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A Political Economy Perspective

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Grocery prices in Hungary remain stubbornly high, despite the country's image as a low-cost economy. While expat-oriented platforms emphasize affordability, Hungarian households are spending a growing share of their income on basic staples, often at prices comparable to or higher than those in Vienna or Paris. The reasons lie in a mix of structural and political factors: a consumption-heavy tax system, weak purchasing power, fragmented markets and chronic underinvestment. These are compounded by policy unpredictability and a tendency toward populist, short-term interventions that distort competition without addressing root causes. The consequences are both economic and social: rising inequality, regional disparities and growing reliance on cross-border shopping. Yet within this picture, there are signs of forward movement. Targeted tax reforms have shown that smart policy can improve transparency and affordability. EU funding through the Common Agricultural Policy offers a rare window for structural investment and younger, tech-savvy producers are beginning to modernize the sector from below. Whether these gains take hold depends on the choices made in the lead-up to the 2026 election. Hungary stands at a turning point: it can double down on crisis management or pursue a more coherent, long-term path toward a fairer food economy.

Keywords: *Agriculture, Branding, Competition, Consumption, Hungary, Inflation, Investment, Subsidies, Taxation, Trade*

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Introduction

Why are groceries in Hungary so expensive? At first glance, this seems like a question of simple economics; yet the answer is deeply rooted in policy and structural inefficiencies. While expat websites portray Hungary as a cheap destination and the government points to price controls as proof of action, many Hungarians face daily hardship at the checkout counter. This paper argues that high grocery prices are the product of layered taxation, weak market competition, underinvestment and volatile policymaking. Drawing on media analysis and interviews with economists and industry experts, it explores how these pressures converge, resulting in the current situation. Beyond the economic burden, food prices in Hungary carry political weight and social consequences: they shape public opinion, deepen inequalities and reveal the limits of state-led market intervention. Understanding what drives food costs is essential to grasping where Hungary is headed.

I. How expensive is food in Hungary and compared to where?

a. International perceptions compared with the local experience

To international observers and expat platforms, Hungary still appears affordable. Websites like *Expatistan* or *Immigrant Invest* rank it among the cheapest places to live in Eastern Europe, citing low rent and modest overall consumer prices. Groceries, in this framing, are routinely described as 'manageable' or 'low-cost,' especially when compared to Western European standards. But this narrative obscures the experience of most Hungarians, for whom food costs have become a major financial strain. Unlike expats paid in foreign currency or supported by higher income, Hungarians households spent 17.8% of their total expenditures on food in 2021, whereas the EU average was at 7.1%[1]. According to kontroll.hu, a Hungarian independent media platform, this burden is particularly acute among low-wage earners and pensioners, for whom even basic staples now compete with rent, energy bills and transportation, with 'the number of people who think it has become more difficult to make a living in Hungary has increas[ing] by almost 40 percent in one year'[2].

While Hungary may still offer cheaper restaurant meals or rent than Vienna or Berlin, this does little to offset the reality that grocery shopping has become increasingly unaffordable for Hungarians. Understanding this divergence between foreign portrayal and domestic reality reveals how surface-level comparisons can mask the deeper structural pressures behind Hungary's grocery price problem.

b. Price comparisons: Budapest, Paris, London, Vienna

When we compare everyday grocery items across major European capitals, Hungary often appears more affordable, or at least on paper. According to May 2025 data, a litre of milk in Budapest costs around €1.08[3], compared to approximately €1.49[4] in Vienna and €1.38 in Paris[5] and still a bit less than Warsaw at €1.00[6]. A kilogram of chicken fillet runs about €5.34 in Budapest, while egg prices (12-pack) reach €2.64, reflecting significant food inflation since early 2023.

Yet these seemingly lower prices don't translate into real savings for Hungarians. Hungary's average net monthly salary was around €1,200 in April 2025[7], markedly lower than France (€2,735 in the private sector[8]) and Austria (above €3,800[9]). With purchasing power among the lowest in the EU, even nominally cheap staples consume a disproportionate share of income. In effect, Hungarian consumers pay similar or higher real prices than their Western peers because their wages lag far behind. Thus, while Hungary may seem affordable, the true test lies in affordability for locals, which is something that raw price comparisons too often obscure.

c. Purchasing power and structural inflation

Hungary's grocery affordability problem cannot be fully understood without considering its weak purchasing power and persistent structural inflation. While the country nominally maintains lower prices than some Western peers, those prices consume a much larger share of the average Hungarian's income. Hungary has among the lowest purchasing power levels in the EU[10], meaning that wages go less far, particularly when it comes to essentials like food. This imbalance is worsened by Hungary's tax structure, which leans heavily on consumption: food items face a VAT of up to 27%, the highest in the EU[11]. Additional levies, such as health product taxes[12] and retail turnover taxes[13], compound the final cost.

