the Ukrainian population, especially ethnic Hungarians in Zakarpattia.

Another fundamental point for the Fidesz government was that no weapons should be delivered to Ukraine directly from Hungarian territory, which not only meant that no Hungarian arms and military equipment were transferred or sold, but also that shipments from other NATO members could not be

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<sup>3</sup> Kiel Institute, Ukraine Support Tracker Data, <https://www.kielinstitut.de/publications/ukraine-support-tracker-data-6453/>

<sup>4</sup> Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Ukraine Refugee Situation, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

delivered through the country. However, Hungary's transport infrastructure and airspace were reportedly used for "indirect" deliveries moving through Slovakia or Romania to Ukraine, without drawing much attention. This should be interpreted within the government's wider political narrative of not getting involved in the war.

The Fidesz government also adopted a contentious position regarding Ukraine's EU membership. Hungary was among the first countries expressing support for Ukraine's EU accession bid in the early days of the war, but this stance changed and Orbán was one of the idea's staunchest opponents. Nevertheless, when the European Council voted in December 2023 to start Ukraine's accession negotiations, Orbán did not veto the decision. In February 2024, Hungary also agreed to the first €50 billion aid package for Ukraine. Nonetheless, its opposition to continuing the accession process and opening negotiating clusters remained firm until the change in government.

The Fidesz government also rejected the idea of Ukraine joining NATO—not only because of the risk posed by collective-defense guarantees during an ongoing war coupled but also because of the negative impact on Russia's threat perception. Its main argument was that the goal of NATO membership should have been abandoned to appease Russia, which would never accept this and do everything—even wage war—to prevent it. When NATO agreed in 2008 that Ukraine would one day become a member, Orbán, then out of office, advocated this. From 2022, the Fidesz government supported all NATO decisions, joint positions, and summit statements identifying Russia as a military threat and aiming to strengthen deterrence against it. Hungary also consented tacitly to most NATO political and military decisions in support of Ukraine, and it has been an observer in the Ukraine Defense Contract (Ramstein) Group without providing much support. Crucially, though, the Fidesz government repeatedly elevated bilateral tensions to the NATO level by blocking issues important to Ukraine and its supporters, like the meetings of the NATO-Ukraine Commission between 2018 and 2022 or preventing Ukraine from joining the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defense Centre of Excellence between 2021 and 2023.

With regard to Ukraine's defense and Euro-Atlantic integration, the Tisza government can easily deliver quick changes in bilateral and multilateral cooperation that are important for Ukraine as well as for EU countries. It can take symbolic and practical steps, including unblocking EU support and providing direct support either via government-to-government or government-to-society channels, while acknowledging and strengthening civilian initiatives. Simply unblocking existing processes and not raising new obstacles will improve relation with Ukraine.

Breaking with the position of not providing weapons to Ukraine is not a prerequisite for improving relations as the country's defense capabilities are now less reliant on international military support in general, and Hungary is not in a position to provide anything meaningful in fields where this is still highly relevant (air and missile defense). Tangible progress has been achieved on some points: Hungary lifted its veto on reimbursing EU member states through the EPF for funds spent earlier on Ukraine's military support. The backlog amounted to about €40 billion across the EU, putting major donors like Germany, the Netherlands, and Poland in an uneasy situation and undermining EPF-funded weapons purchases for Ukraine for two years.

The deadlock on EU membership was broken in June when the new government lifted Hungary's vetoes on opening accession talks on the first negotiations chapter, on the €90 billion loan to Ukraine, and the 20th sanctions package on Russia. These decisions, though not independent of domestic politics in Hungary, highlight that many controversies in relations had been crafted and sustained by the Fidesz government. As they did not reflect popular demand or the national interest, they could be changed easily and quickly. At the same time, the Tisza government maintains the position of supporting merit-based accession and prioritizing the Western Balkans candidates. It is simply addressing Ukraine's candidacy in the normal EU consensual framework, with Hungary no longer an obstacle at every step.

The Tisza government might retain the Fidesz position on Ukraine's NATO membership at least until the war ends, if not beyond, and Ukraine's priorities are also shifting and membership in NATO might not be on the table by that time. However, it was not the Fidesz government opposing NATO accession

that was damaging, but its repeated elevation of bilateral tensions to the NATO level. Ending this practice and resolving the underlying controversies also removes this hindering factor from relations with Ukraine.

