

Geopolitics of Peace: The Hungary Case and its Regional Implications

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Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has since affected the politics of many European countries, both externally and internally. The war in the heart of Europe has created opportunities for political forces to capitalise on issues that were not mainstream prior to the conflict, such as "preserving peace" and defending stability within their own countries, not necessarily from the aggressor Russia, but from the EU. While peace has always been an important topic, it has now acquired a more distinct meaning in the narratives of predominantly illiberal and anti-Western political actors. These actors often intertwine the concept with alleged foreign, mostly Western, pressure to act as proxies in geopolitical confrontations, framing resistance to such pressure as critical for safeguarding stability and security. Interestingly, some political actors have shifted their focus towards portraying themselves as "peacekeepers," although primarily at home rather than on the international stage. They employ narratives about keeping war at a distance and maintaining their countries as "islands of peace" in turbulent times, hoping to gain political support in a period of heightened societal sensitivity due to the ongoing war in the region.

One example is the peace rhetoric of Viktor Orbán, which became an important part of both his and his party's domestic political messaging, particularly prior to the 2026 elections. While he previously portrayed himself as a leader and mediator capable of working with both Russia and Ukraine, and playing an influential role among EU leaders (Gizińska, 2024), he later adopted a more openly anti-Ukrainian government stance. Ahead of the elections, Orbán promised Hungarians that he would keep the country away from Ukrainian and EU pressure to become involved in the war. He then shifted his rhetoric towards the protection of Hungary, and presented himself and his party as the only political force capable of guaranteeing security and stability (Hungary Today, 2026).

Similar rhetoric has also been visible in other countries, including Georgia, where the ruling party has employed comparable discourse. However, these shifts have not come without consequences for relations with both the EU and Ukraine. Hungary's positioning under Viktor Orbán, which included actions such as vetoing support for Ukraine while maintaining close relations with Moscow, significantly strained ties with both Brussels and Kyiv (The Guardian, 2026). At the same time, it unveiled a broader challenge for the EU. Hungary's rhetoric was problematic for the EU not only because it blocked material support for Ukraine, but also because it challenged the perception of a unified European response to Russian aggression, something seen as crucial for maintaining a strong role in the geopolitical dynamics. Moreover, it portrayed the EU as a contributor to the war and an anti-peace actor due to its support of Ukraine. This position is in contrast to the EU's own vision, which views such support not as a stimulus for war, but as

necessary assistance enabling a partner state to defend itself against an unprovoked attack, and to ensure that “Ukraine has the military means to continue to exercise its inherent right of self-defence and counter Russia’s aggression” (European Council, 2026).

This paper analyses the broader strategy employed by political actors across Europe to instrumentalise peace since Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It uses the case of Viktor Orbán’s Hungary to examine the wider implications of peace instrumentalisation for Ukraine, Russia and the European Union, including its impact on their strategic objectives, political positioning and capacity to advance their interests.

Peace as a Political Tool

Since 2022, the topic of peace has become increasingly prominent in Europe. However, some political actors have capitalised on public fears related to war and instability, using “peace” as a political instrument. While many far-right parties across Europe have been associated with opposition to military support for Ukraine (Fagerholm, 2024) on the grounds that it undermines peace on the continent and threatens European economies, more established political regimes, such as Viktor Orbán’s government in Hungary, have also strategically employed the discourse of peace to mobilise political support.

Although electoral outcomes and political fortunes may change over time, as in the case of Hungary, where Orbán was defeated in the 2026 parliamentary elections, such strategies continue to persist across Europe and different political actors, making it important to examine their key characteristics. In such cases, this discourse often takes the form of structured narratives that include several interrelated elements:

1. Portraying the war in Ukraine as “someone else’s war” and framing support for Ukraine, particularly economic and military assistance, as an anti-peace action;
2. Framing the EU as an anti-peace actor that supports the continuation or escalation of the war;
3. Emphasising the need to resist or stop perceived EU pressure to participate in the war, and presenting such resistance as essential to preserving national peace and stability;
4. Constructing the idea that there is only one political force, the author of the narrative, that can ensure through its pragmatic politics that the country remains a “peace island” in the times of war on the European continent;
5. Supporting the opposition equals being against peace, as the opposition is portrayed as being obedient to foreign forces (usually the EU).

