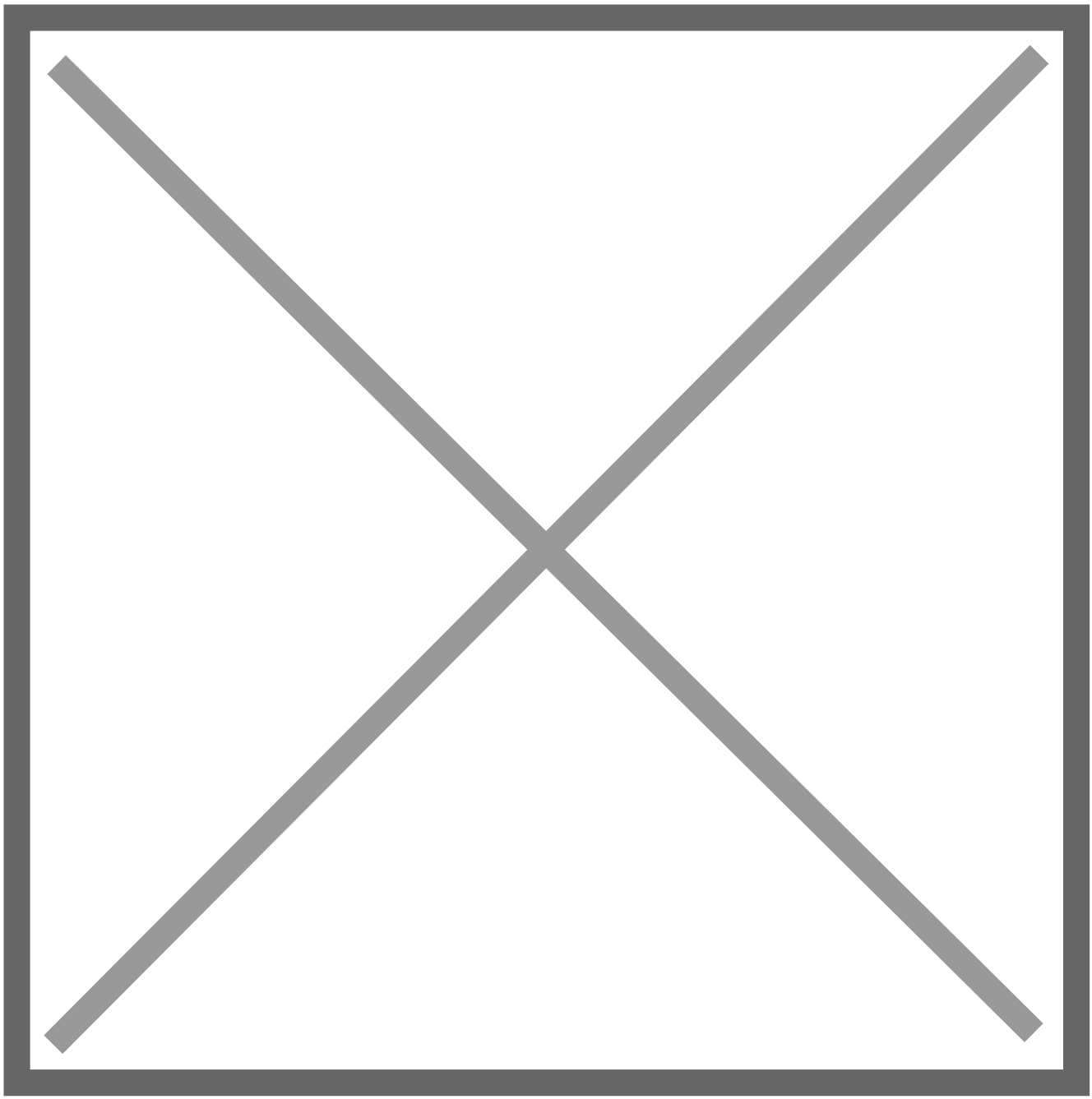
News



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and U.S. Vice President JD Vance gesture during a Day of Friendship event at MTK Sportpark in Budapest April 7, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Jonathan Ernst)



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As U.S. Vice President JD Vance visited Hungary to support its government ahead of April 12 parliamentary elections, local Catholics voiced anxieties about their country's future after a bitterly fought campaign.

"Both the Catholic and reformed churches have claimed complete neutrality — however, given their political entanglements, no one has taken this seriously," explained Tibor Görföl, editor of Hungary's Catholic Vigilia monthly.

