

De-Securitizing the Hungary-Ukraine Agenda

From minority rights to a wider context

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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.

European integration is a goal set in Ukraine’s constitution. The preamble highlights the European identity of the Ukrainian people and proclaims the irreversibility of the country’s European and Euro-Atlantic course. Article 85 makes obtaining EU membership the guiding principle for domestic and foreign policy. The EU granted Ukraine candidate status in 2022 and accelerated the process for opening negotiations. In a joint statement on April 23, 2026, President Volodymyr Zelensky, European Council President António Costa, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen commended the significant progress Ukraine has made toward EU accession and called for opening negotiation clusters without delay. However, Hungary under the Fidesz government that was in office until April 2026 persistently objected to any concessions to Ukraine. Notably, it insisted on the protection of the rights of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine’s Zakarpattia Oblast (Transcarpathia) as a necessary precondition to integration.

More broadly, the Russia leaning of the Fidesz government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, the tense relations between him and Zelensky, and the exploitation of the “Ukrainian issue” in Hungary’s politics, which was exacerbated by the recent electoral campaign, deepened the dividing lines between Kyiv and Budapest. Both governments securitized relations in recent years. A brief analysis of statements by government officials of Ukraine and by the representatives of Fidesz and its successor in government, Tisza, led by Péter Magyar, shows this clearly.

The Tisza government may now continue some aspects of Fidesz’s approach, but it may also look for ways to find common ground with Ukraine and to de-securitize relations.

The Minority Rights Issue

The issue of minority rights falls under the “Fundamentals” cluster of the EU accession negotiations. Fidesz and Orbán relied heavily on claims that the government in Kyiv violated the rights of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine. For example, in September 2023, Orbán claimed that Ukraine’s 2017 education law significantly limited the rights of national minorities, and that it aimed “to transform the Hungarian schools into the Ukrainian schools.”¹

This issue served two purposes for Orbán and Fidesz: it offered a political lever at the EU level and it secured the loyalty of the ethnic Hungarian population in Ukraine. Members of the latter,

¹ Elsa Court, “[Orban: Hungary to Only Support Ukraine if It Restores Minority Laws](#)”, The Kyiv Independent, September 25, 2023.

if officially recognized as such by the Hungarian authorities, are able to participate in Hungary's elections, exclusively by voting for party lists. In March 2026, Orbán said:

I ask the Hungarians in Transcarpathia (Ukraine) for their understanding and patience. We stand by them, listen to them, support them, but we must win this fight against the Ukrainians, because if we do not win it, we will be confronted with similar demands in the coming years that would be completely contrary to Hungary's national interests.²

Although minority rights are not explicitly mentioned in the EU's acquis, the Copenhagen Criteria for accession include "respect for and protection of minorities".³ The European Commission, the Council of Ministers, and the European Parliament therefore must assess whether candidate countries have reached an effective protection of national minorities. Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 2000 envisages the principle of equal treatment between persons irrespective of racial or ethnic origin.⁴

The Fidesz government thus constructed a narrative that connected the issue of minority rights and Ukraine's EU accession. This narrative did not operate through formal proof but by creating a sense of credibility. It also neglected the fact that an accelerated integration process for Ukraine would enable the country's minorities to access the rights ensured by the EU legislation and norms.

Competitive Securitization

Securitization can be understood as the process through which political actors portray an issue as an existential security threat in order to persuade an audience that extraordinary policy measures are justified.⁵

A discourse analysis shows that top-level officials in Hungary and Ukraine securitized the issues between the two countries, but referred to fundamentally different threats. On the Hungarian side the threats were Ukraine and the EU, whereas on the Ukrainian side the threat was Russia, with Hungary's government treated as a Russian proxy. This resulted in a competitive securitization in which the two sides constructed different and incompatible threat narratives that reinforced each other's security framing.

One of the claims of the Fidesz government derived from the mutual defense clause in Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union in case Hungary lifted its veto on negotiations and allowed Ukraine to move toward membership. This instrumentalized the fear of the Hungarian population of "being dragged into war". For example, in June 2025, Orbán said that "Ukraine's

² MTI-Hungary Today, "[Viktor Orbán Urges Hungarians Abroad to Consider the Importance of Upcoming Elections](#)," Hungary Today, March 13, 2026.

³ European Union, [Accession criteria \(Copenhagen criteria\)](#).

⁴ Council of the European Union, [Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 Implementing the Principle of Equal Treatment Between Persons Irrespective of Racial or Ethnic Origin](#)", July 19, 2000.