Viktor Orbán’s “peace march” on 15 March 2026 brought together many of the narrative elements outlined above. While the event itself was a counter-rally of the demonstrations organised by Orbán’s political opponents, including Péter Magyar, now Hungary’s prime minister, Orbán used

the occasion to demonstrate the scale of his domestic support not only to his internal political rivals, but also to international audiences, directly addressing both Ukraine's leadership and the EU, as a key supporter of Ukraine. The central message was that Hungary would not become involved in the war, that it would remain a "peace island," and that only Orbán and his party could guarantee this under pressure from Brussels and Kyiv. As Orbán stated: "Our sons will not die for Ukraine: they will live for Hungary" (Zsiros, 2026).

This illustrates how internal political competition is framed as a choice between war and peace, while simultaneously assigning it a geopolitical dimension through an emphasis on perceived EU and Kyiv pressure to engage in the war. In this context, domestic political rivalry is effectively elevated to the international level, shaping the perception that Orbán's political opponents are serving external actors, in this case Brussels and Ukraine. As a result, supporting the opposition is paralleled with supporting Hungary's involvement in the war, as opponents are portrayed as unable to resist external pressure or prevent the country from being "dragged into war."

In this framing, the term "peace" itself becomes politically charged with a specific meaning, seeing it redefined in an anti-interventionist sense: in particular as non-involvement in the Ukrainian issue and opposition to support for Ukraine. At the same time, it acquires an anti-EU dimension, as the EU is portrayed as a threat to Hungarian sovereignty and to the preservation of peace.

Even though this messaging was strongly emphasised by Orbán and the ruling party during the Hungarian pre-election period in 2026, they lost the elections, resulting in a change of government in Hungary and the start of a transition period in both internal and international politics. However, similar strategies continue to be employed by various political actors within and around the EU. This is particularly noteworthy in light of the challenges seen from some EU leaders, including the Slovak Prime Minister, Robert Fitso, who was a close ally of Orbán, and who openly expresses pro-Russian sentiments, thereby challenging the perception of EU unity on key issues such as support to Ukraine.

Implications for Ukraine

Viktor Orbán himself repeatedly identified the Ukrainian president as one of his principal international challengers, including during the early years of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In 2022, discourse-wise, Ukraine and its president were included on Orbán's list of political opponents, alongside EU bureaucrats, domestic and international left-wing actors, George Soros's "empire" and international media organisations (Hungary Today, 2022). During the 2026 pre-election period, Orbán went even further by explicitly portraying Ukraine as an enemy of Hungary for advocating EU restrictions on energy trade with Russia (Fenbert, 2026). Consequently, unlike most European countries and the EU institutions, Hungary's peace-oriented rhetoric became closely associated with protection from Ukraine rather than from Russia.

Hungary's peace instrumentalisation policy and related political steps had material consequences for Ukraine, affecting its operational capacity to timely translate its strategic goals into battlefield actions, due to delayed support. Ukraine consistently criticised Orbán's government not only for its role as a significant obstacle to Ukraine, particularly through the repeated use of vetoes against necessary EU-level aid intended to support Ukraine in its ongoing defensive measures against Russia, but also for its general rhetoric against Ukraine and its close ties to Moscow. Interestingly, what Ukraine and the EU largely interpreted as pro-Russian behaviour was framed by Orbán himself, as well as by Russian officials, as a "pragmatic, pro-Hungarian policy" that prioritised national interests rather than ideological alignment with Brussels, which was portrayed as a threat (Vaughan, 2025). Over time, Hungary's strategic positioning increasingly involved distancing itself from Ukraine, in contrast to the majority of EU member states, while avoiding comparable distancing from Russia and pursuing a partnership-oriented approach towards Moscow. While this distancing did not fundamentally alter Ukraine's position within the broader European framework, given the continued and widespread support for Ukraine across the continent, it nevertheless had tangible consequences. As noted above, Hungary's repeated objections delayed several EU decisions on military and financial assistance to Kyiv, as prolonged negotiations were often required to secure Budapest's agreement to lift or bypass its vetoes.

