

Why Viktor Orbán Could Survive His Embarrassing Ties to Moscow

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Sunday's Hungarian election will decide if far-right premier Viktor Orbán can continue his already decade-long rule. A united opposition damns Orbán for his lawbreaking and ties to Vladimir Putin — yet has struggled to articulate an alternative of its own.

Viktor Orbán has long enjoyed warm relations with Vladimir Putin. Since the Hungarian far-right leader returned to the prime minister's office in 2010, he has met the Russian president some eleven times — the most recent a February 1 summit to negotiate energy imports, just weeks before the Kremlin-ordered invasion of Ukraine.

Orbán has often insisted that his ties to Moscow are just a matter of pragmatism. In a [2015 interview](#), he told *Politico*: “What I represent is not my opinion but the interests of the Hungarian nation. [...] So, we have to have a good balanced relationship with the Russians. [...] Putin is someone you can cooperate with.”

Such claims have been shaken in recent weeks by Russia's brutal assault against Ukraine, which directly borders Hungary. Not only has the invasion destroyed the lives of millions, but some four hundred thousand people have fled to Hungary itself. Orbán has mounted something of a change of tone — insisting he stands “[neither for Russia or Ukraine](#),” only for Hungary. Yet even this neutrality clearly sets him apart from the European Union's otherwise united front behind Kiev.

With a general election slated for this Sunday, April 3, Orbán's complicated relationship with Putin has unexpectedly taken center stage. Yet, the effects within Hungary are not immediately obvious: opposition leaders insist, and hope, that Orbán's ties with a disgraced Putin could jeopardize his chances, but there are also signs that the febrile geopolitical climate may not favor a change of government. Current polls indicate a narrow lead for the incumbent and his Fidesz party, while other surveys suggest that most Hungarians want “economic stability” and oppose sending arms to Ukraine.

Orbán's main challenger for the prime minister's job is Christian-conservative Péter Márki-Zay, at the head of United for Hungary, a coalition of six opposition parties. He shames Orbán's ties to Putin and explicitly seeks a closer alignment with Hungary's EU and NATO allies. His alliance brings together a variety of forces on the basis of opposition to Orbán: but, even should Márki-Zay win the election, his blandly neoliberal vision is unlikely to break with the orthodoxies of recent Hungarian governments.

Failed Transitions

While each country's transition to free-market capitalism was historically unique, the respective rise of Orbán and of Putin over the 1990s does bear real parallels.

Over thirty years ago, turbulent revolutions across Eastern Europe brought the end of the Cold War

and of Soviet-style state socialism. In each of the former Eastern Bloc states, “shock therapy” was implemented to boost transition to Western-style capitalism and encourage the rapid privatization of the socialist production system.

From Russia to Ukraine and Romania, the transition was inevitably abused by political elites, who seized former state-owned enterprises and became what the West calls “oligarchs.” This produced massive inequalities, underdeveloped economies, [ultranationalist movements](#), and vast resources concentrated in the hands of a narrow capitalist elite.

Putin is a clear product of this process — indeed, one who rose to power with the blessing of Western leaders. While the EU has recently imposed economic sanctions on Russia, for decades it was convenient to do business with Putin, to use the financial infrastructure to launder Russian dark money and help create the oligarchy that is today being sanctioned.

In Hungary, we can see a similar pattern on a much smaller scale: Orbán’s power is secured by Western enterprises and capitalist interests, which invest in the country because of its exploitation-enabling legislation, union-busting, cheap labor, and massive government subsidies. Illustrative is Orbán’s so-called “[slave law](#)” allowing companies to demand that workers do up to four hundred hours overtime a year — just one of his policies intended to keep the German auto industry happy.

Neoliberalism is not entirely a post-1989 political development in Hungary: this ideology [already influenced an elite class](#) of economists, students, and intelligentsia way before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Following the transition, they have become ministers, bankers, and executives, and later gained significant political power in Orbán’s regime. Fueled by his own political agenda, Orbán himself was a big winner of the Soviet collapse. The young Orbán gave a now iconic speech in 1989 demanding the withdrawal of Soviet troops, aiding his initial rise to prominence. Still today, an ardent anti-communism shapes his agenda, from [crude historical revisionism](#) to criminalizing the use of “symbols of totalitarian regimes” — that is, the removal of [communist-era statues](#).

Allies of Circumstance

Faced with the invasion of Ukraine, Orbán’s main rival, Márki-Zay, has accused the prime minister of being “Putin’s puppet.” Yet the real relationship is less one-sided — and requires a deeper understanding of Orbán’s ethno-authoritarian neoliberalism.

Following Orbán’s reelection in 2010, he chose a new economic strategy. His “Eastern opening” promised a turn toward non-Western markets and doing business with countries including Russia, China, and Turkey. Orbán fosters a friendly relationship not just with Putin, but with Xi Jinping and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Yet, despite the pro-Eastern rhetoric, Hungary’s economy still relies overwhelmingly on European partners, while its energy supply is strongly dependent on Russia. Over 50 percent of its gas and oil comes from Russia. Furthermore, in 2014, the Hungarian government awarded a multibillion-dollar project to Russian firm Rosatom to renovate Hungary’s nuclear power plant (Paks) — sparking anger in Brussels.