⁵ Thierry Balzacq, "A Theory of Securitization: Origins, Core Assumptions, and Variants", in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve*, Routledge, 2011.

EU membership would mean self-destruction for us. We would be immediately drawn into war with Russia, bringing it onto EU territory – and thus onto Hungarian territory.”⁶

At the same time, Zelensky described Hungary’s actions toward Ukraine as extending Orbán’s concessions to Russia. He said in June 2025: “He is using Ukraine for his own electoral purposes. By not helping us, he is doing Putin a favour. That is why I said that Viktor is making a serious, historic mistake.”⁷

Given the statements by Orbán in January 2026, about an “EU without Ukraine in the next 100 years”⁸ (Ukraine’s accession, in his view, was not a realistic objective within any foreseeable political horizon) and accusations of Ukrainian interference in Hungary’s elections, the response from the Ukrainian side was decisive. In the same month, Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrii Sybiha said that Orbán was “a threat to his own people”,⁹ and that “This plan is doomed to fail, Mr. Prime Minister. Your master in Moscow won’t last 100 years, even if you were ready to donate him all organs.”¹⁰ Ukraine thus framed the actions of the Fidesz government as bandwagoning with Russia, turning them into a matter of national security. Sybiha also commented in January 2026 on the disappearance of the minority rights issue from Fidesz’s rhetoric—“Because they [Fidesz] are guided by polls and voter sentiment”¹¹—which hinted that the issue was no longer that relevant as a tool of a pre-electoral agitation.

Zelensky too pushed the narrative about the allegiance of the Fidesz government to Russia. In January 2026, he said that Orbán “deserves a slap” for trying to turn European capitals into “little Moscows”.¹² This underscored the decision of Ukraine to connect the Hungary and Russia dots in order to securitize the relations with the former.

Ukraine also framed Hungary’s use of the ethnic Hungarian minority as a lever. Sybiha in January 2026 said:

Orbán simply wants to continue holding them hostage to his geopolitical adventures and laundering money... Why don’t you tell this directly to the Transcarpathian Hungarians? By blocking Ukraine’s accession to the EU, Orbán is committing another crime against the Hungarian people and Hungary.¹³

The term “geopolitical adventures” referred to Fidesz’s alignment with Russia and decision to veto the accession negotiations.

In some cases, securitization hampered emerging improvements in relations. For example, in May 2025, Hungary’s State Secretary Levente Magyar noted a “new kind of dynamism and

⁶ Ukrainska Pravda, “[Orbán Claims Hungary Has Halted Ukraine's EU Accession](#),” June 27, 2025.

⁷ Szabolcs Vörös, “[‘Viktor Is Making a Historic Mistake.’ An Exclusive Interview with Volodymyr Zelenskyy](#)”, Válasz Online, June 10, 2025.

⁸ Andrii Sybiha, [post on X](#), January 23, 2026.

⁹ Khrystyna Bondarieva and Sergiy Sydorenko, “[Ukrainian Foreign Minister: Orbán Is a Threat to Hungarian People](#),” European Pravda, January 27, 2026.

¹⁰ Andrii Sybiha, [post on X](#), January 23, 2026

¹¹ Bondarieva and Sydorenko, “[Ukrainian Foreign Minister: Orbán Is a Threat to Hungarian People](#)”.

¹² Yuliia Zavadska, “[‘He Deserves a Dope Slap.’ Zelensky Sharply Criticized Orban in Davos. He Responded](#),” Babel, January 22, 2026.

¹³ Andrii Sybiha, [post on X](#), January 24, 2026.

mentality” in relations, which would provide a basis for Ukraine to offer an “acceptable solution” regarding the ethnic Hungarian minority.¹⁴ However, a few days later, Ukraine’s security services claimed to have uncovered a Hungarian spy ring gathering information about military activities in Zakarpattia. This resulted in another round of escalation. In response to the announcement, Hungary expelled two Ukrainian diplomats, whom Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó accused of being spies. In September 2025, Ukraine’s military detected two drone-type objects above Zakarpattia. On this occasion, Sybiha described as “good news” Orbán’s acknowledgement on this matter, but he added that “the bad news is that the Prime Minister remains intoxicated by Russian propaganda.”¹⁵

