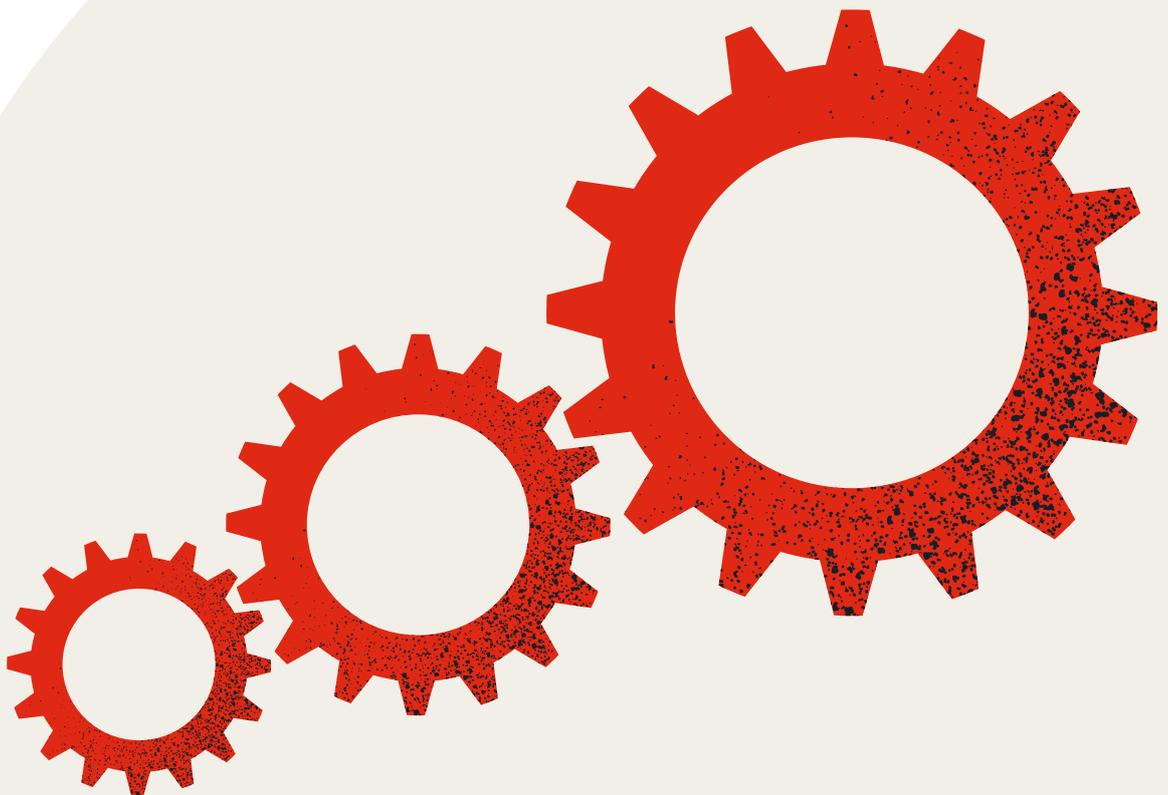

LABORATORIES OF COUNTER-HEGEMONY

ORBÁN, TRUMP AND THE TRANSATLANTIC FAR-RIGHT ECOSYSTEM

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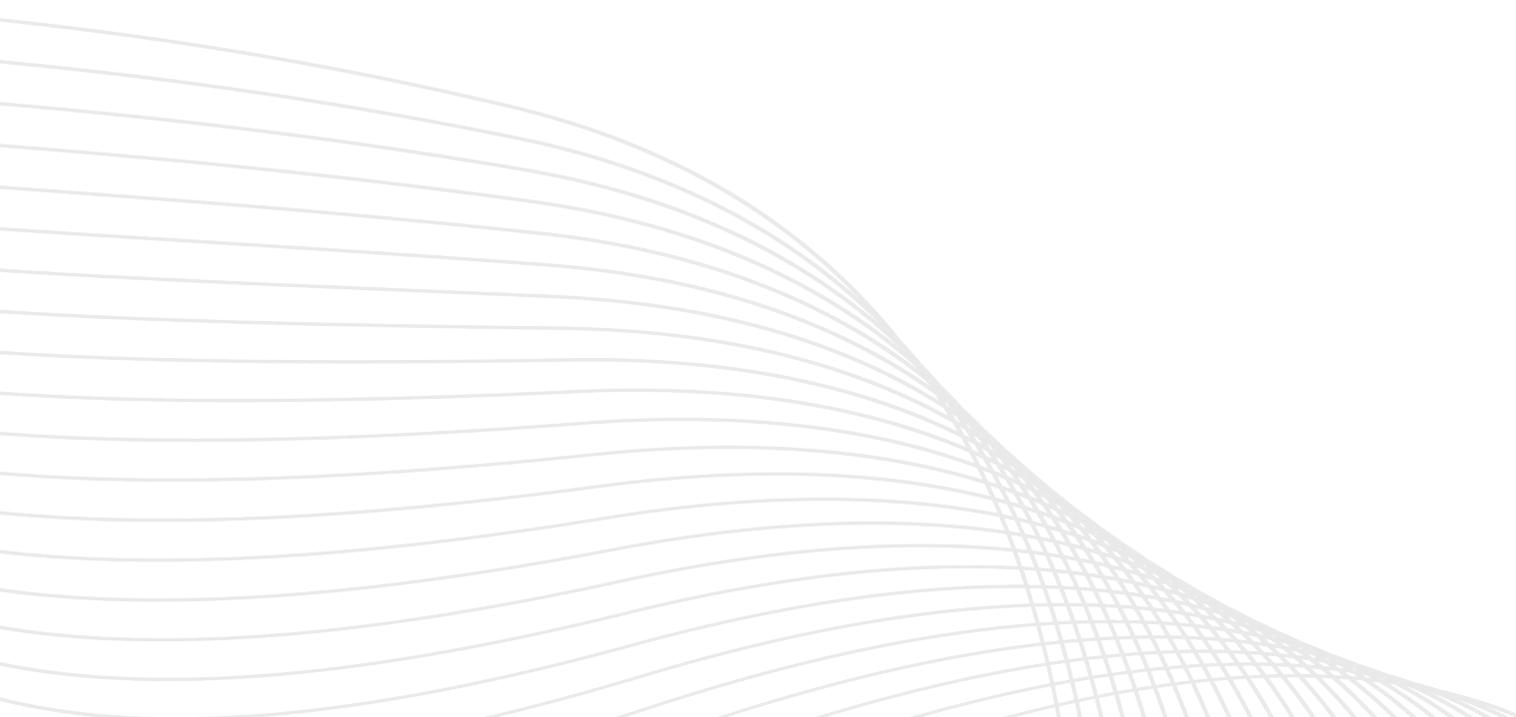
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2008 financial crisis shattered the aura of inevitability surrounding liberal globalism. While many expected a progressive correction, it was the far right that seized the initiative, treating the crisis as an opening for a long-term political project rather than a temporary disruption. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán was among the first to read the moment as a hegemonic rupture: a collapse not only of policy credibility, but of the wider “common sense” that had insulated technocratic governance, liberal elites and transnational capital from democratic challenge.

Orbán’s response was therefore not limited to winning office or hollowing out checks and balances. From 2010 onward, he pursued a counter-hegemonic project aimed at reshaping the state, civil society and culture in tandem. He aimed to build an alternative order that could endure beyond electoral cycles and normalise a different set of political coordinates. The wager is that durable power is produced by institutional control plus cultural and ideological reconstruction: the slow work of turning a worldview into the default horizon of what appears legitimate, patriotic and realistic.

That project quickly ran up against a structural constraint: a small country cannot sustain a counter-hegemonic project in isolation. Orbán’s strategy, therefore, extended beyond Hungary’s borders to embed his national transformation within a broader international far-right bloc. This meant cultivating allies abroad and building channels through which ideas, tactics and legitimacy could circulate, above all with the USA, where conservative institutions, media ecosystems and donor networks offer outsized amplifying power in the wider international order.

Over the past decade, Hungary has invested considerable resources in cultivating ties to American conservatives, and the relationship has

been institutionalised well beyond leader-to-leader symbolism. Mutual admiration between Orbán and Trump matters politically, but it also masks a deeper architecture: a web of foundations, consultancies and media platforms that facilitates exchanges of personnel, narratives and strategic know-how. In this ecosystem, “relationship” is not just rhetorical affinity; it is an organisational pipeline that lowers transaction costs for coordination and turns episodic meetings into routinised collaboration.

This policy study shows that Orbán’s counter-hegemonic project rests on a dense transatlantic infrastructure of far-right cooperation. Before the Trump era, Orbán’s far-right counter-hegemonic strategy fused three moves: institutional reconstruction; polarising narrative warfare; and long-horizon network-building. After losing office in 2002, he drew the lesson that governing is not the same as holding power, because the real limits are set by the hegemony of liberal globalism and its domestic pillars – technocrats, liberal politicians and transnational capital – so returning to power would require dismantling that constellation and building an alternative order, reaching into culture, civil society, universities and knowledge production.

After 2010, he used the “full force of the state” to consolidate this project, while importing hard-edged campaign technologies and threat-based messaging from Republican-linked consultants and strategists, who pushed themes like opposition to “bureaucrats” and “foreign capital” and helped institutionalise the anti-Soros and anti-migrant narratives that became central pillars of Orbánism. In parallel, he invested in durable transnational linkages well before Trump’s rise: relationships with the International Republican Institute ecosystem, training and mentoring programs, and Atlanticist-conservative nodes like the New Atlantic Initiative built channels to American conservative institutions and operatives that would

later become decisive, even as Orbán remained toxic to much of the US mainstream right in the early 2010s.

At the core of this infrastructure stand the Batthyány Lajos Foundation and its offshoot, the Danube Institute, alongside the Mathias Corvinus Collegium and the Hungary Foundation in Washington DC. These bodies channel large sums of Hungarian public money into scholarships, fellowships and media platforms that translate Orbán's policies into American debates and embed them within US conservative circles. Complementing this are lobbying contracts with Republican consultants, orchestrated media collaborations such as Tucker Carlson's Budapest broadcasts, and institutional partnerships with the Heritage Foundation and Conservative Political Action Conference. Taken together, these networks function as an export-import system of far-right ideas and practices – positioning Hungary simultaneously as a model to be admired and a laboratory, the governing techniques of which can be adapted elsewhere.

Within the EU, Orbán operates as both beneficiary and architect of far-right hegemony: EU funds and German industrial capital sustain his regime, while he systematically constructs the transnational infrastructure through party financing, think tanks and media acquisitions at a scale that exceeds any other European far-right movement. This makes Hungary uniquely dangerous to EU cohesion, exploiting institutional protections unavailable to external actors like Russia, while the Union's consensus-based architecture proves structurally ill-equipped to discipline a determined internal defector and conscious architect of counterhegemony.

The study's implications are far-reaching. Pushing back against the far right requires a multi-pronged approach. To fight the resurgent far right, progressives first need to expose the transatlantic influence ecosystem and strengthen the watchdogs that can hold it accountable by mapping and publicising lobbying, consultancy, media and think tank coordination, and investing in independent journalism and cross-border civil society that can trace money, document disinformation and reveal

covert collaboration. Yet transparency is only the first step.