Inflation in Hungary's food sector has been especially aggressive. Between 2020 and 2023, food prices rose over 50%[14], outpacing wage growth and EU averages. Supply-side pressures, like high energy costs[15], added to the burden. The consequences are now visible across society: cross-border shopping to Slovakia or Romania has become common[16]. All of this contributes to a system where high prices are not temporary but embedded. For many Hungarians, grocery costs thus reflect a structural failure rather than just a momentary economic shock.

II. Structural causes of high grocery prices

a. A system designed to burden consumption

Hungary's tax system plays a central role in driving up grocery prices, not just at the checkout, but throughout the supply chain. At the heart of the issue is the country's exceptionally high reliance on consumption-based taxation. Hungary applies a general VAT rate of 27%, the highest in the European Union, with only selective exemptions or reductions for certain food items. While some essential goods like fresh meat benefit from a lower 5% VAT, many others, especially processed or packaged foods, remain heavily taxed. This alone places a visible burden on consumers, but the deeper impact lies in the layering of additional levies that amplify costs before items even reach the shelves.

Tamás Éder, a senior industry representative, highlights[17] that large retailers also face a 4.5% turnover tax and producers are subject to the NETA health tax, even on items like jam or yogurt. These taxes apply cumulatively, creating a compounding effect.

Éder estimates that, in some cases, taxes alone account for nearly half the final retail price. Economist Zombor Berezvai contextualizes[18] this within Hungary's broader fiscal philosophy: income and labor taxes are kept relatively low, shifting the burden to consumption. According to him, this regressive model disproportionately affects lower-income consumers, who spend a larger share of their earnings on basic goods.

These fiscal pressures also discourage formalization in parts of the supply chain. High taxes increase incentives for under-the-table transactions, small-scale evasion and informal retailing, all of which further reduce efficiency and transparency. Even where enforcement improves, as in the pork sector post-VAT reform, gains are only seen when tax cuts are paired with effective oversight mechanisms. In short, Hungary's tax regime shapes market behavior, pricing structures and consumer hardship. Any serious effort to reduce grocery prices must begin with a reevaluation of how and where this tax burden is applied.

b. Investment aversion and political risk

Hungary's persistently high grocery prices are not only the result of direct costs like taxation, but also of chronic underinvestment in food production and processing. The root of this problem, according to economists and industry professionals, lies in the country's volatile and politically driven regulatory environment. Businesses face a significant disincentive to modernize or expand due to the unpredictable nature of policymaking, where regulations, taxes and subsidies can change with little warning. Economist Péter Virovácz describes[19] Hungary as having a 'hard-to-predict economic policy environment' where investment decisions are complicated by the risk of abrupt fiscal shifts, such as new sectoral taxes or selective incentives that alter competitive conditions overnight.

This uncertainty has tangible effects. According to Virovácz, investment activity has declined for three consecutive years, with food industry stakeholders hesitant to commit capital to long-term projects. Without predictable rules, even well-conceived business plans become high-risk ventures. Zombor Berezvai further explains that subsidies, while plentiful, are often misallocated. In theory, public funding should stimulate innovation, scale and productivity. In practice, it frequently rewards politically connected or inefficient players, especially among SMEs. This reinforces a cycle in which investments are made based on access to state support rather than market viability.

The legacy of policy exclusion also plays a role. Until 2020, Hungary's large food processors were not eligible for EU development funds, limiting their ability to modernize. While this has changed, the delayed access has left a gap in infrastructure and technological capacity. Even now, many companies remain skeptical that the regulatory environment will allow them to recoup long-term investments.

In sum, Hungary's food economy operates under a shadow of hesitation. Without regulatory predictability and smarter investment policy, the sector will remain undercapitalized: unable to scale, innovate, or bring prices down for the consumer in a meaningful way.

c. Distorted competition and market size

Hungary's grocery sector is shaped by a market structure that both limits competition and prevents economies of scale. Those two dynamics contribute significantly to high food prices. One major constraint is the country's relatively small population, which limits potential market volume. With just under 10 million people, the Hungarian market cannot support the same level of specialization, investment, or price competition found in larger economies like Germany or Poland. As economist Péter Virovácz points out, this makes scaling up production and achieving cost efficiencies far more difficult. For food producers, there is simply less room to expand or compete on price without oversaturating demand.

