

The Hungarian Candidate

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On Sunday, the day after tomorrow, Hungary will hold parliamentary elections. Ho-hum, you might think, a routine round of politics in a small central European nation. But these elections loom large the world over.

Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, is a central figure in the international far right, and indeed the man, more than any other, who created the networks that normalized what he himself calls “illiberalism.” Should he lose, as all signs indicate he will, this would be blow to far more familiar figures such as JD Vance and Donald Trump, who are Orbán’s pupils. Americans tend to think that history moves from us outward; but in the case of the new oligarcho-fascism, we are the students rather than the masters. Much of what seems American in Trump and Vance came from Hungary, or from Russia via Hungary.

Orbán has been prime minister of Hungary for twenty years, the last sixteen consecutively. He was in power long before Trump was president. He was prime minister when Vance attended school in the Cincinnati exurbs. Beginning long before either man won office, Orbán created a model of post-modern authoritarianism. Inside Hungary he managed, largely by way of [constitutional changes](#), to create an apparently invincible strategic position for one-party rule and his own personal power: the “illiberal state” which he then presented to others as a model for emulation.

On the European scale, Orbán has done more than anyone else to generate negative propaganda about the European Union, treating it as a hostile enemy even as he personally exploited Hungary’s membership. He worked to normalize his own anti-democratic, far right position within the EU parliament. He took money directed by the EU to assist Hungary and used it to enrich his oligarch friends. His government opened EU territory to Russian and Chinese intelligence operations and indeed [directly supplied Russia](#) with confidential information about EU meetings.

On the scale of Russia, Europe, and North America, Orbán has been a leader of transnational efforts to pass dark money from country to country in support of the far right. Budapest has become a hub in a system in which Russian oil money is laundered to become support for far right figures and organizations in Europe and the United States. Many institutions which we presume to be American, such as the Heritage Foundation, are in fact part of this larger international network. Many initiatives that we treat as American, such as [Project 2025](#), are based largely on Hungarian models. The same goes, for that matter, for a number of American politicians. In our American provincialism we often fail to see that Trump and Vance have been involved in a certain kind of international politics [from the beginning](#); there was never a moment when their terrain was purely American. Indeed, that has always been Orbán’s magic: to be an essentially international player who claims to be protecting the little guy at home.

Orbán has helped far right politicians in Europe and the United States (such as Donald Trump and JD Vance) find their feet in the tricky territory of foreign affairs. Much of what passes for Trumpian policy positions -- the claims that Russia is not the aggressor despite having invaded Ukraine, that Russian energy is always the solution and never the problem, that Ukraine is corrupt and suspicious, that the EU is an overbearing bureaucracy, that immigrants are the real threat -- arise in whole or in part from Hungarian sources.

This is why when Vance just traveled to Budapest to support Orbán (as he just did) he essentially says the same things Orbán does. It is also why Orbán comes to the US to be a star of Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Texas in 2022, when he instructed the American far right to fight a culture war. A special conference of CPAC was held for Orbán in Hungary last month.

At the level of global fascist propaganda memes, Orbán has been a pioneer in the politics of unreality, shamelessly running electoral campaigns (earlier) on the premise that the international Jewish conspiracy was coming for Hungary or (this time) on the premise that if he loses Ukraine will invade. It should be noted that the Ukrainian angle is also antisemitic, in that it portrays the Ukrainian president (who is Jewish) as a warmongering maniac, when in fact he is a democratically-elected head of state who is leading his country in a defensive struggle against a Russian invasion. Orbán’s slogan is “Don’t let Zelenskyy have the last laugh” and the campaign posters present Zelens’kyi as a dark, cackling Jewish enemy. State-run social media propaganda is [even worse](#).

In Sunday’s elections, Orbán and his party Fidesz have two advantages: an apparatus at home built up to ensure that they can never lose, and allies abroad (Vance, Trump, Putin) who recognize Orbán’s importance in the oligarcho-fascist [network](#) that is their own source of power. If international dictators and the MAGA minstrels were doing the

voting, Orbán would certainly win. But it is Hungarians who will vote. They will vote in the conditions [political scientists](#) call “competitive authoritarianism”: with major hindrances, but with the real possibility of changing power. This will be the American situation in November, as Trump and Vance understand.