Framing anti-Ukrainian and anti-EU messaging as an expression of political loyalty to one's own country (pro-Hungarianness in this particular case) has been a recurring characteristic of what can be described as the instrumentalisation of peace narratives. Arguably, presenting political positions in this manner within a broader discourse of "peace preservation" serves to legitimise such stances by blurring the distinction between the interests of the ruling party or individual leaders and the wider national security interests of the state. Moreover, this rhetorical strategy contributes to normalising anti-EU foreign policy positions, embedding them within domestic narratives of stability and sovereignty while simultaneously reducing space for alternative interpretations or critical debate, which is automatically labelled as being in contradiction to national interests and peace.

Implications for Russia

As previously noted, Viktor Orbán's Hungary maintained strong ties with Russia and tried to deepen the cooperation in recent years, something in contrast with the post-2022 EU approach to limit dependency on Russia and minimise engagement. Shortly before the 2026 elections in Hungary, the two countries signed a 12-point plan aimed at strengthening bilateral partnership (Gavin & Shevtalovich, 2026). This agreement included cooperation across multiple sectors, ranging from culture to energy policy.

Orbán's government consistently opposed sanctions against Russia and, as noted, repeatedly blocked EU-level support measures for Ukraine. In practice, this directly benefited Russia's political and military positioning by constraining Ukraine's capacity to defend itself and delaying

EU decision-making processes. However, this support was not limited to material or procedural dimensions; it also carried a strong ideological component, enabling Russia to back its narratives about European fragmentation and to maintain supportive voices within Europe itself who would reproduce the same rhetoric. This is strategically important for Russia, framing its actions as justifiable and cultivating support.

The Kremlin has systematically accused the EU of warmongering and of being anti-peace, particularly in the context of its policies towards Ukraine, portraying continued European support for Kyiv as an obstacle to peace negotiations (EU vs Disinfo, 2026). This narrative can be interpreted as an attempt to divert attention from Russia's responsibility for the ongoing conflict by shifting blame onto the EU and portraying its role as an obstacle to diplomatic resolution. Orbán repeatedly employed similar messaging, framing support for Ukraine as synonymous with support for the continuation of the war. In doing so, this discursive alignment effectively lent support to Moscow, facilitating the diffusion of Russian strategic narratives into European political discourse. It contributed to portraying Russia as a peace-seeking actor rather than as a state responsible for initiating and sustaining the aggression, thereby helping to maintain leverage in political and diplomatic arenas.

Implications for the EU

Viktor Orbán's rhetoric in Hungary contributed to weakening the perception of a unified European stance in support of Ukraine, despite the fact that unity on key issues, particularly regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, has been a central element of EU policy towards Moscow since 2022.

The consistent portrayal of the EU as a threat to Hungarian sovereignty and freedom (Inayatullah, 2026) challenged the fundamental principle that the Union functions on the basis of respect for the sovereignty and equal rights of its member states. In this context, Hungarian discourse centred on the idea of "preserving peace" and maintaining Hungary as a "peace island" in parallel to the wider regional instability. It also functioned as a form of resistance to perceived EU political centralisation. The framing presents national sovereignty as a policy objective for resisting deeper integration within the EU framework, which was communicated to the electorate as a threat, thereby in the long-term deepening mistrust of EU institutions.

Hungary's role as an internal disruptor, particularly through its repeated blocking of EU support for Ukraine, caused significant criticism from the EU, with some leaders even characterising these actions as "gross disloyalty" (Gray & Bayer, 2026). One of the most significant implications for the EU was the realisation that it lacks effective mechanisms to persuade such a member state to cooperate on critically important issues, including sustained financial and military assistance to Ukraine. This limitation was demonstrated through a series of unsuccessful negotiations aimed at convincing Viktor Orbán's government to adopt a more constructive position. These developments

underscore structural constraints within the EU decision-making framework, especially regarding internal veto power over matters of high geopolitical importance.