Countering the far-right counter-hegemony requires an ambitious progressive alternative that moves beyond defending a discredited status quo and instead rebuilds democracy as a lived, socially rooted project that tackles insecurity, restores political voice and offers cultural recognition without scapegoating, while renewing institutions and using technology to expand participation rather than deepen manipulation. The decisive arena is international: the response cannot be a return to the old liberal order, but a new progressive multilateralism centred on ecological sustainability and human development, including coordinated taxation of multinationals, curbing tax havens, regulating capital flows, enforcing labour and environmental standards, sharing green technology, and financing global public goods, alongside reforms that give developing countries room for industrial policy and access to patient public capital. This agenda also requires change in wealthy democracies through a gradual shift that prioritises wellbeing and equity; invests in care and green infrastructure; and rebuilds state capacity to generate stable jobs, strengthen labour and reduce inequality, backed by robust global and regional coalitions capable of confronting entrenched corporate power and competing at the same scale as the far-right project.

Recommendations

- **Expose the network:** map and publicise the lobbying contracts, influence operations and transatlantic think tank coordination that support far-right cooperation.
- **Support watchdogs:** invest in independent media, cross-border investigative journalism and civil society collaborations to trace disinformation and expose covert influence.
- **Challenge the narrative:** debunk the idea that Hungary is a success story. Highlight inequalities, dependency on foreign capital and long-term economic vulnerabilities.

- **Provide a democratic alternative:** offer a people-centred, democratic vision centred on tackling economic insecurity, restoring political voice and offering cultural recognition.

INTRODUCTION

We have a very good relationship with those who work behind the president on writing his economic and foreign policy agendas. I could say that we take part in the process of this agenda setting; there are a few topics such as family policy and stopping migration where we are highly regarded.

(Viktor Orbán on Donald Trump some months after the two met at Mar-a-Lago, 18 July 2024)¹

There's nobody that's better, smarter or a better leader than Viktor Orbán. He's fantastic... A noncontroversial figure because he stated, 'This is how it will be,' and that's final, right? He's in charge and... he's an exceptional leader, a fantastic leader. He is respected in Europe and globally.

(Donald Trump on Viktor Orbán just after the two met at Mar-a-Lago on 8 March 2024)²

Radical right populism has deep roots. The declining hegemony of liberal globalism has created fertile ground for far-right challengers since the 2000s, when the radical right began to break out of the cordon sanitaire imposed by centrist forces. Deindustrialisation, stagnating real wages among working- and middle-class citizens, increasing labour-market precarity, the growing distance between political elites and the masses, the devaluation of traditional skills and ways of life, and accelerating technological change have shaken the foundations of the social compromise on which liberal democracies were built. The 2008 financial crisis and the 2015 surge in people seeking protection in Europe served as catalysts for this long-brewing disruption.

The financial crisis marked the first turning point, shattering the aura of inevitability surrounding liberal globalism. What began as a Wall Street collapse quickly spilled across the Atlantic, triggering currency devaluations, IMF rescue packages and harsh austerity in countries across Europe. Millions

experienced it not as an abstract crisis of “global finance,” but as job losses, evictions and collapsing welfare systems.

The second, specifically European, turning point came with the rapid escalation of challenges around refugee reception, as an estimated 1.3 million asylum seekers arrived in Europe in 2015. Nativist forces quickly reframed the images of large groups of primarily Muslim refugees arriving at Europe's borders into a civilisational narrative of invasion, cultural threat and loss of control. By embedding xenophobia within a critique of economic insecurity, distant elites and supranational institutions, the radical right captured new constituencies and forced mainstream parties onto defensive terrain.

As the hopes for a progressive alternative to liberal globalism faded, it was the far right that seized the initiative. Step by step, it became the transformative political force of the 2010s, while parties of the liberal centre retreated into defensive crouches. Electoral success soon followed the increase of their bases.

The seats held by populist radical right parties in the European Parliament (EP) rose substantially between 2014 and 2019, gaining further ground at the 2024 EP elections,^{3,4} as well as in national polls across Europe in 2025.

Viktor Orbán's Hungary became a symbolic reference point for the rising forces of far-right disruption, both regionally and globally. Orbánism catapulted to power in 2010 not as a simple political project to govern, but as a transformative answer to the systemic crisis of liberal globalism. From the moment he returned to office in 2010, Orbán pursued a counter-hegemonic project.

The need to create structures and institutions beyond day-to-day governance became clear to Orbán after his government lost the 2002 elections. He drew a blunt lesson: "Between 1998 and 2002 we were in government, but not in power".⁵ The real limits were set by the hegemony of liberal globalism, the local pillars of which in Hungary were the alliance of late-socialist technocrats, liberal politicians and transnational capital.⁶ To return and remain in power, Orbán concluded he would have to dismantle this constellation and build an alternative hegemonic order that extended to culture, civil society, universities, knowledge production, even the language and symbols through which politics was understood and the future was imagined. The exhaustion of the Hungarian project of liberal globalism provided him the opportunity to build this project with the full force of the state.

Reducing Orbánism to mere democratic backsliding or corruption misses the point. Orbán's project was never just about organised corruption or the raw hunger for power. Yes, he has hollowed out institutions, dismantled checks and balances, and relied on a network of business allies to stay in power. However, Orbán not only dismantled the old institutions, but he also built something new: an alternative order claiming its own legitimacy. Liberals often dismiss Orbán's policies and his shifting narratives about the global order as incoherent. However flawed Orbán's answers to the crisis of globalisation may be, he is at least posing some of

the right questions, while liberals have preferred to bury their heads in the sand.

From the outset, Orbán grasped that any counter-hegemonic project required a dual strategy: tactical accommodation with the crumbling forces of liberal globalism and parallel investment in building an international far-right counter-hegemony.

Capitalising on his cult-like following among the European far right, Orbán publicly spearheaded the creation of Patriots for Europe, a new radical right bloc in the EP aimed at uniting sceptical and nationalist parties.⁷ The group quickly became the EP's third-largest faction in 2024. Orbán invests heavily in strengthening far-right counter-hegemony within Europe.⁸ He famously declared, "If we want to defend Hungary's freedom and sovereignty, we have no other choice but to occupy Brussels".⁹ Institutions like Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) in Brussels play a key role in his battle for Brussels, amplifying far-right discourse within the EU.

MCC also serves as a key transatlantic hub, facilitating the exchange of far-right policies and narratives between Washington DC, Brussels and Budapest.¹⁰

While European ties are critical to the growing international far-right ecosystem, the biggest boost to the rising far-right counter-hegemony came from the former global core of liberal globalism: the USA. As crucial as Europe is to Europeans, when it comes to the international order, the USA is the most significant player. Orbán knew this from the outset and wagered that the crisis of liberalism would catapult Trump to the White House, making Orbán the first European leader to embrace Trump. As a result, the Orbán-Trump relationship became central to the emerging "far-right international," which is the focus of this policy study.

Having invested in nurturing networks with the US alt-right, Orbán succeeded in marketing his regime to American radical conservatives as a model and laboratory of far-right statecraft. Today, praise flows easily between Orbán and Donald Trump, as well as across their respective political camps. Yet the key

question is how far this really goes. Is the Trump-Orbán relationship more than symbolic admiration and family resemblance? Does Orbán's counter-hegemonic project reach deeper, shaping strategies, institutions and even concrete policy decisions on both sides of the Atlantic? Is Orbán's ambition to dictate US politics directly, or rather to strengthen a broader international far-right alliance with the USA as its anchor? Do these ties simply recycle talking points, or do they provide the organisational and discursive foundations of a shared counter-hegemonic project?

To address these questions, we must look past the rhetoric and focus on the institutional and personal linkages that sustain the relationship. The Trump-Orbán axis is not built solely on Twitter praise; it has been mediated for decades by political consultants, party officials, think tanks, and foundations that connect the Hungarian and American right. Tracing these networks across historical periods enables us to determine whether this axis is underpinned by durable organisational infrastructure, or whether it is merely a media spectacle masquerading as strategy.

This policy study maps the evolution of ties between Hungarian and American conservatives from the 1990s to the present day. It concentrates on the personal ties and institutional networks that facilitate the diffusion of campaign strategies, narratives and policy ideas. It traces the sources of funding, revealing the central role of Hungarian public funds. The channelling of taxpayer money toward private and political goals sets Orbán apart from most other radical right forces, allowing him to punch way above his weight in international politics and revealing the depth of his commitment to building counter-hegemony. After exploring these ties, the policy study also assesses the extent to which Orbán's far-right laboratory has influenced policymaking in the USA beyond mere rhetoric. The study also outlines the indirect policy parallels that signal the consolidation of a transatlantic far-right playbook. Finally, the policy study also briefly maps Orbán's efforts at building the far-right hegemony in Europe as another critical leg of his transnational counter-hegemonic ambitions. The conclusion outlines the broader political context and briefly highlights the need for a transformative democratic renewal to address the growing influence of the far right.

1. 1990S-2000S: FAR RIGHT IN THE MAKING

Analysts tend to trace the relationship between the Orbán and Trump camps back to around 2015, when Trump first emerged as a political force. At that time, Orbán openly supported his candidacy for president, making him the sole European leader to do so. However, relations between Orbán, Fidesz and the American right have a far-longer history that has played a pivotal role in establishing the institutional linkages between Trump and Orbán.

The first contact between the American political leadership and Fidesz occurred in 1989 through the then-US Ambassador to Hungary, **Mark Palmer**. He claimed to have seen Fidesz as a potential leader in Hungary's democratic transition. He even went to rallies with them. In a comedic twist of fate, Palmer, at the time, shared the views of George Soros, the billionaire philanthropist who had supported Fidesz before the party's rightward shift with substantial amounts in the early 1990s.^{11,12}

Cooperation between Fidesz and the Republicans really began to take shape around 1994. A crucial conduit was the **International Republican Institute** (IRI), which had established itself in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of state socialism. The IRI's mission was to provide organisational support to emerging right-wing parties. A key figure in this context was **Daniel Odeschalchi**, a Hungarian-speaking American consultant, who founded *Survival in a Democracy*, a training and mentoring program for young Fidesz politicians. The program was funded by Strategic Advantage International, the **Batthyány Lajos Foundation** (BLF), the Robert Schuman Institute (of the European People's Party, EPP) and – most importantly – IRI itself. According to Odeschalchi, Fidesz was the program's priority, which taught young representatives the mechanics of modern campaigning, constituent relations and media communication.^{13,14}

The crucial inflection point came in 1996 when Orbán became chairperson of the Hungarian **National Committee of the New Atlantic Initiative** (NAI),¹⁵ a US-based neoliberal and Atlanticist think tank launched at the Congress of Prague by President Václav Havel and Margaret Thatcher. John O'Sullivan, a former Thatcher speechwriter and editor at the Heritage Foundation, co-chaired NAI.¹⁶ This connection laid the foundation for the link between Hungarian politics and American conservative institutions that would prove decisive decades later. O'Sullivan's later trajectory from Thatcher advisor to the Heritage Foundation to *National Review* editor positioned him as the perfect bridge between European and American conservatism.