"If you're a Catholic and you don't fully back the government, it's seen as grave disloyalty. This is why we face serious problems here," Görföl said.

The lay Catholic spoke as the preelection battle climaxed between veteran Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his challenger, Péter Magyar, amid signs that Orbán's national-conservative Fidesz party could be ousted after 16 years in power.

In an early April report, Hungary's Christian Axioma Center said Fidesz had "followed Christian values" more closely than Magyar's Tisza ("Freedom and Respect") party on issues from abortion and euthanasia to marriage, family and gender.

However, in an OSV News interview, Görföl said Fidesz had used AI-generated videos and stories to "spread fear and anxiety," leaving many Hungarians unsure "what's real and what is fake."

Meanwhile, another prominent Catholic agreed the campaign had been "full of hatred and misrepresentation," and told OSV News there were signs of growing Catholic resistance to the acerbic style of Hungarian politics.

"Although the government has attempted to portray its opponents as anti-Christian, Magyar has sent clear messages, publicly and privately, that he'll maintain a positive attitude to the churches," said András Máté-Tóth, a religious studies professor at Szeged University.

"Far from instrumentalizing them, he's promised they'll be able to work autonomously, free from the direct government interference of the Orbán era. Although not a practicing Catholic, he's closer to Catholic social teaching than Orbán," he said.

Heading Fidesz since 1993, Orbán has been widely accused of authoritarian governance after four successive election wins since 2010, and has defied Western sanctions by buying Russian oil and refusing aid to neighboring war-torn Ukraine.

He's also gained prominence in some Church circles for claiming to defend Europe's Christian traditions — with restricting LGBTQ groups' rights being one of Fidesz's most visible slogans — at the same time using wide powers granted by the Fidesz-dominated parliament to block media freedom and migration.

Pope Francis criticized such politics during his May 2023 visit to Hungary, saying it was "sad and painful" to see doors closed to people who were "unlike us," including "migrants or the poor."

Magyar has challenged Fidesz's domination as leader of Tisza since 2024, and has pledged to tackle corruption, restore legality and return Hungary, a NATO and European Union member, to a more pro-Western path.

The Catholic-educated Magyar has used St. John Paul II's invocation "Be not afraid" as a campaign and social media slogan, and has pledged to maintain public funding for churches, while ensuring greater fairness and transparency.

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With faltering public services and rampant inflation dampening support for Fidesz, Vance vigorously reiterated U.S. support for Orbán after arriving in Budapest April 8.

However, Görföl said Vance's visit appeared to contradict Orbán's insistence of Hungarian sovereignty and noninterference by outside powers, adding that he doubted the Catholic U.S. vice president was sufficiently "known and heard" to affect the prime minister's chances.

Hungary's Catholic bishops pledged in October 2025 to avoid the election campaign, noting that public discourse had "become extremely crude, often involving baseless sensationalism and slander."

No mention was made of the ballot at the bishops' March 3-4 spring plenary in Budapest or in Easter messages carried by the Church's Magyar Kurir news agency.

However, Fidesz's campaign was criticized by Bishop Asztrik Varseghi, retired archabbot of Pannonhalma, in a statement to the religious portal Szemlélek, as well as by Hungary's Military Bishop Tibor Berta, who said he had recently declined a government honor to avoid claims of "a merger of government and Church."

Meanwhile, the historic Pannonhalma monastery's current archabbot, Benedictine Bishop Cirill Hortobágyi, warned many Hungarians had been shocked by methods used to "discredit, destroy and morally nullify" political opponents, and looked "to the future with tension and anxiety," fearing the erosion of "community, nation and homeland."

"A person with Christian values cannot approve of such methods, cannot consider those who hold different opinions as enemies," the archabbott said in his Easter message.

Hungary's 3,000-member ecumenical Association of Christian Intellectuals issued voter guidance April 7 on evaluating election candidates, urging Hungarians not to "make an idol of politics", but to remember the "ultimate point of reference" for Christians was "not a political leader but Christ."

Asked about the post-election prospects for Catholics, Görföl told OSV News the Hungarian Church "completely lacked" a "public culture," leaving no possibilities to discuss rival ideas and disagreements.

However, Máté-Tóth said he believed the church's official silence during the campaign, in contrast to previous elections, could be interpreted as "criticism of Orbán's political style."

"Change is never rapid or total in the Church," the religious studies professor, who is also a faculty member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, told OSV News.

"But the silence of Catholic bishops and priests, associations and publications, carries its own significance, as many express negative feelings against this long-established government."