Spillover of Securitization

The prospect of Ukraine’s EU accession was securitized in several other dimensions in Hungary. The Fidesz government claimed that integrating Ukraine’s economy into EU markets would create a significant imbalance and appealed to related fears. Orbán stressed that integrating the low-cost agricultural sector of Ukraine would completely dismantle the existing agricultural economic ties between EU member states. In December 2023, he said that “a major part of the Hungarian agricultural industry would be completely destroyed by the agricultural actors in Ukraine, if we [Hungary] were to allow them [Ukraine] into our market”.¹⁶ He also quoted, in May 2025, Slovakia’s Prime Minister Robert Fico’s words that “Ukraine’s accession to the EU is economic suicide.”¹⁷ In January 2026, he said: “Ukraine would then take our money, creating a bottomless pit. There would be nothing left for European development. The European economy is already slowing, and this would push it down below zero.”¹⁸

Such statements aimed not only at extending securitization to another issue, but also at involving other EU countries that may have shared Hungary’s concerns. This was perceived by Ukraine as another step suiting Russian interests and could be interpreted as allying with Russia, and thus as posing an existential threat to Ukraine.

Orbán also spoke of the economic redundancy of the EU decision to support Ukraine by aligning with the Russian narrative. For example, in December 2025, he said: “It’s not clear who attacked whom, but in any case, we are now helping a country that has been subjected to violence, and it costs us nothing. But in the end, they will pay.”¹⁹ The Ukrainian reactions hinted that Hungary chose the wrong side, as it did in the past, by maintaining close relations with Russia. In December 2025, Sybiha wrote: “Just as ‘not clear’ as it was for Hungary’s leadership in 1939”,²⁰

¹⁴ Budapest Times, “[State Secretary: New Kind of Dynamism and Mentality in Hungarian-Ukrainian Relations](#)”, May 5, 2025.

¹⁵ Andrii Sybiha, [post on X](#), September 29, 2025.

¹⁶ Balázs Bozzay, “[Orbán: The EU Shouldn’t Even Begin Discussing Ukraine’s EU Accession](#)”, Telex, December 1, 2023.

¹⁷ Magyar Nemzet, “[PM Orbán: Ukraine's Admission to the EU Would Be Economic Suicide](#)”, May 2, 2025.

¹⁸ Melike Pala, “[Hungarian Premier Says Ukraine's EU Membership 'Out of the Question,' Warns of Economic Consequences](#)”, Anadolu Agency, January 31, 2026.

¹⁹ Oleh Pavliuk and Alona Mazurenko, “[Orbán on Russia's War against Ukraine: 'It Is Not Clear Who Attacked Whom'](#)”, Ukrainska Pravda, December 19, 2025.

²⁰ Andrii Sybiha, [post on X](#), December 19, 2025.

drawing a historical parallel with the Second World War, when Hungary fought on the side of Nazi Germany. Once again, this showed how in the Ukrainian discourse the actions of the Fidesz government were framed as being part of Russia's aggression.

The increase in tension could also be observed after Hungary decided to block the EU's €90 billion loan to Ukraine. Notably, Zelensky ironically said in March 2026 that he could give the contact details of the person who kept insisting on vetoing the loan to the Ukrainian military "so that they can call him and speak to him in their own language".²¹ This provoked an unprecedented reaction in Hungary. Szijjártó strongly condemned Zelensky's words: "This is beyond any limit. This is the kind of 'culture' coming from Kyiv. And this is the man Brussels admires and the country they want to fast-track into the European Union."²² Magyar, then running to unseat Orbán and his government, supported his political adversary by stating that "No foreign leader has the right to threaten a Hungarian citizen."²³ Given the "Hungary first" political position of Tisza, such a reaction was not surprising.

The above examples indicate that securitization was manifested in two forms: one related to specific sectors (politics, military, agriculture, economics, etc.) and the other to "conditions historically associated with the threat".²⁴ In the case of Ukraine, the utilization of context refers to the historical past of Hungary. The statements of Sybiha related to that past and Hungary's alignment with Nazi Germany. Another reference was Russia, which has historically been perceived by Ukrainians as a lasting threat. Such a combination identified Hungary as an ally of the two countries that posed an existential threat to Ukraine.

Moreover, the spillover of securitization to different areas, extending to a wider circle of actors and multidimensional contexts, showed that the spiral of escalation was far from exhausted. Besides, there have been indicators that the new leadership in Hungary faces the inertia of mutual mistrust and the burden of securitized issues, causing lock-in effects when it comes to considering an alternatives course.