Odeschalchi's efforts bore fruit in 1998, when Fidesz, allied with other right-wing forces, came to power. The networks forged through IRI also helped Orbán get the American Enterprise Institute's Freedom Award and secure a meeting with Republican President George W. Bush. After losing the 2002 election, Orbán once again turned to American consultants for help. This time, the key figure was **Sean Tonner**, a former chief of staff to Colorado's Republican governor, Bill Owens, and the Western US campaign director for Bush in 2000.¹⁷ During the 2000s, he worked as a consultant for Fidesz, providing advice on door-to-door "field" campaigning and general communications. Although Orbán failed to return to power immediately, Tonner remained a durable link in US-Hungarian conservative relations.¹⁸ By 2008, Tonner was joined by **Rich Beeson**, then political director of the Republican National Committee, who would later serve as deputy campaign manager for **Marco Rubio's** 2016 presidential bid. (Rubio, notably, has since become Secretary of State in Trump's second administration.)^{19,20}

It was also at this time that one of the most prominent, yet lesser-known, liaisons between the Republican Party and Fidesz emerged: **Patrick Egan**. His exact role in the pre-2010 era is less clear, but according to a 2005 interview in the Fidesz-affiliated daily *Magyar Nemzet*, Egan was the Director of IRI in Central and Eastern Europe. In the same article, he was described as

“

*one of those American young men, who use their determination and careers in service of an American effort to spread Western-style democracy all over the globe, be it the Eastern Europe of the nineties or the Middle East at the outset of the new millennium.*²¹

”

In 2008, in a report on a public debate that was held for those “interested in conservative foreign policy” by Szabad Európa Klub, Egan was referred to as “president of the organisation of Republicans living in Hungary”. A year later, Egan participated in Fidesz’s summer university, where he delivered lectures on campaign strategy.²²

In 2010, Egan founded the consultancy FWD Affairs, which played a direct role in Fidesz’s successful election campaign. A presentation published by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung credits FWD with introducing methods such as the “tele-town-hall” for voter contact, illustrated with Fidesz campaign materials. Tonner’s name also appeared on these materials, highlighting the continued interplay of American Republican consultants in Orbán’s political operations.^{23,24}

Finally, two more Republican-affiliated Israeli-American consultants deserve special mention: **Arthur J. Finkelstein** and **Georg Birnbaum**. Before working for Orbán, they worked on the campaigns of well-known right-wing figures like **Ronald Reagan** and **Benjamin Netanyahu**. They have been involved in several campaigns of Republican politicians, including those beyond Reagan. Around 2008, they were contracted by Fidesz’s think tank, the Századvég Foundation. They pushed Orbán to frame his campaigns around opposition to “bureaucrats” and “foreign capital,” themes well-suited to post-financial crisis Hungarian society.²⁵

More consequentially, they are credited with introducing the anti-Soros and anti-migrant narratives that have since become central pillars of Orbán’s far-right project.²⁶ Finkelstein died in 2017, while Birnbaum faded from the Hungarian political landscape in the 2010s. Still, they played a vital role in the evolution of the Hungarian far right. Finkelstein and Birnbaum brought to Hungary not just US-style negative campaigning, but also Israeli hard-right campaign tactics, honed during their work for Benjamin Netanyahu and Avigdor Lieberman. Both had deep experience in framing politics around existential threats, security fears, scepticism of liberalism and polarising wedge issues.

2. EARLY 2010S: TRUMP BEFORE TRUMP

By the early 2010s, Viktor Orbán had become an increasingly fringe figure in mainstream American politics. Democrats had long been sceptical of him for ideological reasons, but even leading Republicans regarded him more as a liability than an ally. His efforts to dismantle democratic institutions in Hungary and, above all, his close ties to Vladimir Putin raised concerns among traditional Republicans. In December 2014, during the Senate debate over confirming Colleen Bell as US Ambassador to Hungary, McCain called Viktor Orbán “a neo-fascist dictator who is getting in bed with Vladimir Putin”.²⁷ Traditional institutional Republicans like Mitch McConnell have continued to maintain this critical stance, even though they are now a minority.²⁸

One of his earliest and most loyal allies was Congressman **Andy Harris**. Since taking office in 2011, Harris has been a fervent Orbán supporter, later rising to lead the far-right House Freedom Caucus and co-chair the Hungarian Caucus.²⁹ Harris openly endorsed Orbán’s concept of an “illiberal state”, a political model Orbán himself had popularised. He lobbied against bipartisan resolutions critical of Hungary’s democratic backsliding and opposed US funding for Hungarian media.³⁰ Meanwhile, in 2017, he attempted to remove the de facto ambassador to Hungary, who claimed the number of “free” press outlets was dwindling in the country (a trend that had already begun under the Trump administration).³¹

Another key figure of the 2010s was **Connie Mack IV**, a former Republican congressperson from Florida who worked as a lobbyist for the Hungarian government. His tasks included lobbying to lift US travel bans imposed by the Obama administration on six Hungarian officials suspected of corruption.³² The Hungarian government designated him as an unofficial spokesman for the government in the USA.³³

A less-significant figure reported by the media as a government lobbyist is **David Reaboi**. He is a US-based conservative political operative and commentator. He registered under the US Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) as a lobbyist for Hungary starting in 2020. Among his services was his defence of the government on Twitter, including posting sponsored tweets. Examples included a tweet paid for by the Embassy of Hungary that accused George Soros of demanding that Biden and the EU “destroy” Hungary and Poland. He also tried to arrange for Hungarian politicians to appear on US media talk shows. Meanwhile, building on his Jewish background, he was also used for publishing statements to counter accusations of anti-Semitism directed at Hungary, especially those involving Soros.³⁴

Patrick Egan also re-emerged as an important, if more low-profile, player. Through his company, FWD Affairs, he was contracted by the Hungarian government in 2014 and 2016 to run “international communication” campaigns, explicitly aimed at promoting “Orbánism” in the English-speaking world.³⁵ The concrete outputs of these early campaigns remain unclear, but they foreshadowed the more visible projects he would later oversee.

A somewhat less discussed, but equally relevant institution was established in 2012: the **Hungary Foundation (HF)**. HF was founded at the direct instruction of Viktor Orbán to “strengthen and support the bonds that unite the Hungarian diaspora’s nationalist identity with the Hungarian nation”.³⁶ However, the political opposition accused the organisation of “plotting to buy the votes of American-Hungarians”.

HF claims that it is solely a “charitable 501(c)3 nonprofit organisation” and “does not participate in political activities, political or election campaigns”.³⁷

In reality, it serves as a soft-power tool to improve Hungary's image and build a network of sympathetic elites in the USA. Among others, it has co-sponsored research fellowships with well-known conservative organisations, such as the **Hudson Institute**.³⁸ By the end of 2020, it had donated more than \$5.2 million to think tanks, conservative groups, colleges and Hungarian-American organisations to fund conferences, fellowships and cultural programs.³⁹

John McLaughlin is another longtime advisor to Viktor Orbán, who has been working with Fidesz for years, particularly after inheriting this role from his mentor, Arthur Finkelstein, the Republican strategist who advised Fidesz from 2008 until his death in 2017 and famously recommended that Orbán make George Soros his primary political enemy. McLaughlin, who worked under Finkelstein for a decade and participated in Orbán's 2022 campaign, is now being marketed in Hungary as a prestigious international analyst, bringing objective clarity to Hungarian polling.⁴⁰ However, he is in fact the party's own consultant with a mixed track record in the USA, known more for telling clients what they want to hear than for accuracy,⁴¹ continuing the pattern of American Republican consultants fundamentally shaping Hungarian political strategy.

While in the mainstream Orbán was unable to gain a real foothold, it turned out that he was gaining credibility in places that had much more relevance for the future Republican president than traditional Republicans did. One pivotal figure in this area was **Steve Bannon**, who co-founded *Breitbart News* in 2007 and famously described it as the "platform for the alt-right".⁴² Soon, it was one of the most widely shared sources of political content on Facebook.⁴³ Initially, Breitbart ignored Orbán, but the 2015 refugee crisis changed that. Orbán's hardline anti-migration policies and anti-Soros campaigns turned him into a hero of the American alt-right. Breitbart, from 2015 onward, began publishing article after article praising his nationalist, nativist stance. From that point onward, Orbán became a regular feature in Breitbart's coverage.⁴⁴

This alignment proved crucial. In 2015, Bannon was appointed to lead Trump's presidential campaign.

After Trump's victory, he became chief strategist and senior counsellor to the president. In 2018, after leaving the White House, Bannon visited Budapest to speak at the government-affiliated "Future of Europe" conference, where he famously declared Orbán "Trump before Trump" and admitted that they had relied heavily on European examples, such as him, for Trump's campaign.^{45,46} This, of course, included not just the strategies, but the actual messages, such as anti-migration, anti-elitism and nativist policies, that Breitbart itself had stood for. Bannon was thus most likely the person who brought Orbán onto Trump's horizon, both as a politician and as a source of policy ideas.

Bannon's colleague, **Sebastian Gorka**, is also worth mentioning. In Hungarian media, Gorka is often portrayed as a key contact between Trump and Orbán. As a sidekick to Bannon, Gorka served as deputy assistant to Trump until approximately 2017. Gorka is of Hungarian origin; he holds views that align with the right-wing, illiberal worldview. He lived and worked in Hungary during the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s. During this time, he held an advisory role next to Orbán that was not precisely defined. Yet he publicly turned on him around 2006 and criticised the Orbán government during his time next to Trump in 2017 for its constant "back and forth between NATO and Moscow".⁴⁷ After he left the first Trump administration, Gorka faded from public discourse but was reinstated in the second Trump administration as deputy assistant to the president and Senior Director for Counterterrorism.⁴⁸

3. THE TRUMP ERA

Only days before the 2016 US presidential elections, the traditional institutions of electoral prognostication in the USA uniformly dismissed the possibility of a Trump presidency. Yet, against this backdrop of technocratic consensus, Viktor Orbán made a calculated geopolitical wager, issuing a full-throated endorsement in his favour well in advance of the election – the sole European leader to do so. Donald Trump’s victory in 2016 was a turning point for Viktor Orbán. For the first time, a self-described “illiberal” leader could plausibly claim an ally in the White House.

Yet despite this symbolic win, Orbán still struggled to translate Trump’s election into tangible influence within American politics. This was made explicit in 2019, when Orbán was scheduled to meet Donald Trump for the first time, four years after endorsing him for president. Ahead of the meeting, members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, both Democrats and Republicans, sent a joint letter to Trump. The senators warned that democracy in Hungary had suffered a severe decline, citing Fidesz’s dominance of the electoral system, government influence over the judiciary and restrictions on press freedom. They also highlighted Orbán’s rapprochement with Moscow, which they described as particularly alarming. The letter was signed by Republicans such as **James Risch**, then the committee’s chair, and **Marco Rubio**, who is today the US Secretary of State.⁴⁹ Their concerns echoed broader scepticism within the Republican establishment.⁵⁰

It is worth noting that this was already the Trump era, when “Trumpism” was reshaping Republican politics. If Orbán faced such bipartisan condemnation even then, it is safe to assume that mainstream Republicans had been even more hostile toward him during the pre-Trump years. Orbán himself recognised this decline in his standing and sought ways to sway Republican opinion. He saw an

opportunity, however, and began investing heavily in spreading “Orbánism” among both the Republican establishment and the emerging MAGA movement.