Overall, the four contentious issues discussed above were largely created artificially and were let to deteriorate out of domestic political calculations by the Fidesz government. This did not answer popular demand or meet a national interest, serving instead as an element of securitization and enemy-creation by the government for political mobilization. Therefore, the nature and dynamics of these issues were primarily determined by domestic politics, which—as we are witnessing now—can transform into a cooperative and constructive dialogue that aims at resolving the controversies that fueled conflictual relations.

## Recommendations

The Tisza government has already initiated the first steps of de-conflicting. Based on the above analysis, the following recommendations aim for a step-by-step, workable process for further constructive engagement by Hungary's government, state-related, and civilian actors. Their focus is the next six months, at the end of which period the expected outcome would be a disciplined normalization of relations.

1. Sustain momentum and make progress with practical deliverables on the contentious issues that strained relations by:

- Communicating mutual interest in stability regarding the security of energy supply and deliver predictably, also regarding diesel fuel and electricity exported from Hungary (and Europe) to Ukraine.
- Delivering on the breakthrough agenda of Ukraine's minority action plan.
- Working to mutually minimize restrictions on trade, where and when possible.
- Sustaining unblocking policies with regard to Ukraine's integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions, specifically in the fields crucial for its defense efforts (for example, EPF funding).
- Sustaining a de-securitized discourse and communication with (and on) Ukraine, while signaling strong solidarity.

2. Continue de-conflicting multilateral frameworks with regard to the contentious issues by:

- Sustaining support to EU funding and aid to Ukraine.
- Participating actively and constructively in negotiating Ukraine's EU accession chapters, providing expertise and sharing lessons learned in fields of mutual concern to incentivize harmonization.
- Participating constructively in the NATO–Ukraine Council.
- Continuing, at least, tacit consent with regard to NATO transferring military aid to Ukraine.

3. Use multilateral frameworks to improve and intensify relations under normalization to create added value by:

- Taking an active and constructive part in any reconstruction planning and activities, particularly regarding infrastructure development between Hungary/the EU and Ukrainian territories.
- Adding Hungarian know-how and technology, as well as economic capacities on a market-oriented basis, to sectoral reconstruction efforts crucial to Ukraine (for example, power generation).

- Taking an active and constructive part in multinational aid and assistance efforts (for example, in de-mining and ordnance disposal, and environmental restoration) crucial for Ukraine in the long term.
4. Engage with other Central and Eastern European countries in cooperative and aid programs developed with Ukraine to provide humanitarian support.
  5. Focus on sub-regional transborder cooperation in terms of normalizing and improving trade relations and infrastructure and people-to-people relations, among other things.
  6. Restore and expand institutional relations across various sectors beyond foreign policy, energy, and trade (particularly in education, research, and cultural exchanges).
  7. Engage Ukraine in the field of defense in terms of participating in the process of learning lessons about war-fighting and operational conduct, of defense innovation and defense industry capacity-building, and of cooperating within EU frameworks of military health care and training, among other things.
  8. Design further normalization steps, including within the perspective of a Magyar-Zelensky meeting, to ensure that there is not a short-lived transformative moment but a process that creates space for structural changes. The following basic principles should be adhered to:
    - Moving from breakthrough deals to focused procedures, and then to tailored programs.
    - Building slowly but steadily.
    - Expanding step-by-step and highlighting reciprocity.
    - Aiming high but remaining realistic.
    - Moving from symbolic to practical steps.
    - Engaging on shared attitudes, values, and commitments to create common narratives on independence and sovereignty, freedom from external repression, intervention, democracy and the rule of law, and EU accession criteria.

### **About the Author(s)**

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### **About the Hungary–Ukraine Reconciliation Initiative**

The Hungary–Ukraine Reconciliation Initiative of the German Marshall Fund of the United States addresses challenges related to trust, security, EU integration, and minority rights in the relations between these two neighboring countries. It offers a strategic confidence-building approach to developing a constructive agenda for the relationship between Hungary and Ukraine.

The initiative aims to serve as a policy compass for democratic governments in Kyiv and Budapest, to foster mutual understanding among experts and stakeholders with positive spillover effects for both societies, and to help remove obstacles on the Hungarian side that may hinder Ukraine's EU accession process.

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