Prospects for De-Securitization

The mutual mistrust among Hungary and Ukraine's elites is reflected at the level of the public. Public opinion polls indicate that Ukrainians' trust in Hungary has steadily declined, and trust in Orbán was consistently low. In a September 2022 survey by Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism" in collaboration with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and Info Sapiens International, 43% Ukrainian respondents said they felt negatively toward Hungarians, compared to 30% before

²¹ Iryna Kutielieva and Valentyna Romanenko, "[Hungary Considers Zelenskyy's Remarks about Orbán and Ukraine's Armed Forces a 'Threat'](#)", *Ukrainska Pravda*, March 5, 2026.

²² Hungary Today, "[Zelenskyy Threatens to Send Ukrainian Soldiers to Explain Things to Viktor Orbán 'Their Own Way'](#)", March 6, 2026.

²³ Magyar Peter, [post on X](#), March 5, 2026.

²⁴ Ole Wæver, "The EU as a Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders," in Morten Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams (eds.), *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security and Community*, Routledge, 2000.

February 2022.²⁵ In a March 2023 Razumkov Center survey, 46.5% of Ukrainian respondents said they felt negatively toward Hungarians.²⁶ In 2024, the figure it was 59%.²⁷ In 2025, it reached 68.9%, while mistrust toward Orbán was at 81.3%.²⁸

Hungarians' perception of Ukraine is reciprocal. In Policy Solutions' foreign policy attitudes survey in December 2025, Ukraine's image was particularly unfavorable in Hungary: 71% of respondents expressed a negative view of the country, more than of Russia (68%) and with only Iran (74%) viewed more negatively.²⁹

Under such circumstances, even a change in elite actors on either side will not immediately lead to de-securitization. In the case of Ukraine, the chances of de-securitization through rhetoric are also low because the actors of securitization remain in office and the existential threat from Russia persists. The solution demands a complex set of activities going beyond the reversal of the security language.

The Consequences of the April 2026 Elections

Tisza won an overwhelming majority in the April 2026 elections in Hungary. This has opened a window of opportunity for unblocking Ukraine's EU accession process and for normalizing bilateral relations. There are obstacles on the path to improvement, though.

Despite Tisza's formal alignment with the EU-level European Peoples' Party (which supports Ukraine's accelerated EU accession), Magyar said several times that the party would not support fast-tracking Ukraine's membership. This position is backed by the clear statement that Ukraine must complete the Copenhagen Criteria in full, without political shortcuts. "The position of many EU leaders is that all candidate countries must meet the Copenhagen criteria before being admitted to the EU", Magyar said in February 2026.³⁰

Minister of Foreign Affairs Anita Orbán claimed before the elections that a Tisza government would "stop using [Hungary's] veto as an instrument of political bargaining".³¹ So, hopes for bilateral or multilateral negotiations between a potential Tisza government and Ukraine on lifting the Hungarian veto on "Fundamentals" were high.

Magyar's first statements as prime minister reinforced the centrality of the issue of the ethnic Hungarian minority in Ukraine in bilateral relations. In April 2026, during a meeting with Costa,

²⁵ Tetiana Kostiuchenko, Sergiy Gerasymchuk, and Mariia Koval-Honchar, "[Ukraine and Central Europe: Attitudes and Perceptions](#)", Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism", December 2022.

²⁶ Razumkov Centre, [Foreign Policy Preferences of Ukrainian Citizens, Assessments of the Government's Foreign Policy, Attitude to Foreign Countries and Politicians \(February–March, 2023\)](#), April 4, 2023.

²⁷ Razumkov Centre, [Attitude to Foreign Countries, International Organisations and Politicians, and Ukraine's Accession to the European Union \(January, 2024\)](#), February 28, 2024.

²⁸ Razumkov Centre, "[Results of a Sociological Survey Conducted by the Razumkov Centre's Sociological Service from September 12 to 17, 2025](#)", October 3, 2025.

²⁹ András Bíró-Nagy et al, "[The World Through Hungarian Eyes: Foreign Policy Attitudes in Hungary in 2025](#)", Policy Solutions, December 2025.

³⁰ APA, "[Hungary's Opposition Rejects Accelerated EU Accession for Ukraine](#)", November 30, 2024.