3.1 Family policy as soft power

One of the instruments used to lure Republicans and the Trump administration into Orbán’s court was built on Hungary’s family policy. Amid anti-migration rhetoric and a dwindling population in Hungary, Orbán needed to devise an alternative narrative for how the country would sustain itself, both economically and demographically. Before 2015, his idea was to transform the welfare state into a workfare state; however, after 2015, this concept was primarily reinterpreted as a family fare state.⁵¹ The logic was clear: instead of relying on migrants to replenish the workforce, Hungary would direct its welfare provisions to use pro-natalist incentives to encourage citizens to have more children, primarily married and heterosexual couples.

To this end, the government introduced several measures primarily favouring middle- and upper-class families with children, or those who at least intended to have children. Key policies included a lifetime tax exemption for mothers with three or more children, interest-free loans of up to \$37,000 for young married couples who promised to have children within five years, and several others. These measures were designed to fit the far right’s nativist worldview: protecting national identity through birthrates, not immigration.

To market this model abroad, Orbán turned to **Katalin Novák**, State Secretary for Family and Youth Affairs since 2014. Fluent in several languages and polished in demeanour, she became Hungary’s “export face” of Orbánism. In her role, she was involved with the **Political Network of Values** (PNfV), a transnational conservative initiative supported by groups such as

the World Congress of Families and CitizenGo. She eventually became its president.^{52,53}

Novak then drew upon these connections to help organise the biannual Budapest Demographic Summit. This gave Hungary its first real platform to promote its “family values” policies to an international audience. The second conference in 2017 was proposed to host **Ben Carson** from the Trump administration at the time, but he cancelled at the last minute. Nonetheless, subsequent conferences included, among other foreign leaders, former US Vice President Mike Pence, who served under Trump. The conferences helped raise Orbán’s profile. Future heavyweights of the second Trump administration, such as the Heritage Foundation, Elon Musk and JD Vance, have all praised the model introduced by the Orban regime, even before it assumed power in 2025.⁵⁴

3.2 Buying access: Lobbying and the media

Fresh off his 2018 landslide re-election, Orbán escalated efforts to penetrate Trump’s circles directly. His government signed contracts with several Washington lobbying firms – including **Barnes & Thornburg, Munk Policy & Law, and Greenberg Traurig, as well as BSI Public Affairs** – to strengthen bilateral relations, enhance its image within the Trump administration, lobby members of the US Senate, coordinate governmental affairs and manage media outreach. A key objective of this effort was to secure appearances for Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó on prominent outlets such as *Fox News*.^{55,56}

There was, however, an even bigger fish to fry. The Hungarian government contracted another American lobbying firm, **Policy Impact Strategic Communications**. Richard Carlson, the father of Tucker Carlson, a prominent right-wing media personality in the Trump ecosystem, led this PR firm.⁵⁷ Orbán’s efforts bore fruit. Not only did Tucker Carlson begin to portray Orbán and Hungary favourably on his show, but in 2021, he even filmed a week-long special in Hungary, offering effusive

praise for Orbán’s policies and framing Hungary as a template for American conservatism.⁵⁸ The show helped boost Orbán’s image, both internationally and domestically, just before the 2022 elections in Hungary. Carlson’s visits were facilitated by Hungarian state institutions and tightly coordinated with Orbán’s communications staff, underscoring the strategic nature of the relationship.

3.3 Building institutions

Orbán’s team – led by Antal Rogán, Minister of the Prime Minister’s Cabinet Office – also decided to step up efforts to influence the American and English-speaking audience. The most crucial conduit of that objective was BLF, an organisation that last played a significant role in American-Hungarian conservative relations in the 1990s. Over the last few years, BLF has emerged as the primary vehicle for channelling public funds to pro-government think tanks, media outlets and ideologically aligned institutions.

It was established in 1991 by Prime Minister József Antall, named after Lajos Batthyány, Hungary’s first post-1848 prime minister, to foster conservatism and national values. The Foundation faded as József Antall’s party (MDF) declined. Still, it survived and was reoriented into a broader conservative-nationalist vehicle by the end of the 2010s.⁵⁹ In 2018, Viktor Orbán’s government resurrected BLF with a series of massive cash injections. Over time, especially since the mid-2010s, and above all under the cabinet of Antal Rogán, BLF’s budget and state backing expanded dramatically. In 2018, BLF got 1 billion Hungarian forints (\$3.7 million) from the prime minister’s office.⁶⁰ In 2020, it was converted into a public-interest asset-management trust, accompanied by the transfer of valuable real estate assets, including a high-profile luxury property in Budapest (the Lónyay-Hatvany villa). According to investigative journalists, between 2013 and 2018, BLF received \$41-46 million (16-17 billion Hungarian forints) in direct state grants,⁶¹ excluding the villa mentioned above, which is valued at around \$26 million (10 billion Hungarian forints).⁶² This is likely an underestimate, as BLF’s finances are opaque.

With the funds, BLF began financing the operations of the Danube Institute (DI), an entity that lacked separate legal status from BLF.⁶³ According to DI's mission statement, it has been tasked with promoting conservative and national values, fostering intellectual exchange between Central Europe and the English-speaking world, and serving as a bridge for centre-right thinkers and policymakers.⁶⁴ In reality, however, DI's primary objective is to promote Orbánism in the USA. The message it needs to get across globally is that Hungary is a kind of conservative right-wing utopia. As such, it should serve as a model for foreign, especially US, right-wing policymakers.

DI is led by John O'Sullivan, a co-chair of NAI in the 90s, and it serves its purpose by hosting American scholars, former officials and journalists. It also serves as a centre for financing lobbying activities within the USA. Over the past three years, it has paid more than \$1.64 million to its foreign collaborators, primarily building a network in the USA in cooperation with the **Heritage Foundation**. The two signed a formal cooperation agreement in 2021.⁶⁵

Hungarian journalists have uncovered that DI has specifically commissioned US public figures to write favourable articles about Hungary for US newspapers and journals. Hungarian journalists have retrieved the contracts that DI had concluded with several American conservative scholars and influencers. Most stayed in Hungary for an extended period, but some moved to Hungary to be employed by DI.⁶⁶

Rod Dreher is the most prominent American at DI. He is a conservative author, a *New York Times* bestseller, and a former editor and contributor to *The American Conservative*. At DI, he is a research fellow and director of its network project. His contract requires him to publish articles about his experiences in Hungary in US media outlets, among others. That is why, following his recruitment, he dedicated a lengthy portrait to Orbán, which mostly praised him for his stance on the Ukraine-Russia War.⁶⁷

Michael O'Shea also received money from BLF specifically for publishing in American media outlets. O'Shea's connections with DI go back to 2021, when his work was sponsored by HF in Washington DC and MCC. His current contract with BLF stipulates that he is to "produce two articles per month, each at least 650 words, particularly on Hungarian family policy and Hungarian geopolitical issues, for American and European media outlets".

Christopher F. Rufo, who is a well-known right-wing political influencer in the USA, with established connections to the Republican Party and the Heritage Foundation, spent six weeks in Hungary between March and April 2023. His contract reveals that during the study trip, he received \$35,000 from BLF.⁶⁸ In return for the money, the Hungarian Foundation requested that he deliver two lectures ("on the topics of critical race theory and LGBTQ+ propaganda") and write two articles, to be published in either *Hungarian Conservative* or *Hungarian Review*. Later, in *Compact Magazine*, he wrote a lengthy, positive article about the Orbán government's policies, based on his six-week study trip to Hungary organised by DI. The article's message was that the American right should consider adopting several of Fidesz's methods.⁶⁹

Jeremy Carl signed a contract with BLF under which he was required to write two studies: one on Hungarian family support policies, and another on "How the Orbán government managed to tame the Hungarian deep state while also keeping Brussels at bay". Interestingly, in the Hungarian part of the bilingual contract, there is a note stating that these essays "may serve as examples for the American right". However, this sentence does not appear in the English version of the text.⁷⁰

Another prominent Budapest-based institution is the **Hungarian Institute of International Affairs**. Founded in the 1970s, the Institute served as a government think tank on foreign relations. Yet despite its role and unambiguous indication of Hungarian affiliation in its name, the Institute is led by the conservative, pro-Trump academic Gladden J. Pappin.⁷¹ Pappin is a former University of Dallas professor. He accepted Hungarian citizenship to become president of the

Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, serving as a direct conduit between Hungarian foreign policy and American conservative intellectuals.

Meanwhile, the educational institution, **MCC** – led by Orban’s Political Director **Balázs Orbán** – has been the centre of an exchange program for American conservative academics and media personnel, providing them with visiting fellowships. MCC was granted university status, and today it is the largest private educational institution in the country. It has received substantial funds. According to a 2021 *New York Times* report, MCC received more than \$1.7 billion in government funding and assets that year alone. This was equal to about 1% of the country’s GDP and more than the annual budget of the country’s entire higher education system.⁷² In 2023, MCC’s annual operating budget was around \$95 million.⁷³ In May 2025, MCC claimed that it had more than 7,800 students enrolled.⁷⁴ It operates 18 regional offices in Hungary and 12 offices outside the country.⁷⁵

Among the numerous Americans who lecture at MCC are **Gladden Pappin** and **Rod Dreher**, while John O’Sullivan has been a guest lecturer.^{76,77} Lavish fellowships, including high-end housing, entice a wide range of right-wing intellectuals to join. In return, they are expected to work on projects aligned with the far-right agenda. A young Hungarian-American MCC fellow, a student at Columbia University’s School of Journalism, reported that the MCC administration tried to edit his work to align with institutional priorities.⁷⁸ MCC also organises the *MCC Feszt* annually, a festival featuring Hungarian and international public speakers and politicians, who give presentations and take part in Q&A sessions with participants. In 2021, **Tucker Carlson** was one of the star guests at the *MCC Feszt*. Relying on its staggering public funding, MCC continues to grow, acquiring publishing houses and establishing spin-off think tanks and a network of satellite organisations.⁷⁹

MCC has also become an international force to reckon with. It acquired a university in Vienna,⁸⁰ established an offshoot in Brussels and plans to open new branches in other Western European cities,

including London.⁸¹ MCC also plays an increasingly central role in amplifying the transatlantic far-right narrative. For example, a study funded and published by MCC Brussels echoes the Trumpian talking points about a “shadowy network of NGOs and think tanks”. The study claims the “EU-NGO propaganda complex” is used to “undermine or attempt to delegitimise democratically elected administrations”. To curtail the power of the European deep state, the study proposes establishing the “EU Department of Governmental Efficiency (EU DOGE)”, mirroring Elon Musk’s initiative, which targeted federal institutions and funding that the Musk-Trump network deemed hostile to the MAGA project.⁸² In 2022, Portuguese businessman **Pedro Vargas Santos David**, son of a conservative politician with close personal and business ties to Viktor Orbán’s government, bought *Euronews*, one of Europe’s biggest TV channels, with the help of Orbán’s government.⁸³ Since this change in ownership, MCC experts, such as **Jacob Reynolds**, are regularly invited to studio debates, thereby normalising and amplifying far-right narratives at the highest international level and periodically criticising EU integration, climate policies and immigration.⁸⁴

Finally, the **Center for Fundamental Rights** also plays a vital role in the transatlantic far-right ecosystem. It operates as both a domestic propaganda outlet and a transnational connector. Founded in 2013, the Center presents itself as an independent legal think tank defending “Christian, conservative values”. In practice, it operates as a government-funded organisation closely aligned with the Prime Minister’s Cabinet Office.⁸⁵ Its director, **Miklós Szánthó**, is a key figure in Fidesz’s ideological apparatus and chairs the board of *Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány* (KESMA), the foundation that owns most pro-government media outlets. Through this dual role, he connects the Center’s legal-theoretical messaging with Hungary’s state-aligned media ecosystem. In March 2024, it opened an office in Madrid to strengthen its network in Ibero-America.⁸⁶ Since 2022, the Center has organised the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) Hungary, providing a high-profile platform for US and European far-right leaders to coordinate messaging and forge personal relationships.