Orbán has been prime minister for a very long time. In electoral politics this is of course itself a disadvantage. Along with Putin and Trump, he works in the “[politics of eternity](#),” in which one man should rule forever thanks to constant references to eras of past innocence and invocations of external and internal enemies. He has essentially exhausted Hungarian history for these purposes, dwelling on the territorial losses at the end of the First World War, and finally landing on Ukraine as the current enemy. Orbán is good at the politics of endless grievance; but being in power indefinitely also has its shortcomings, as Hungarians see their economy stagnate, their institutions crumble, and their standard of living fall ever further behind that of other Europeans. There is really no one else to blame for that than Orbán. In his recent public appearances he has fallen into the someone desperate mode of saying that people who oppose him are not really Hungarians or are Ukrainian agents.

Over the years, the risk that an act of corruption becomes public also increases. Interestingly, Hungarian right-wing oligarchy had the same problem as American right-wing oligarchy: a coverup of [the sexual abuse of children](#). In the Hungarian case, a director of a state-run orphanage, convicted of abusing children, received a state pardon. When this was revealed by independent journalists, it led to huge protests. The president who issued the pardon felt obliged to resign, as did Orbán’s heir apparent Judit Varga, who was involved as minister of justice. Her ex-husband Peter Magyar, who had been a major figure inside Fidesz, then gave a widely-read interview in which he exposed the corruption of Orbán’s government. That led to the creation of a new political party, Tisza, which quickly gathered a third of the votes in elections to the European Parliament. It is at the center now of a larger opposition movement.



In the creation of an opposition movement, independent media has played an essential role. Like Putin and Trump, Orbán understands that creating public/private media monopolies is indispensable for durable personal power. But in Hungary there are still cracks through which the [light gets in](#), and these have allowed Hungarians, even as they are drenched in government propaganda, to also get a sense of the scandals and the abuses. Hungarian tax money, and money Hungarians were supposed to receive from the EU, have instead been used to build senseless [monuments](#) to the bad taste of the wealthy, landmarks on a tour of self-destruction that independent media guides Hungarians to see.

So what happens on Sunday? It is important to always emphasize that politics is not a spectator sport. Orbán is very far behind in the polls -- according to the latest independent [polling](#), by 25 points. But polls do not win elections: people have to vote, and then all too often they have to defend their votes. Orbán has many ways to influence the outcome: gerrymandered districts, a habit of not counting mail-in ballots for the opposition, and a practice of buying votes. And the dirty tricks and intimidation efforts are already on display, with the government persecuting independent journalists and organizing provocations to make it appear that opposition is somehow run by Ukraine.

Most interestingly, and also most ridiculously, Orbán has already reached the last resort of the dirty tricksters, which is fake terrorism. In a highly transparent and widely predicted provocation, Orbán announced that Serbs had discovered explosives on a pipeline that supplied Russian gas to Hungary. No evidence was provided. And then, predictably, Orbán went on to claim that the perpetrators must have been Ukrainians, the purported allies of the opposition party.

Now, this kind of provocation can be effective, if people can be made genuinely afraid: it worked for Putin as he came to power, but in that case Russians used real explosives to kill other Russians and then blamed the self-terrorism on Chechens. In this case, the opposition had correctly forecast that Orbán would try something of the sort, which is the

most effective defense. And the fact that the entire escapade depends on taking Orbán at his word makes it unlikely to have much effect one way or the other. Only Russian propagandists seem to be taking much trouble to even pretend that Orbán's version might be true.

Orbán was making these claims while JD Vance was in Budapest, and the provocation itself reveals the essentially international character of Orbán's program. It depended on the work of a few people in Serbia and Russia and a few statements by Orbán himself. It had nothing to do with anything that actually happened, as far as we can tell. It is consistent with the politics of unreality that Orbán and his allies depend upon. But the failure of this provocation may also reveal the limits of big lies. They can become not only implausible but boring and predictable.

Another big lie is almost certainly under way. While Vance was in Budapest, he claimed that the Ukrainian secret services interfere in elections on the United States and Hungary — an activity that is unknown to the scholarship of the subject, to put it mildly. This was reinforcing a campaign message of Orbán: the tall tale that the Ukrainian secret services [had somehow penetrated](#) all of Hungary and were preparing a systematic electoral falsification. When, as is likely, Orbán loses the vote count, he will probably revive this story in some form. Americans might endorse it; they might copy it themselves this fall. It is a comfortable story for Trump and Vance because it inverts the historical fact: that Russia always tries to tilt elections their way.