³¹ Jorge Liboreiro, "[Orbán's Rivals Promise an End to Hungary's 'Inflated Vetoes' of EU Policy](#)", Euronews, February 11, 2026.

he said that the government would only support the starting of Ukraine's EU accession process if Kyiv granted more rights to this group. Anita Orbán stressed that "from the very beginning, the rights of the Hungarian community in Transcarpathia must be fully respected."³² During bilateral consultations in May 2026, she said: "Hungary is committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. At the same time, the consistent protection of the rights of national minorities in our bilateral relations is our first task."³³

However, while remaining politicized, the issue is getting less framed around Russia-related security narratives. The new government has taken several steps that pave the way for Hungary to take a new approach toward conditionality, unrelated to any agenda imposed by Moscow. For example, the new government did not object to the EU's €90 billion loan. Right after the Russian drone strikes in Zakarpattia in May 2026, Anita Orbán summoned the Russian ambassador to express Hungary's concerns. This act reframed securitization by pointing the blame at Russia instead of Ukraine. The new government has also signaled its readiness to allow the EU to sanction Patriarch Kirill, the head of Russia's Orthodox Church, and other individuals whom the Fidesz government had protected from EU measures. The perception of Hungary as a Russian proxy may gradually change in Ukraine as a result of such steps, but more are needed to preserve the trend.

Steps for De-Securitization

The starting point for de-securitization is rebuilding trust. An indispensable step would be to move sensitive bilateral issues from the security frame back into that of normal politics and technicalities. This can be achieved by downgrading the dialogue between Hungary and Ukraine from the level of top political leaders to that of relevant institutions (for example, through intergovernmental commissions, interparliamentary groups, expert task forces, etc.). Action plans and assessment mechanisms should not be subjects for the national leadership of both countries to comment on, but rather the respective governmental agencies. An incremental approach may bring more results than unmanaged expectations.

Engaging additional actors may also decrease the level of securitization and create grounds for optimized and pragmatic dialogue. Enabling in a revived or restructured format the Joint Ukrainian-Hungarian Commission on Ensuring the Rights of National Minorities established in 1992, and/or launching an EU-mediated trilateral format including the European Commission, may also be valuable.

Another part of the solution is to focus on the issue of minority rights. The process of de-securitizing this issue requires "a shift from nationalizing, monocultural practices to multicultural policies".³⁴ De-securitizing here is not simply about creating an opportunity to regulate minority rights on the basis of human rights instead of security, for example, but also about creating an opportunity to incorporate the issue in the quest for an alternative founding of the political

³² Márton Balázs and Nyilas Gergely, "[Anita Orbán: A Country Cannot Be Sovereign Without a Sovereign Foreign Policy](#)", Telex, May 11, 2026.

³³ Tom Balmforth, "[Ukraine, Hungary Kick Off Expert-Level Consultations](#)", Reuters, May 20, 2026.

³⁴ Matti Jutila, "Desecuritizing Minority Rights: Against Determinism", *Security Dialogue*, 37:2, 2006.

community in Zakarpattia. Such a quest can be resolved within the EU accession process framework.

Also, the potential of the Carpathian Euroregion as a platform for multilateral dialogue on educational rights (including for minorities) has been underestimated so far. The EU may use its levers for invigorating the dialogue in this format.

The de-securitization of rhetoric and abandoning “threat/survival” framing is highly dependent on the rotation of elite actors. It is viable since the elections in Hungary, and will be eventually in Ukraine too. However, while in some areas, this shift is possible in Ukraine, the Russian threat will remain existential for the country for decades and any new leaning toward Russia by Hungary, even for pragmatic reasons, could re-securitize relations.

Finally, while securitization is dependent on political actors, the role of audiences in enabling de-securitization is underestimated, and the traditional view of them as passive and static is mistaken.³⁵ Public opinion trends indicate that audiences in both countries accept the securitization, which significantly complicates prospects for reversing it. However, the gradual transformation of audience perceptions cannot be excluded. Several instruments can increase the prospects for audience-level de-securitization—extending the number of actors involved to civil society and the expert community (including by launching forums), engaging societal actors from Central and Eastern Europe and wider from the EU with demonstrated experience in minority rights, reconciliation, or cross-border cooperation, who can promote alternative, non-security framings of bilateral disputes, cross-border initiatives grounded on previously impactful projects (such as the EU-funded cross-border cooperation under Interreg or the Hungary-Slovakia-Romania-Ukraine ENI CBC Programme), educational exchanges, and enhanced cooperation between local government institutions. This may eventually break the political elites’ monopoly on defining threats and pave the way for civil society actors to act as co-producers of security and drivers of de-securitization.

³⁵ Sebastian Enhager, “Spaces of Desecuritisation: Understanding Changing Audiences Within Desecuritisation”, *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations*, 4:1, 2022.

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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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