CPAC Hungary has truly served as an instrument to globalise the far-right agenda. Its speakers have included former British Prime Minister Liz Truss; former Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš; Dutch Party for Freedom leader Geert Wilders; former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Brazilian congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro, son of former president Jair Bolsonaro, along with several other former heads of government and high-ranking politicians from the USA, Poland and other parts of the world. Such institutionalised platforms have significantly bolstered Orbán's standing within US conservative circles. His role as a keynote speaker at the 2022 CPAC in Dallas, appearing alongside Donald Trump, symbolised the extent to which he had been integrated into the new Republican mainstream.⁸⁷

3.4 Propaganda for the English-speaking world

The *European Conservative* and its Hungarian sister outlet, *Hungarian Conservative*, are closely tied and serve as flagship publications for the transnational conservative network that Orbán's government has nurtured. The BLF supports both outlets. Edited by right-wing journalist **Alvino-Mario Fantini**, another vocal ally of Orbán's, the *European Conservative* is published by the European Conservative Nonprofit Ltd. The nonprofit was established in November 2021 and received 1.65 billion Hungarian forints (approximately €4.3 million) from BLF shortly thereafter.⁸⁸ Editorially, the two publications emphasise long essays, reviews, interviews and opinion pieces rather than quick news reporting. Among their recurring authors are Rod Dreher and John O'Sullivan.

Another component of the far-right ecosystem can be linked to Patrick Egan. Antal Rogán felt that Hungary needed its own Breitbart, where the views of Orbánism could be presented in English to a wider audience than the more scholarly, longer pieces of the organisations and publications within its far-right ecosystem. That is how **ReMix News** was born in 2018 with Egan's leadership. Heavy with ads, ReMix boasts extensive coverage on migration, the

"liberal elite" and "oligarch George Soros", phrases in line with the Hungarian government's narrative. The outlet received \$390,000 from the BLF between 2020 and 2023. Despite Egan's best efforts, ReMix remains marginal in English-speaking media. In September 2025, most of its articles received fewer than 80 interactions on Facebook, which is a tiny number in the broader international news environment.^{89,90}

3.5 The American counterparts

Orbán not only funded new institutions to influence American politics but also leveraged existing US infrastructures by inviting the CPAC to Hungary and strengthening its partnership with the **Heritage Foundation**. The American Conservative Union traditionally hosted CPAC but has since expanded internationally, and Budapest has now hosted four editions. Organised locally by the Fidesz-aligned legal/political institute, the Center for Fundamental Rights, CPAC Hungary became a showcase for Orbán's far-right agenda.

The Heritage Foundation was founded in 1973 as a conservative think tank, which was created to provide policy research and advocacy for the US right. Once anchored in Reagan-era conservatism, it has undergone a radical transformation under **Kevin Roberts's** leadership since 2021, tilting sharply toward reactionary and Trump-aligned ideology. This ideological realignment made the Heritage Foundation a receptive platform for Orbán, positioning it as a key conduit for Hungarian influence in Washington.

The Heritage Foundation signed a "landmark cooperation agreement" with the Budapest-based DI, under which it sends four researchers to Budapest each year as visiting scholars. It also organises joint events, such as the **Danube Geopolitical Summit**. Yet the precise details remain hidden, as it operates under the guise of "educational research and analysis", which falls outside the scope of standard FARA regulations.⁹¹

More recently, it was claimed that some of the Heritage Foundation's broader initiatives, most notably Project 2025, which outlined a framework for expanding executive power, bear Orbán's imprint, reflecting how Orbán-style governance inspired US conservative models.^{92,93}

The Heritage Foundation has also strongly supported ending US support for Ukraine. This position has been a significant talking point for Orbán.⁹⁴ So much so that Orbán insisted on highlighting this aspect of his controversial meeting with Trump in 2024, claiming "Donald Trump 'will not give a penny' to Ukraine if he is re-elected" and "therefore, the war will end, because it is obvious that Ukraine cannot stand on its own feet".⁹⁵

Since its launch in 2019, the **National Conservatism Conference (NatCon)** has become the second-most-significant annual convening of the global conservative movement, after CPAC. It also serves as a transatlantic meeting point between the Trump-aligned American right and Viktor Orbán's project of far-right counter-hegemony. Ideologically, NatCon's "statement of principles" exalts national sovereignty, traditional family and the rejection of globalist liberalism, mirroring the core tenets of Orbánism. Institutionally, the overlap is visible in personnel and patronage: Hungary's MCC⁹⁶ and DI⁹⁷ have sponsored or sent speakers; MCC head Balázs Orbán is a signatory to NatCon's founding declaration;⁹⁸ and Viktor Orbán himself has twice headlined the conference in interviews with its founders, Yoram Hazony⁹⁹ and Christopher DeMuth.¹⁰⁰

3.6 Summary

By 2025, the ties between Orbán's Hungary and the American right had evolved far beyond symbolic admiration. What began in the 1990s as tentative contacts through the IRI, consultants such as Daniel Odescalchi and transatlantic initiatives like

the NAI gradually matured into durable channels of cooperation. Fidesz's early reliance on Republican pollsters and campaign advisors, including Arthur Finkelstein, Georg Birnbaum, Sean Tonner and Patrick Egan, helped import US campaigning techniques into Hungary. These networks laid the groundwork for later ideological and institutional alignment with Trumpism.

The relationship deepened during the Trump era. Orbán was the first European leader to endorse Trump in 2016. Once Trump took office, Hungary invested heavily in lobbying contracts, PR firms and media access to gain access to Trump's circle. The Hungarian government mobilised its government-organised NGOs – such as BLF, DI, HF and MCC – to create a steady flow of fellowships, conferences and publications aimed at cultivating MAGA elites. Media figures like Tucker Carlson and authors like Rod Dreher were integrated into this ecosystem. At the same time, CPAC's expansion to Budapest symbolised Hungary's alignment with the Republican mainstream. In parallel, US conservative influencers, from Chris Rufo to JD Vance, openly praised Hungarian family policy and educational control as templates for the USA.

Taken together, this ecosystem forms a dense transatlantic web of politicians, media figures, think tanks, NGOs and academic institutions linking Orbán's Fidesz to the Republican right. Its coherence rests on a shared far-right vision: rejecting progressive liberalism; attacking multilateral institutions; elevating a nationalist and Christian worldview; and framing politics as a struggle for civilisational supremacy. Hungary has positioned itself as both a model and a laboratory for US conservatives, exporting tested strategies while importing symbolic validation. Table 1 summarises the most significant pairings of actors and institutions within the Orbán-Trump ecosystem.

Table 1. Key nodes in the Orbán-Trump ecosystem (only the most significant connections), focusing on the period after 2010.

Institution/node	Key linked actors	Function in the ecosystem
BLF <i>Breitbart News</i>	Patrick Egan, John O'Sullivan Steve Bannon	Funding conduit for US outreach and media production Ideological amplifier; helped popularise Orbán among the US alt-right
CPAC Hungary/Center for Fundamental Rights	Szánthó Miklós	Event platform for transatlantic far-right cooperation
DI	John O'Sullivan, Christopher Rufo, Rod Dreher, Michael O'Shea, Jeremy Carl	Think tank promoting Orbánism to US conservatives, cooperating with the Heritage Foundation
Heritage Foundation	Kevin Roberts, John O'Sullivan, Spencer Chretien, Troup Hemenway, Roger Severino	Leading US policy partner; Project 2025 link
Hungarian Institute of International Affairs	Gladden J. Pappin	Government-aligned foreign policy think tank, linking Hungarian diplomacy with the American right
HF	Tamás Fellegi, Anna Smith Lacey	Washington-based soft-power foundation funding US think tanks and fellowships
MCC	Orbán Balázs, Tucker Carlson, Gladden Pappin, Rod Dreher	Training and fellowship hub; institutional bridge between Hungary, Brussels and US conservatives.
PNfV	Katalin Novák	Conservative pro-family diplomacy and expert network

4. DIRECT INFLUENCE

When assessing the institutional architecture that has grown up around the Trump-Orbán nexus, it becomes clear that Orbán has been the active builder of this ecosystem, while the MAGA world has essentially played a passive role. Orbán's ambition has consistently been to shape the American right into an ally of his far-right project. Trump's election provided him with an unprecedented opening, which he seized by investing considerable financial and human resources into transatlantic networks, think tanks and loyal intermediaries designed to translate his model for US audiences. And he has not only managed to build ties but also had some – limited but symbolically significant – direct policy influence.

In 2022, at the first CPAC held in Hungary, Orbán compared Hungary to a political laboratory where, after eight years of experiments, they had found a perfect antidote to the “progressive dominance”. This was a reference to how far-right regimes across the globe, and especially in the US, should pursue politics and policy making to remain in power with respect to their left-wing or liberal alternatives. He went on to outline the “recipe” for the antidote, consisting of 12 steps. The steps were less a speech than a governing manual for far-right statecraft. It is a recipe he has tested at home and exported abroad, seeking not merely to consolidate his domestic dominance but to shape the ideological trajectory of the global right: an outline of his counter-hegemonic strategy.¹⁰¹

Firstly, Orbán suggested finding allies. According to him, conservatives must focus on common ground with friends, even in disagreement, to counter a unified progressive front. Secondly, he suggested creating institutions, such as think tanks, schools and youth groups, that is, structures that outlast

individuals and render far-right politics sustainable in the long run. Finally, he paid special attention to the media. According to Orbán, the far right cannot expose progressive flaws unless it has a media presence to amplify its message, which requires owning or controlling the media. Some of his suggestions have been directly transplanted into the MAGA world.

4.1 Vision

By 2022, Trump's camp was so captivated by the political system that Orbán had constructed in Hungary that **Kevin Roberts**, president of the Heritage Foundation and author of Project 2025, Trump's undeclared policy program, had this to say: “Modern Hungary is not just a model for conservative statecraft, but the model”.^{102,103}

The same willingness to learn from Hungary was made explicit by **Chris Rufo**, a fellow at DI, in an article published in August 2023. Rufo argued that the American right should adopt methods pioneered by Fidesz. He observed that Orbán “has reshaped public and private institutions to create a conservative counter-hegemony. This included schools, universities, NGOs, the media, and the government. The aim is to strengthen Hungary's cultural foundations, family life, Christian faith, and historical memory”. Rufo concluded that Republicans should follow Orbán's example and build a strong government that could be used by conservative politicians “to advance conservative aims.”¹⁰⁴

In March 2024, when Orbán travelled to Florida to meet **Donald Trump**, the then former US president said

“

There's nobody better, smarter or a better leader than Viktor Orbán. He's fantastic, he's a non-controversial figure because he says, 'This is the way it's going to be,' and that's the end of it. Right? He's the boss. No, he's a great leader.