Zombor Berezvai identifies another key issue: entrenched brand dominance and a fragmented competitive landscape. Many global companies struggle to enter the Hungarian market, not because of quality or pricing, but due to rigid brand loyalty and limited consumer turnover. Even well-established firms like Coca-Cola and Danone have failed to establish secondary brands like AdeZ or Zott, which would typically perform well in similar-sized EU markets. The dominance of a few key players limits diversity and keeps prices elevated.

At times, regulation has actively reinforced this distortion. One example cited by Berezvai is the case of Trappista cheese. While cheaper rectangular versions of this cheese are available from Poland and Germany, Hungarian producers lobbied to restrict the definition of 'Trappista' to circular forms, effectively blocking competition on a technicality. Such interventions stifle competitive pressure and protect domestic inefficiencies rather than challenge them.

Subsidy structures further complicate the picture. Programs intended to support small and medium-sized enterprises often entrench unproductive business models. Without mechanisms to reward efficiency or scale, these firms persist with outdated practices.

Taken together, Hungary's market structure protects incumbents and inhibits challengers, ensuring that food remains more expensive than it should be in an open, competitive system.

III. Political and social implications

a. Political impact: price controls, populism and public trust

Hungary's high grocery prices have both strained household budgets and become a political flashpoint. The government has responded to public frustration with a series of high-profile price control measures, including price caps on basic food items, profit margin freezes and selective tax cuts. These moves are framed by pro-government media as protective interventions, aimed at shielding families from global inflation and corporate greed. Outlets like *Magyar Nemzet*[20] cite drops in prices for butter, eggs and dairy as evidence that the government is taking care of its people.

But the opposition and independent analysts tell a different story. According to *HVG*[21] and *Telex*[22], price controls have distorted markets, leading to shortages, quality degradation and offsetting price hikes on non-capped goods. Companies pass losses onto consumers elsewhere, undermining the very effect these policies claim to achieve. The Hungarian National Bank found that such controls widened the inflation gap between Hungary and its neighbours by disincentivizing competition and reducing supply flexibility.

For Prime Minister Orbán's government, food policy plays into a broader narrative of economic sovereignty and national protection. However, critics argue these interventions are more about political symbolism than sustainable solutions. As economist Péter Virovácz notes, short-term controls may temper inflation for a moment but deter investment and efficiency in the long run. Ultimately, food prices have become a stage for populist policymaking, where tactical interventions serve immediate electoral goals rather than long-term reform. With the 2026 election on the horizon, the temptation to double down on visible but ineffective measures will likely grow, even as structural problems deepen. The politicization of grocery pricing risks locking Hungary into a cycle where public trust is maintained through temporary fixes, while underlying issues remain unresolved.

b. Social impact: poverty, inequality and cross-border shopping

Beyond the political theatre, high food prices have a tangible and growing impact on Hungarian society. As basic groceries consume a larger share of income, particularly for low-wage earners, food insecurity is on the rise. For those on fixed incomes, such as pensioners, single parents and the working poor, this pressure is even more acute. Beneath the surface, hidden structural costs make the situation worse. As Zombor Berezvai points out, while utility prices for households are artificially capped, producers absorb the difference through inflated service fees, such as water supply and waste management. These costs are passed up the supply chain and ultimately onto consumers, creating an indirect yet persistent price burden that disproportionately affects those least able to afford it.

Rising food prices also deepen social inequality. Wealthier households can respond by switching retailers or absorbing price hikes with relative ease. Poorer families face harder choices, having to decide between nutrition, medication or energy bills. These trade-offs can lead to lasting harm, especially for children's health and educational outcomes. Food thus becomes a dividing line in a wider system of economic exclusion. As structural inefficiencies persist, Hungary's grocery crisis continues to entrench social divides far beyond the supermarket aisle.

IV. What could improve the situation?

a. Targeted policy reforms: what has worked?