When leaders themselves telegraph these stunts, oppositions can also talk about them, and thereby make them seem implausible and even make them self-defeating. This realization is important, because [another such attempt](#) cannot be ruled out, either in Hungary or among the politicians who imitate Orbán, which include Vance and Trump. It would indeed be very surprising indeed if Trump and Vance, Orbán's acolytes, did not take heed of his electoral stunts, and consider trying similar tactics themselves in October or November. We should be as aware of this possibility as the Hungarian opposition was, and deter it by being ready to mock it and use it against anyone who tries it.

Because Orbán is an essentially international rather than national phenomenon, his defeat would have international consequences. It will be painful for Trump and Vance in particular if Orbán loses. They have both gone to a lot of trouble to endorse him personally, and they are both dependent upon international networks of ideas and money which Orbán helped to build. Might they try to help Orbán in some way if he loses the election, an outcome which seems extremely likely?

Their ability to do so would seem to be hampered by the humiliation in Iran, and also by the contradictions in their foreign policy. Hungary under Orbán is part of a set of powers that includes Iran, Russia, and China, that seek to challenge the status quo and upend the traditional legal, ideological, and economic bases of American power. It has never really made sense for the US to try to defeat Iran while also trying to support Putin and Orbán.

But some kind of American intervention cannot be ruled out, especially given that Vance and Trump have already offered Orbán their explicit endorsement (which [has not helped](#) him; it may have [hurt](#)). If Orbán loses and claims that he has won, Americans will likely join Russians in giving him some kind of at least rhetorical support. Sadly, the days when the United States might stand for free and fair elections as such have passed, at least for now.

But all this, too, is known to the Hungarian opposition. No one in Hungary believes that this is just a normal election. They might be slandered by Chinese, Russian, and American regime propaganda if they win, but they have been slandered for two years at home already. Most likely the outcome of the election will have to be contested, in some way, well after Sunday. But an opposition that has been hard at work for two years is unlikely to give up in one day. And it is not clear, as we see over and over again, that Trump and Vance have the patience or the strength of will to actually implement a foreign policy, however malign may be their intentions, in the teeth of any actual resistance. All but the most tactful of foreign interventions are likely to backfire, depriving Orbán of any claim to represent Hungarians, revealing him as the cosmopolitan player that he is -- and tact has not been the forte of either Trump or Vance. They will support Orbán in some way, but in the face of popular determination it is not clear what they could achieve.

The most important consequence for Trump and for Vance of Orbán's defeat would be the revelation that history is not in fact going in a single direction, that their power, or the power of people like them, is not assured for all time. In their view of themselves, they are not of course the creatures of historical structure: the power of oil money; the psychology of social media, the perversion of wealth inequality. As they see matters, they are beyond history now, beyond historical change, beyond the actions of the peoples in whose name they rule. This is, if possible, even more true of Vance than of Trump; Trump has at least worked to campaign for president; Vance has no legitimation at all beyond the notion that his ideas, none of which is original, somehow fit the times.

Orbán has helped to create that sensibility, because he has understood those structures. If he loses, if he falls, it means that Trump and Vance lose a guide. It also means that they are exposed to the reality that they, too, can lose, can fall. It

turns out not to be true (yet again) that there are no alternatives, that there is only one possible future, and that the people in power happen to be the anointed ones forever.

And so, although Hungary might be a small country, we can draw some larger conclusions. The world has been plagued for a century by various “ends of history,” and those ends of history have arisen disproportionately in central and eastern Europe, in Hungary in particular.

The fascists of the 1930s, in Hungary and elsewhere, said that history was over, that all that remained was a biological struggle directed by a party elite. The communists, who came to power in Hungary after 1945 and elsewhere, said that history was over, replaced by scientific administration directed by a party elite. After the end of communism, speaking about Hungary and other post-communist states, too many of us declared that history was now indeed over, since fascism and communism have exhausted themselves, and all that remained was the imperturbable triad of liberalism, democracy, and capitalism.

From Hungary, Orbán showed that this was not true: capitalism could be corrupted; liberalism could be replaced by illiberalism (his word); and democracy could be turned into a ritual. Seduced by Hungary’s success, many on the far right came to see the Hungarian alternative as the next end of history, the way that things would be, the way that things had to be.

And they are wrong; history goes on. Just as Hungary once offered the international oligarchical far right the confidence that a formula had been found, it now offers to men such as Vance and Trump the anxiety that voting might actually make a difference, that democracy might actually turn out to be more than a slogan, that unpredictable change is still possible, that the future is open.

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