”

In 2024, during the most critical event of a US presidential election, the debate, Donald Trump singled out Orbán as “one of the most respected men” and “smart” to highlight his alliance with international (moreover European) figures.¹⁰⁵

More recently, while Trump has met several world leaders, particularly European leaders, since taking office for the second time, he has not met Orbán once. Yet, according to the US *Chargé d’Affaires*¹⁰⁶ Robert Palladino, there are frequent Trump-Orbán calls and announcements that bilateral relations are undergoing “realignment at the highest level”.^{107,108}

At the level of campaign strategy and messaging, Orbán has also been instrumental to the American alt-right. **Steve Bannon**, who was the early architect of Trump’s rise and first campaign, admitted so in a speech in Budapest, as stated in the previous section. Orbán was the first leader to build a comprehensive communications campaign against George Soros, for example. As a follow-up to the campaign, Orbán enacted several laws that have restricted non-state-dependent civil society. One was even named “Stop Soros”.¹⁰⁹ Just as Orbán did, Trump initially had a good relationship with the Hungarian billionaire. Soros was among the investors of the Trump International Hotel & Tower in Chicago and even attended his wedding to Melania Knauss in 2005. However, later, this relationship soured.

In 2018, just when the Hungarian government started pouring money into influencing American

politics at a more profound level, Trump also started antagonising Soros. In October, he tweeted that the anti-Kavanaugh protesters were “paid by professionals... Paid by Soros and others”.¹¹⁰ Later, in the same month, he also suggested that the migrant caravan “might be funded by Soros”.¹¹¹ Trump has also built on (and created) an anti-Soros sentiment on the right. He has advocated on numerous occasions for using the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act against the Hungarian-born billionaire to try him and any organisations that can be connected to him.¹¹²

4.2 Project 2025

The most important ideological and policy blueprint that binds Trump’s policies into a coherent program, Project 2025, also shows clear evidence of learning from Orbán’s far-right laboratory. The Project 2025 manual – a 900-page program for a prospective Trump administration – bears Orbán’s imprint. Created under the aegis of the Heritage Foundation, a key conduit for importing Orbán’s policy repertoire into the American right, Project 2025 prescribes the standard toolkit of authoritarian conservatism: the expansion of executive power; subordination of the judiciary; tax cuts for the wealthy; weakened labour protections; tighter control over universities; assaults on LGBTQ+ rights; and the dismantling of climate policy in favour of fossil fuels.

Project 2025’s intellectual infrastructure is closely tied to Hungary’s influence network. The Heritage Foundation, the president of which openly lauds Hungary as a model, is the most visible node. However, based on a training video created for internal use to provide instructions on how would-be political appointees could further the aims of Project 2025, several other individuals affiliated with Orbán were involved. **Spencer Chretien**, co-director of Project 2025, previously cultivated the Heritage Foundation’s ties with Budapest, including at a 2024 event hosted by the Center for Fundamental Rights. That same year, DI showcased Project 2025 with the participation of **Troup Hemenway**, another senior Heritage Foundation operative. **Roger Severino**, a former Trump official featured in Project 2025

training materials, travelled to Hungary in 2023 with the Heritage Foundation's leadership at the invitation of MCC.

In January 2023, the Center for Fundamental Rights hosted a joint event with the Conservative Partnership Institute in Washington DC. In February 2024, the **Liszt Institute**, part of the Hungarian Department of Culture and Innovation, hosted a joint event with the **Conservative Partnership Institute** in Washington DC. At this event, **Ed Corrigan** presented a book by Balázs Orbán, a member of Viktor Orbán's cabinet, alongside the politician.¹¹³

4.3 The border wall

Perhaps the earliest synergy between Orbánism and Trumpism came on immigration, preceding Project 2025. Both Trump and Orbán rose to power on anti-immigrant platforms, and they explicitly hailed each other's approaches. In 2015, Orbán erected border fences to stop migrants from the Middle East and Africa, a move that Trump later cited approvingly. Trump echoed Orbán's hardline stance, advocating for border walls and travel bans, and praised Hungary for "fighting illegal migration" alongside the USA. When Orbán visited in 2019, Trump highlighted that Hungary's fence had spared it from the migrant "problems" seen elsewhere in Europe.

Far-right Republicans like Rep. Paul Gosar explicitly call Hungary a model on border security, crediting Orbán with securing his nation against "chaos" and lauding how he "rebuilt his nation... by focusing on families [and] border security... worked beyond all expectations".¹¹⁴ Gosar, after meeting Orbán, described Hungary as an "inspiration to the world" for upholding its borders and culture. Such statements illustrate how US anti-immigration rhetoric has borrowed Orbán's success story as validation.

In fact, Kari Lake and other Trump-aligned Republicans have said they want the "Hungarian model" transplanted to the USA for immigration policy – a reference to Hungary's strict border defence and refusal to accept refugees from Africa and the Middle East.¹¹⁵ This symbolic alignment

was further reinforced when the Republican-aligned America First Policy Institute sent its representatives to observe Hungary's border fence.¹¹⁶ While US policy did not directly copy any Hungarian law, the admiration and cited example of Orbán's wall undeniably influenced the resolve behind Trump's own border wall project and stricter asylum rules.

4.4 Family policy

Trump's current vice president, **JD Vance**, praised Orbán's policy stances in two areas well before he was even Trump's running mate for office: family policy and academia. Even outlets beyond the conservative echo chamber, such as the *New York Times*, have acknowledged the resonance of his family policy innovations.¹¹⁷

In 2021, Vance commended Hungary's family policy and offered it as a model for the USA. In Hungary under Orbán, Vance said, "they offer loans to newly married couples that are forgiven at some point later if those couples have stayed together and had kids. Why can't we do that here? Why can't we actually promote family formation?"¹¹⁸ Not surprisingly, upon taking office in 2024, the Trump administration floated proposals for baby bonuses, enhanced child tax credits and even symbolic rewards for large families, in line with Hungary's own policies.

The parallels run deeper than rhetoric. Orbán's model rests on tax exemptions for mothers with three or more children, generous housing subsidies (CSOK) and interest-free "baby loans", all designed to reward traditional, heterosexual family structures while excluding single parents, LGBTQ+ couples and precarious workers. These policies have been consistently presented to American audiences through funded conferences, such as the **Budapest Demographic Summit**, paid fellowships at institutions like DI and articles published in conservative American media outlets. Trump's proposals mirror the Hungarian model. His administration paired regressive tax cuts for the wealthy with selective pro-natalist incentives, framing them as cultural renewal rather than broad social support. Both leaders thus fused upward redistribution with family-oriented

welfare chauvinism, offering benefits to middle- and upper-class traditional families while imposing austerity on the rest.

4.5 Academia

As for the educational sphere, Vance took issue with a supposed left-wing bias at American universities in a May 2024 interview, where he stated that the USA “could learn from” Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán when it comes to addressing what he describes as “US universities’ left-wing bias”. He essentially spoke in favour of central control over the curriculum at universities but spun it as an issue of democratic control, when he said that “They’re not controlled by the American taxpayer, and yet the American taxpayer is sending hundreds of billions of dollars to these universities every single year”. When asked whether he wanted direct control over academic institution in the USA, he claimed that there needed to be a “political solution to the problem”.¹¹⁹ In 2021, Hungary shifted control of 11 public universities to quasi-public foundations headed by Orbán loyalists, a move critics argue was intended to secure the prime minister’s lasting influence over institutions that had previously enjoyed independence.¹²⁰ While Vance has spoken favourably of Orbán, he also noted in the same interview that he “did not endorse every single policy Orbán has implemented”. In a way, this has genuinely been the case since taking office, as he has not once referenced the Hungarian far-right regime.

The restructuring of the New College of Florida (NCF) again shows Hungarian influence. In early 2023, Ron DeSantis’s administration appointed six new members to NCF’s board of trustees, including prominent conservative activists such as **Christopher Rufo**, who was also a fellow of DI in the same year that the capture took place. The stated aim of the takeover is to create a conservative college. The new board immediately marginalised gender studies, purged LGBTQ+ literature from the library and started to pressure faculty to fall in line. Following the takeover, NCF received state funding to establish a new right-wing institute. The college now forms part of a growing network of

right-wing institutions aiming to develop right-wing scholars. The takeover of NCF directly paralleled Orbán’s forced closure of the Central European University in 2017-2018, as well as his approach to building MCC into a major right-wing educational hub.¹²¹ Both campaigns targeted liberal institutions by imposing impossible regulatory requirements, replacing leadership with political loyalists, and aimed to transform academic culture. Rufo explicitly endorsed Orbán’s university targeting on social media, demonstrating a conscious adoption of Hungarian methods.^{122,123}

4.6 Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation

Orbán’s anti-LGBTQ+ messaging and legislation also resonated with the deeply traditionalist conservative segments of the American far right. Nowhere is this clearer than in Florida, a state that has emerged as perhaps the most receptive for Orbánism in the USA. Under Governor **Ron DeSantis**, a former mainstream conservative who has shifted sharply to the far right, several policies not only echo Hungary’s playbook but have also been openly acknowledged as being inspired by it. Certain commentators have even coined the term “American Orbánism” to describe this phenomenon”.¹²⁴

A case in point is its “Don’t Say Gay” law. The legislation was explicitly modelled on Hungary’s 2021 anti-LGBTQ+ legislation, according to multiple sources, including **Rod Dreher** and DeSantis’s press secretary **Christina Pushaw**, who, when asked about it, reportedly stated “we were watching the Hungarians”.¹²⁵

“Don’t Say Gay” bans instruction or classroom discussion about LGBTQ+ issues for children up until the third grade. While the inspiration might have been Orbán, the Hungarian prime minister went much further in Hungary than DeSantis in Florida so far. In 2020, Orbán banned adoption by same-sex couples – which has been legal in all US states since 2017 – and made it impossible for transgender people to legally change their gender. Last year, his government passed a law that prohibited sharing content with minors seen

as promoting homosexuality or sex reassignment. It also contained provisions restricting education on homosexuality and establishing a searchable registry of convicted paedophiles.¹²⁶

While both leaders have instrumentalised LGBTQ+ issues for political gain, DeSantis's interventions remain comparatively narrow. His policies primarily target transgender people, whereas Orbán has imposed wide-ranging restrictions affecting the full spectrum of LGBTQ+ communities. Crucially, DeSantis has not sought to link non-heterosexual identities with paedophilia in the manner of Orbán's narrative framing, underscoring the partial rather than wholesale adoption of Hungarian strategies.

4.7 Sanctions exemption

Trump and Orbán met in Washington DC on 7 November 2025. Orbán arrived with over a hundred ministers, propagandists and business allies to seek an exemption from US sanctions on Russian fossil fuels. Trump had been pressing Hungary to join his sanctions regime. This tougher US line toward Moscow hit Orbán hard, as he had cultivated friendly ties with both Trump and Putin while alienating Western liberals. The sanctions risked higher energy

prices and political backlash before Hungary's April 2026 election.

Orbán left Washington DC with a one-year grace period, delaying the financial pain until after the vote. At their joint press conference, Trump echoed Orbán's claim that Hungary could not quickly abandon Russian oil. They revived plans for a Trump-Putin meeting in Budapest, all of which helped amplify Orbán's messaging on the topic.