Despite the broader failures of market-wide price controls, there are examples of effective, targeted policy reforms in Hungary's food sector, chief among them, selective VAT reductions. Tamás Éder highlights the case of fresh meat: in 2014, the government lowered VAT on pork to 5%, resulting in a dramatic shift. While total production volumes remained stable, officially registered slaughtering increased by one million pigs. This wasn't growth in consumption, but rather a shift from black-market to legal supply, suggesting that a lower tax rate paired with oversight brought shadow transactions into the formal economy. A similar pattern followed for poultry, where transparency mechanisms (such as mandatory digital tracking of delivery routes) helped reinforce the impact.

These kinds of policy tools stand out because they are not rooted in populism, but in logic: lower tax burdens encourage compliance, level the playing field and reduce consumer prices through legal supply expansion. Unlike blunt price caps, they don't distort market signals or drive retailers to recoup losses through other products.

Péter Virovácz agrees, noting that the key to successful intervention lies in timing and clarity. When margin freezes were first introduced in 2023, they temporarily slowed core inflation. Though not a long-term fix, this shows that well-calibrated interventions can have limited success in specific contexts.

Zombor Berezvai cautions, however, that good policy requires good filtering. Many subsidy programmes in Hungary, he argues, fail because they are handed out indiscriminately. Instead of financing efficient or innovative projects, they reward political connections or entrench inefficient actors. He recommends greater emphasis on technology transfer and smarter selection criteria.

Altogether, these examples suggest that what Hungary lacks is not tools, but rather discipline in how it uses them. When policy is precise, transparent and targeted, it can deliver real, measurable impact.

b. EU funding and the rebound opportunity

While Hungary's domestic policy environment has often been unstable, one bright spot lies in its continued access to European Union agricultural funding, and specifically, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Unlike other EU funding streams to Hungary that have been suspended in the name of the rule of law, CAP funds have remained intact and apolitical. According to Tamás Éder, this makes them a vital opportunity for modernization in Hungary's food sector. Between 2024 and 2026, an estimated 500 to 600 billion forints will be disbursed to food industry players who submitted qualifying proposals. These funds are already being allocated, with criteria focused on sustainability, energy efficiency, export potential and use of local inputs.

This is a marked departure from the past. Until 2020, Hungary's large-scale food processors were excluded from EU co-financed development programs, as only farmers and small enterprises were eligible. The inclusion of the broader processing sector reflects both successful lobbying efforts and a growing recognition that food chain inefficiencies can't be addressed solely at the farm level. According to Éder, this represents a 'chance that has not existed before.'

Crucially, the application process has improved in transparency. Scoring systems prioritize measurable performance indicators over political favouritism. While final decisions may still be subject to some degree of influence, experts believe the structure is more professional than in previous years. This raises hopes that the funds will not just be distributed, but used effectively.

If administered wisely, this new wave of CAP funding could serve as a catalyst for long-overdue structural reform, enabling investment in equipment, technology, logistics and training. It could also strengthen mid-sized producers, closing the gap between dominant brands and undercapitalized SMEs. In an environment otherwise marked by uncertainty and hesitation, CAP stands out as a stable, results-oriented lever that Hungary is uniquely positioned to pull if it can resist the temptation to politicize its use.

c. Structural modernization and youth-driven reform

Beyond policy and funding, Hungary's long-term hope for more affordable groceries may lie in the gradual transformation of its agricultural sector, driven by innovation, generational change and a new mindset toward efficiency. Zombor Berezvai points to promising examples of modernization emerging at the margins of the current system. One notable case is a tomato farm near Szegvár, which uses precision irrigation and digital monitoring tools, avoids pesticides and operates with minimal subsidies. Despite being outside the heavily supported meat and dairy sectors, this farm ranks among the most productive in the country. Its success demonstrates that competitiveness doesn't always require massive capital, but it can also stem from strategic use of technology and efficient management.

A broader trend is the rise of younger producers who are open to modernization and collaboration. According to Zombor Berezvai, this new generation is more comfortable adopting advanced tools and less tied to outdated practices or subsidy dependence. Their emergence suggests a slow but real cultural shift, one that challenges the individualistic, fragmented nature of traditional Hungarian agriculture. Péter Virovácz adds that cooperation will be key. Without it, producers remain small and under-scaled, unable to compete with larger EU counterparts or meet export demands. Shared investment in equipment and infrastructure could dramatically raise productivity, but this requires a willingness to pool resources, something that has historically been lacking.