Governmental Change and the Political Future

Hungary's parliamentary elections in April 2026 were crucial not only for Hungary itself, but also for Ukraine, Russia, and the European Union. Despite Orbán's strong continued efforts to mobilise voters by appealing to fears of war, and by framing the EU and Ukraine as threats to Hungary's peace and stability, his opponent Péter Magyar and his party succeeded in winning the elections, resulting in Orbán's removal from government. This electoral outcome was a significant political shift, with potential implications for Hungary's foreign policy orientation.

Since Péter Magyar became prime minister, there has been cautious optimism about a potential shift in Hungary's foreign policy trajectory, particularly in relation to a reduction of previously hostile attitudes towards the EU and Ukraine. Such a reorientation could enable the European Union to present itself as a stronger global actor, with fewer internal consolidation challenges, at least on key strategic issues.

Seemingly, the new prime minister has also demonstrated a willingness to improve relations with key partners, not only through high-level meetings with European leaders, but also by taking concrete political steps, such as recently unblocking arms reimbursement packages for Ukraine worth approximately 40 billion euros (Barigazzi, 2026). There is also ongoing discussion regarding improving chances of Hungary's long-term support to Ukraine's EU membership, a position that Orbán had previously maintained categorical opposition to. This emerging shift, while still developing and fragile, suggests Hungary's potential positive turn towards European policy and more constructive relations with Ukraine.

Viktor Orbán's loss of power in Hungary represented a strategic blow for Russia. In light of its gradually decreasing influence across various regions of the world, including the Middle East and the Caucasus (Baev, 2026), the loss of a political partner within the EU, one that had previously been effective in echoing Russian narratives and supporting its strategic goals, constitutes a further weakening of Russia's international position. Additionally, the unblocking of EU support to Ukraine is likely to have implications on the battlefield, as the released funds may be allocated towards new military equipment and armament by Ukraine, thereby strengthening Ukraine's defensive capabilities.

The transformations so far appear positive for both Ukraine and the European Union. Negotiations on previously challenging topics between Hungary and Ukraine, such as the wider language, educational, and political rights of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine's Zakarpattia region, which were also linked to Hungary's support for Ukraine's EU accession (Miller, 2026), were successfully concluded. The Ukrainian side is committed to guaranteeing the rights of the minority group and

incorporating it into the EU Minority Action Plan. This led to Hungary's green light for the start of formal EU accession talks with Ukraine in June (Fornusek, 2026). For now, Hungary continues to refuse to provide weapons or other direct military assistance to Ukraine. Restrictions on Ukrainian agricultural imports also remain in place. Nevertheless, unlike the Orbán government, the current leadership appears more open to negotiations with both Ukraine and the EU, suggesting that earlier narratives framing Ukraine and the EU as adversaries under the "preserving peace" discourse are likely to gradually lose their dominant position in Hungarian political arenas.

Conclusion

The Hungarian case demonstrates that the use of "peace" as a political tool has increased significantly since 2022 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In this context, peace has often been framed as something that must be protected not from Russia, but rather from Ukraine and the European Union. This narrative comes in direct contrast to EU narratives about who is the aggressor and a threat to peace and stability. It is a tendency also observable in other countries beyond Hungary. Narratives and related political actions regarding the deterioration of relations with Ukraine and the EU, the blocking of support to Ukraine, and the framing of the EU as an anti-peace actor, have largely aligned with and served broader Russian strategic objectives, while causing challenges for Ukraine and the EU. Vetoes on EU material support have constrained Ukraine from receiving necessary assistance in a timely manner, while for the EU this has had not only operational consequences resulting in prolonged, unsuccessful efforts to convince internal disruptors, but also an ideological impact, challenging the principle ideas of the union and its united stance regarding the Russian war against Ukraine.

However, the change of government in Hungary is likely to weaken the previous government's "peace preservation" discourse, particularly given the improving relations with both Ukraine and the EU. While this transition is unfavourable for Russia and its geopolitical positioning, it provides the EU with an opportunity to present itself as more unified and coherent on key issues, especially regarding support for Ukraine. This development is also beneficial for Ukraine, as it facilitates greater access to EU assistance, thereby strengthening its capacity to sustain battlefield performance and, in parallel, to advance its EU accession process.

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