The visit marked a tactical win for Orbán. He secured short-term relief, kept Russian oil profits flowing and flaunted his US connection at home. In return, he agreed to buy American liquified natural gas, weapons and nuclear fuel, and to align with US policy toward Russia over time. Orbán's ties with Trump could prove decisive in the April 2026 election if he can present his influence in Washington DC as a major domestic achievement.¹²⁷

5. THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

The EU functions simultaneously as a constraint on Orbán's ambitions, a critical resource enabling his domestic consolidation and the primary terrain on which he seeks to build far-right counter-hegemony. Understanding this dual character of Orbán as both recipient and architect of European-level processes is essential for grasping how a small Central European country has come to punch so far above its weight in reshaping the international far-right ecosystem.

While the EU is increasingly attempting to strengthen its capacity to restrain Orbán's far-right project, including freezing regular cohesion funds and the post-COVID-19 Recovery and Resilience Facility funds, the EU has provided critical resources sustaining Orbán's regime, funding that underwrites authoritarian consolidation.¹²⁸ Hungary has been amongst the largest net recipients of EU funds relative to GDP, receiving approximately €6 billion annually in structural and cohesion funds, equivalent to roughly 4-5% of Hungarian GDP. These resources have been systematically channelled through public procurement systems captured by Fidesz-connected networks.¹²⁹ Hungary ranked as the most corrupt EU member state for three consecutive years (2022-2024).¹³⁰

European, particularly German, industrial capital has also provided Orbán with crucial international political leverage that extends well beyond direct EU funding. Hungary positioned itself as a low-wage, low-tax manufacturing platform within the EU single market, attracting massive foreign direct investment from German automakers and their supply chains. Orbán offered favourable conditions to strategic investors. By 2020, this foreign-owned automotive sector accounted for approximately 5% of Hungarian GDP, 25% of value added and 20% of exports, with Audi, Mercedes-Benz, Opel and BMW operating major production facilities.¹³¹ This economic integration created powerful corporate

constituencies with direct interests in maintaining stable Hungarian-EU relations regardless of rule-of-law concerns. German industrial lobbies consistently advocated against strong EU enforcement measures that might destabilise Hungarian operations.¹³² The EPP's extended protection of Fidesz – only suspending membership in 2019 – reflected in part the preferences of Christian Democratic parties' industrial constituencies.¹³³

Beyond industrial capital, European financial markets and intermediaries have served as critical enablers of Orbán's far-right counter-hegemony.¹³⁴ The case of Heinrich Pecina, an Austrian investment banker, illustrates how European financial networks facilitate the movement of funds that sustain Orbán's political operations. Pecina has repeatedly appeared in the ownership structures of companies connected to Hungarian government contracts and media acquisitions, serving as a node in complex corporate structures that allow Orbán's oligarchs to buy up media companies.¹³⁵ European offshore havens, particularly Luxembourg, Cyprus and Malta, provide the corporate vehicles through which Orbán-aligned capital can move across borders while obscuring beneficial ownership.¹³⁶

Crucially, Orbán is not only on the receiving end but also an active architect of far-right hegemony in Europe. Orbán has invested systematically in nurturing far-right coalition formation across Europe through both institutional and financial means. The Patriots for Europe grouping, announced on 30 June 2024, in Vienna alongside Czech ANO leader Andrej Babiš and Austrian FPÖ chairman Herbert Kickl, represents the culmination of years of coalition-building efforts in which Orbán has played a critical role. Within weeks, the Patriots attracted France's Rassemblement National (30 MEPs), Italy's Lega, Spain's Vox, the Dutch PVV, Belgium's Vlaams Belang and Portugal's Chega, becoming the third-largest EP grouping. Orbán has not only

forged political ties with Europe's far-right parties but has actively funded them. The most extensively documented cases include a €10.7 million loan to France's Rassemblement National,¹³⁷ a €9.2 million loan to the Spanish far-right party Vox from Fidesz-affiliated MKB Bank¹³⁸ and approximately €14 million channelled to Slovenia's far-right SDS.¹³⁹

The institutional infrastructure Orbán has built in Brussels represents the most sophisticated effort by any EU member state to project ideological influence within the Union's capital. The MCC Brussels office, established in late 2022 and led by British sociologist Frank Furedi, operates with an annual budget of approximately €6.3 million – making it one of the largest political think tanks in Brussels, with a budget exceeding that of the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), a leading think tank based in Brussels.¹⁴⁰ MCC Brussels has hosted events featuring EP members, organised policy workshops on migration and “gender ideology”, and published reports explicitly calling for an “EU Department of Governmental Efficiency” (EU DOGE) modelled on Elon Musk's initiative to dismantle federal institutions.¹⁴¹ MCC has expanded its European footprint through a network of educational centres and university partnerships. By late 2024, it operated in 33 cities across the Carpathian Basin and Europe.¹⁴² It has also partnered with a business school in Berlin,¹⁴³ and in 2023 acquired Modul University Vienna.¹⁴⁴

The April 2024 NatCon in Brussels – temporarily shut down by Belgian police before an administrative court overturned the ban – was organised by the Edmund Burke Foundation with institutional sponsorship from MCC.¹⁴⁵ The event featured Viktor Orbán in conversation with Edmund Burke Foundation chairperson Yoram Hazony, alongside speakers including Nigel Farage, Suella Braverman and Éric Zemmour. This platforming infrastructure provides European far-right politicians with regular opportunities for coordination and mutual legitimisation at the symbolic heart of the EU.¹⁴⁶

Orbán's most ambitious European media intervention came with the acquisition of *Euronews*, one of Europe's most widely distributed television

news channels. Investigative reporting shows that Hungarian state-linked entities provided €45 million of the €150 million purchase price, as part of a strategy to counter what the Orbán government portrays as left-liberal dominance in European media.¹⁴⁷ The buyer, Portuguese businessman Pedro Vargas Santos David, is the son of Mário David, a former EPP MEP and a longtime Orbán associate.¹⁴⁸ Beyond *Euronews*, BLF funds English-language publications, including *European Conservative and Hungarian Conservative*, providing platforms that translate Orbán's far-right narratives for European conservative audiences. Investigation into Hungarian funding of the Slovenian SDS aligned media also documented that significant funds flowed through opaque networks of intermediaries to influence the Slovenian media landscape.¹⁴⁹

Furthermore, the Western Balkans serves as both a testing ground for Hungarian influence operations and a strategic buffer where Orbán can cultivate allies at Europe's southeastern periphery. Orbán has leveraged Hungary's position as a gateway between the EU and the Western Balkans to build economic and political influence in the region. Hungarian state-backed investments have flowed into Serbia, North Macedonia,¹⁵⁰ and Bosnia and Herzegovina, often accompanied by political support for nationalist and illiberal leaders. The relationship with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is particularly close.¹⁵¹ Hungary has consistently blocked EU statements critical of Serbia and advocated for accelerated accession despite democratic backsliding.¹⁵² In Bosnia, Orbán has provided political cover for Republika Srpska leader Milorad Dodik, blocking European Council discussions of potential sanctions against him, despite Dodik's violations of the Dayton Agreement and threats of secession.¹⁵³ Hungarian construction companies connected to Orbán have won contracts for infrastructure projects across the region.

The Hungarian diaspora, particularly in neighbouring states with significant ethnic Hungarian minorities, provides another vector for Orbán's influence operations. Following the 2010 constitutional changes, Hungary extended citizenship and voting rights to ethnic Hungarians abroad: around 1.5

million people, predominantly in Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine. These voters, who can cast ballots by mail without Hungarian residency, have overwhelmingly supported Fidesz in successive elections, providing crucial marginal support.¹⁵⁴ Beyond electoral utility, diaspora networks serve as channels for extending Hungarian influence into the domestic politics of neighbouring countries. The Hungarian government funds extensive cultural, educational and media operations serving Hungarian minorities, creating institutional infrastructure that parallels Orbán's domestic capture of civil society.

Orbán's investment in building European counter-hegemonic infrastructure is unique among EU far-right parties. Other formations, like France's Rassemblement National, Italy's Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, Spain's Vox, Austria's FPÖ, and Poland's PiS, are predominantly participants in or recipients of networks that Orbán has constructed, rather than builders themselves. This asymmetry reflects structural factors: Orbán has controlled the Hungarian state continuously since 2010 with an explicit dedication to building lasting infrastructures of power outside governance. Giorgia Meloni's contrasting "mainstreaming" strategy, that is, working within EU structures rather than building alternative infrastructure, illustrates how other far-right leaders have chosen different paths. The only comparable systematic investment in European political networks comes from Russia, which has documented ties to multiple European far-right parties through loans, media support and political coordination. However, Hungary operates within the EU institutional framework, enjoying protections and access that an external actor cannot claim, making Orbán's project, in some respects, more threatening to EU cohesion than Russian interference.

Orbán's counter-hegemonic project has severely tested the EU's capacity to defend its foundational values. The Article 7 procedure, the EU's "nuclear option" for addressing serious breaches of EU values, has proven structurally ineffective against Orbán until recently, though the cuts to EU funds are starting to bite politically.¹⁵⁵ For years, Hungary and Poland provided mutual protection, each pledging to veto sanctions against the other. However, the

2023 Polish elections disrupted this arrangement: the Tusk government's commitment to restoring the rule of law led the Commission to close proceedings against Poland in May 2024, leaving Hungary isolated. Yet even without Polish protection, Hungary has found new partners: Slovakia's Robert Fico has publicly pledged not to support sanctions against Hungary. The Council's unanimity requirement means that a single ally suffices for blocking. The fundamental challenge is systemic: EU treaties, designed for cooperation among democracies, lack adequate mechanisms to manage a determined internal defector and conscious architect of far-right hegemony.

Beyond rule-of-law enforcement, Orbán's leverage over EU decision-making has tangible consequences across multiple policy domains. In energy policy, Hungary's dependence on Russian hydrocarbons – and Orbán's refusal to reduce it – has complicated EU efforts to sanction Russian energy exports. Hungary secured exemptions from the oil embargo and has repeatedly blocked the strengthening of sanctions packages, extracting concessions on pipeline oil imports and nuclear fuel supplies, and exemptions for Gazprombank transactions. In foreign and security policy, Hungary has blocked several critical EU foreign policy statements, including numerous statements on Russia's war in Ukraine.¹⁵⁶ Orbán's unauthorised "peace mission" to Moscow and Beijing during Hungary's July 2024 EU Council presidency, undertaken without EU mandate and explicitly contradicting common positions, represented the most dramatic assertion of foreign policy autonomy against EU coordination. On migration, Hungary's refusal to comply with EU asylum rules, despite a €200 million European Court of Justice fine and €1 million daily penalties, has emboldened other member states to resist burden-sharing and prevent consensus on comprehensive reform.¹⁵⁷ The cumulative effect is a progressive hollowing out of the EU's capacity for unified external action, as other member states increasingly circumvent Hungarian vetoes through ad hoc coalitions of the willing rather than Treaty-based common positions.

Comparing Orbán's European and American theatres reveals a division of labour underpinning his counter-

hegemonic project. In both arenas, Orbán functions as the active architect while his counterparts remain passive recipients: the American right imports ideas with little reciprocal institutional commitment, and European far-right parties participate in networks Orbán constructs rather than building their own. This asymmetry positions Hungary uniquely among both far-right movements and small states.