The shift toward green energy is also essential. Hungary missed the opportunity to invest in sustainable infrastructure during the era of cheap credit, but that window is now closed. The current energy landscape, which is volatile, expensive and increasingly regulated, demands a new approach. As Péter Virovácz emphasizes, 'you don't have cheap energy anymore ... you need to catch up.'

While these reforms won't yield immediate results, they represent a viable path forward. Structural modernization—led by innovation and generational renewal—may offer Hungary its best chance at long-term affordability and resilience.

V. Future outlook

a. How likely Is reform?

Despite clear diagnoses and available tools, the likelihood of substantial reform in Hungary's food pricing system remains uncertain. While targeted interventions and EU funding have shown promise, systemic change requires political will, institutional discipline and a long-term vision, none of which are guaranteed. Several experts interviewed for this paper voiced scepticism about the government's capacity to move beyond tactical measures. Péter Virovácz warned that Hungary's policy environment is still dominated by short-term thinking, where decisions are shaped by immediate fiscal needs or electoral considerations rather than coherent strategy. This makes structural reform both politically risky and administratively difficult.

Moreover, political incentives often work against reform. In the lead-up to national elections, governments may double down on populist measures like price caps or subsidy giveaways to maintain public approval, even if these policies are economically counterproductive. As economist Zombor Berezvai notes, poorly filtered subsidies continue to be distributed widely, favoring politically connected or inefficient players rather than driving modernization. Without a shift in how success is measured, away from visibility and toward performance, reforms risk being diluted or reversed.

There is also a trust deficit between the state and private sector. Years of unpredictable policy shifts, punitive taxation and politicized business decisions have eroded investor confidence. For businesses to modernize, they must believe that the rules will remain stable long enough for investments to pay off. So far, that belief is not widespread. While CAP funding offers a temporary reprieve, it cannot compensate for domestic instability.

In short, the path to reform exists, but it is narrow and politically inconvenient. It will require a deliberate choice to prioritize systemic improvement over electoral tactics. As long as political logic favors spectacle over substance, the chances of deep, lasting reform will remain low, even as the costs of inaction continue to mount.

b. Where is this going? The road to 2026 and beyond

With national elections approaching in 2026, Hungary stands at a crossroads. Grocery prices, once an economic concern, have become a proxy for broader governance questions: Who benefits from current policies? Who bears the cost? And can the government deliver meaningful relief without distorting the economy further? Over the next year, food affordability will likely remain a central political issue, especially as households continue to feel the pinch of high prices amid stagnant wages and rising utility costs. The temptation for more short-term interventions, such as expanded price freezes or populist subsidy schemes, is high, especially given their proven media impact and voter appeal.

However, experts caution that doubling down on temporary fixes will only defer deeper problems. Hungary's long-term competitiveness in the food sector hinges on structural reform: scaling efficient producers, stabilizing regulatory conditions and investing in productivity. If the government continues to prioritize control over competition, Hungary may fall further behind regional peers like Poland and Czechia, both of which have undertaken market-friendly reforms that expanded their food export sectors and attracted investment. Péter Virovácz argues that Hungary still has time to catch up, but not if current patterns persist.

At the same time, pressure from the EU and international markets may limit some policy choices. Continued access to CAP funding and other EU mechanisms depends not only on formal eligibility but on alignment with broader EU norms around market transparency and legal stability. Failure to deliver credible reforms could jeopardize future support and isolate Hungary further.

Ultimately, where Hungary is going depends on whether policymakers can break the cycle of short-termism. The 2026 election offers both a risk and an opportunity: a moment to reset priorities and invest in systemic solutions, or another chapter in a pattern of reactive governance. The direction taken will shape food prices and much more for years to come.

Conclusion

Hungary's high grocery prices are not the product of temporary inflation, but the outcome of deep-rooted structural issues: a consumption-heavy tax system, weak market competition, investment paralysis and politically driven policymaking. While expat narratives and headline statistics suggest affordability, the lived experience of Hungarians tells a different story one of constrained budgets, rising inequality and limited consumer choice. Yet this complex picture is not without hope. Targeted VAT reforms, EU CAP funding and a new generation of tech-savvy producers offer tangible paths toward a more efficient and fair food economy. Still, meaningful change depends on political will: a shift away from populist price controls toward long-term, predictable reforms. As the 2026 election looms, the government faces a choice: double down on short-term optics or invest in systemic solutions. The future of Hungary's grocery prices, and by extension its economic trajectory, hinges on the path chosen in this critical period.

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