The two theatres yield different forms of power. In Europe, Orbán exercises embedded power: EU funds, single-market access, veto points and legal protections supply resources and insulation unavailable to external challengers, enabling counter-hegemony built from within through institutional capture and procedural obstruction. In the USA, Orbán exercises derivative power: he lacks institutional leverage but gains amplification and legitimacy by positioning Hungary as a laboratory for the American far right. Europe provides durability through long-term control over state resources, party networks and capital flows that persist beyond electoral cycles. America provides scale, translating a small state's project into global relevance. Resource flows move accordingly: Hungarian state money flows outward to the USA through lobbying and fellowships, while EU money flows inward to Hungary and then back out to European far-right parties through loans and media acquisitions. Orbán is simultaneously recipient and redistributor – a far-right hub of counter-hegemony.

Trump's return marks his assumption of leadership not merely of the US government but of the global far-right revolt against the liberal world order. At this juncture, Orbán supplies a crucial missing link: a European network translating American ideas for European audiences while channelling European policy innovations back to Washington DC. He operates as a bidirectional hub, accelerating the circulation of policies, narratives and personnel across the Atlantic.

CONCLUSION

While the parallels between Trump and Orbán are striking, the actual state of their bilateral relationship suggests that ideological affinities should not be overstated. Several diplomatic signals point to a more distant relationship than their shared rhetoric might suggest. During Trump's first presidency, it took three full years before he publicly met with Orbán. Now, despite campaign references praising the Hungarian leader, Trump has yet to extend a White House invitation since returning to office. Most tellingly, when European leaders were invited to discuss the Russia-Ukraine war, Orbán was conspicuously excluded – even though both he and Trump represent a united front against Western European positions on the conflict.

Furthermore, the USA has not even appointed a full ambassador to Hungary, maintaining only an interim *chargé d'affaires*. Their foreign policy alignment is also increasingly put under pressure (Russia-Ukraine War, China). These diplomatic overtures suggest that, while Trump may draw inspiration from Orbán's playbook and share his populist worldview, the practical relationship between the two leaders remains more limited than their ideological kinship would predict.

This policy study has shown that the Trump-Orbán relationship is based on more than just rhetorical admiration. A dense web of consultants, lobbyists, think tanks and media platforms underpins it, all financed by Hungarian state resources and embedded in US conservative networks. BLF, DI, MCC and HF play central roles in cultivating American allies, while figures such as Steve Bannon, Tucker Carlson and Patrick Egan have carried Orbán's messages across the Atlantic. This infrastructure has made Hungary both a model and a laboratory for the American radical right.

At the same time, the Orbán-Trump relationship has its limits. Trump has not consistently rewarded Orbán with high-level access: he has not received a White House invitation during his second term, has been excluded from Ukraine war consultations and has been assigned only a *chargé d'affaires* to Budapest. Trump treats Orbán less as a partner and more as a valuable prop.

The asymmetry is striking. Hungary invests heavily in influence networks, while the USA imports the lessons with little reciprocal commitment. Yet this imbalance does not weaken Orbán's project. Orbán uses Trump's symbolic validation and political weight as leverage to consolidate his own domestic and international standing. What appears to be one-sided dependence is, in fact, a means of converting US attention into resources and legitimacy for a far-right counter-hegemony.

The EU represents the central paradox of Orbán's counter-hegemonic project: it simultaneously constrains his ambitions, furnishes the resources that sustain his regime and provides the primary terrain on which he constructs far-right political infrastructure. EU funds, single market integration, and political tolerance rooted in industrial and financial interests helped sustain authoritarian consolidation in Hungary. At the same time, weak enforcement mechanisms and unanimity rules limited the Union's capacity to respond. Orbán used this embedded position strategically. He converted EU resources and access into leverage for building far-right alliances, institutions and media infrastructures across Europe through an active strategy of internal defection and counter-hegemony building, a member state operating inside the Union while working to reorganise its political balance and hollow out its collective capacity for action. Orbán's

ambition distinguishes Hungary from comparable movements and renders his project, in certain respects, more threatening to EU cohesion than external interference from Russia, which cannot claim the institutional protections and access that membership affords.

As argued at the beginning of this policy study, hegemony is never secured by institutions alone; it rests on the ability to shape “common sense” and to make one’s worldview appear natural, inevitable and desirable. The crisis of liberal globalism created an opening for counter-hegemonic projects, and Orbán was among the first to seize it. His far-right counter-hegemony has sought not only to dominate the state but also to redefine the cultural foundations of politics – family, nation, Christianity, sovereignty – while constructing a network of institutions, schools, think tanks and media to reproduce these ideas across borders. Protected for years within the EPP and sustained by German industrial capital, Orbán used his embeddedness in EU structures as cover while he worked to build a rival far-right bloc. His American alliance-building efforts mirror his European strategy, gradually building political leverage for far-right hegemony, facilitating an ever-closer transatlantic exchange to consolidate far-right disruption.

Orbán’s position today is the opposite of 1998-2002. Back then, he could govern but lacked power, constrained by the hegemony of liberal globalism. Today, after 15 years in office, he has built a counter-hegemonic ecosystem that fuses state institutions with loyal foundations, schools, media outlets and international networks. These structures embed Orbánism beyond elections, shaping public discourse and training the next generation of elites. Even if he loses office, this ecosystem will continue to reproduce his ideas. Yet Orbán also knows that this far-right counter-hegemony can only endure if the international order shifts. His transatlantic efforts harness Trump’s lift to strengthen the global far-right ecosystem and secure cover for his domestic project.

The counter-hegemonic infrastructure Orbán has constructed, enshrined in think tanks, educational

institutions, media platforms, party-financing networks and fellowship circuits, constitutes a set of extra-governmental fortifications of far-right counter-hegemony. These structures do not depend on holding office; they reproduce ideas, train cadres and sustain international linkages regardless of electoral outcomes. Even if Orbán loses his capacity to govern, an increasingly plausible scenario at the time of writing, this ecosystem will persist. While Orbán’s electoral defeat would represent a significant symbolic victory for democracy globally, it would constitute only a single battle in a protracted war between the far right, liberalism and democratic renewal. BLF, MCC, the DI, the Heritage Foundation partnership and the European party-financing networks with their endowed wealth will continue to function as powerful challengers to established institutions, hindering the revival of democracy both domestically and internationally. The counter-hegemony has been institutionalised beyond the person.

Fighting the resurgent far right means first exposing the networks and strengthening the watchdogs. The far-right ecosystem is built through lobbying contracts, PR and consultancy work, conference circuits, and tightly coordinated think tank and media partnerships that turn public money into transatlantic influence. The first task is therefore basic democratic hygiene: map these ties systematically; publish them in accessible formats; and keep them in the news cycle, so “normal” institutional cooperation is not allowed to function as a cover for influence operations. Progressives and pro-democracy actors also need to invest in independent media, cross-border investigative journalism and civil-society collaborations that can follow money trails, document disinformation pipelines and expose covert coordination.

However, transparency alone is not enough. Pushing back against this far-right counter-hegemonic project requires an equally ambitious progressive one. Currently, the struggle is between a crumbling liberal globalism and a resurgent far right: the former has lost legitimacy, while the latter offers no real solutions but supplies meaning and identity through exclusion and confrontation. Progressives

cannot remain passive or retreat to defending the status quo. They need a bold, socially rooted, people-centred democratic alternative that treats democracy as a lived experience, not just a set of institutions to be guarded in moments of crisis.

Domestically, this means tackling economic insecurity, restoring political voice and offering cultural recognition without exclusion, while reinventing democratic institutions so they listen, include and empower, and using new technologies to widen participation and strengthen pro-democracy mobilisation rather than leaving the digital sphere to cynical manipulation.

But the central battleground is international. If the crisis of liberal globalism opened space for far-right internationalism, the progressive response cannot be a nostalgic return to economic liberalism and the nostalgic memories of the liberal world order that already failed to deliver security, dignity and justice for all. What is needed instead is a new global order focused on multilateral governance, ecological sustainability and human-centric development; a progressive global multilateralism with real teeth.

In practice, this means governments coordinating to tax multinational corporations and curb tax havens, regulating capital flows, setting minimum labour and environmental standards, sharing green technologies, and jointly financing global public

goods. It also means redesigning global economic governance so developing and emerging countries can pursue industrial policies and access patient, sustainable capital through stronger ties with public finance institutions – an alternative to liberal globalism that is cooperative, developmental and accountable rather than austerity driven and investor first.

A credible progressive world order also requires adjustment in the wealthy democracies that have been both the architects and casualties of the old model. Parallel to eco-social developmentalism in emerging economies, mature economies need a gradual turn that prioritises wellbeing, ecological stability and social equity, investing in care work, green technology and public infrastructures. With stronger cooperation between national and multilateral public finance institutions – and better tools to tax and regulate corporations, governments can rebuild the capacity to create stable well-paying jobs, strengthen organised labour and reduce inequality. This is not just good policy; it is a revival of progressive politics and democracy. It will not happen automatically; it requires robust global and regional political coalitions capable of challenging entrenched corporate interests and counterbalancing the existing capital-driven global framework. Only a project of that scale can compete with far-right counter-hegemony.

ENDNOTES

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Gábor Scheiring's research examines why and how the crisis of liberal globalism becomes embodied in individual suffering and the unravelling of everyday life across peripheralising economies, asking why this polycrisis leads to socioeconomic disintegration and illiberalism in some contexts and renewal in others. He is the author of the award-winning *Retreat of Liberal Democracy* (Palgrave, 2020) and dozens of studies published in leading journals across multiple disciplines. He is an assistant professor at Georgetown University Qatar, with previous appointments at Harvard University, the University of Cambridge and Bocconi University. A former member of the Hungarian Parliament (2010-2014), he brings first-hand knowledge of the political dynamics his research examines.

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This study maps the international infrastructure scaling Orbán's counter-hegemonic project. The roots of this counterhegemonic project go back to the exhaustion of liberal globalism, which created fertile ground for far-right challengers. Instead of progressive correction, the far right seized the initiative, treating the crisis of globalization as an opening for a long-term counter-hegemonic project. Viktor Orbán's Hungary emerged as a frontrunner of it. Orbánism is not routine governance or a mere electoral platform but an integrated strategy to reshape the state, civil society, and culture, building an alternative order that can endure and reproduce itself over time. A small country cannot sustain such disruptive politics in isolation; therefore, Orbán's strategy extended beyond Hungary's borders to embed his national transformation within a broader far-right bloc.

Within the European Union, Orbán wages counter-hegemony from inside the liberal order's own institutional architecture, converting EU funds, veto rights, and single-market access into resources for building a pan-European far-right bloc. But Orbán's priority has been the United States. The study traces transatlantic linkages from their origins in the 1990s to the consolidation of an organized influence ecosystem. At its core are foundations channeling substantial Hungarian public funds into scholarships, fellowships, and media platforms that embed Orbán's politics within US conservative circles, complemented by lobbying contracts, orchestrated media collaborations, and institutional partnerships. This dual position simultaneously drains liberal institutions from within and links illiberal templates across the Atlantic, making Orbán's counter-hegemonic project uniquely dangerous and instructive.

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