To understand Orbán’s positive attitude toward Moscow, it is crucial to understand the discrepancies in his regressive fiscal and social policies. One of his most prominent policies is the so-called “[rezsicsökkentés](#)” — a government-imposed price cut on utilities, that keeps living costs at bay and heavily relies on cheap Russian gas. Orbán claims that by this measure, he is protecting the Hungarian people from EU austerity, even as his own government is shrinking the welfare state.

Orbán’s right-wing [American cheerleaders](#) such as Tucker Carlson praise his system as “pro-worker

conservatism.” This couldn’t be further from reality. According to [recently published research](#), lower-income Hungarians pay 6 to 8 percent more taxes than their higher-income peers. As a result, income inequality is skyrocketing in Hungary with extremely limited social mobility. The ruling party also implemented an inequitable flat income tax and massive tax breaks for global corporations. Evidently, Orbán’s fiscal policies benefit the wealthy and favor oligarchs — both East and West.

Orbán and his propaganda machine surely have presented Putin’s Russia in a positive light, suggesting that the warm relations are not solely about economic interests. Similarly to Putin, Orbán has launched attacks against human rights groups and civil-society organizations stigmatized as “foreign agents,” and also forced the Soros-funded Central European University out of the country.

Both Putin and Orbán claim to stand for traditional Christian values, while rejecting “gender insanity,” “Westernization,” “multiculturalism,” and “hegemonic liberalism.” Orbán’s government suppressed academic freedom and gender studies, banned transgender people from receiving legal recognition, and last year adopted an anti-LGBT law driving a Russian-style censorship of LGBT content in classrooms and public life. A referendum taking place alongside the April 3 election includes four questions about suppressing “LGBTQ and gender propaganda” in schools.

Yet for all the similarities, Orbán and his brand of Hungarian postfascism are not a product of Russia or Putin, as if dropped in from the outside. While the centrist-liberal opposition prefers to pin Hungary’s devastating far-right problem onto the “Eastern menace” (Russia, China) with an orientalist and xenophobic thrust of its own, this is a misinterpretation of rising global fascism. Hungary’s alarming far-right problem should be perceived through the lens of other similar developments in the USA, Brazil, Poland, Germany, Spain, and elsewhere.

We should, moreover, be cool about the prospects that opposition victory will bring substantial change. The main challenger, Márki-Zay, has praised Orbán’s repressive labor laws and taxation policies, and heads an alliance of six parties dominated by neoliberal and technocratic approaches. The main forces, made up of urban liberal and center-right parties, have, moreover, joined forces with the far-right Jobbik — a party with a troubling legacy of antisemitism, anti-Roma bigotry, and homophobia, today desperately trying to rehabilitate its image to appeal to the liberal camp.

Relying on outwardly apolitical anti-corruption messaging — a standard form of political rhetoric in Eastern Europe — the combined opposition thus has little new to offer to working-class and rural voters. “Orbán and Putin or the West and Europe — these are the stakes” Márki-Zay has told voters, showing the lack of substance behind the opposition’s agenda, despite the tone of civilizational clash.

“Strategic Calm”

Certainly, this geopolitical contrast has been dramatized by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and Orbán’s unwillingness to take sides.

On March 15, Hungary celebrated the anniversary of the 1848–49 revolution and the country’s historic struggle for national sovereignty. Thousands of Orbán loyalists and Fidesz party members marched through Budapest with banners saying “no war.” The displays of “no war” messages at a far-right rally were grotesque enough, especially considering that for years the government has stigmatized victims of military aggression elsewhere. At the same time, Orbán delivered a public address on the situation in Ukraine, televised to millions in Hungary.

Unlike other leaders in Europe, Orbán has announced total neutrality, a new approach he calls “strategic calm”: neither Washington nor Moscow, as he emphasized the importance of keeping the

peace for the sake of Hungary's security. While his rhetoric is posed as "pragmatic," it is also deeply hypocritical: just days before, Orbán had decided to cooperate with NATO and the EU, voting for sanctions against Russia and more military aid for Ukraine — though Hungary declined to send military aid of its own. The Russian government has put Hungary on its list of "unfriendly countries," while Volodymyr Zelensky has also singled it out for criticism.

Here, we see a major contradiction in Orbán's actions and official communications: while he seems to collaborate with the West, he also fails to unequivocally condemn Putin as the aggressor. His neutrality sparked fury in Central Europe which could jeopardize the future of the Visegrád Group political alliance, and might forever change the dynamics between once-great allies Hungary and Poland.

On March 21, Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijjártó rightfully condemned the calls for a no-fly zone over Ukraine, because it would risk World War III. Yet even if this stance is itself reasonable, Orbán's antiwar rhetoric does not come from a love for peace, but from an indecisive loyalty to Putin. For twelve years, his propaganda apparatus and pro-Fidesz influencers presented the post-Soviet Russian system as a desirable path to Hungarians — making it difficult to change the narrative just weeks before the election. Furthermore, Hungarian nationalists are reluctant to support the Ukrainian resistance, given Ukraine's history of repressing Hungarian minorities in its far-western Kárpátalja region.

Yet, the war in Ukraine has also put the combined Hungarian opposition in a difficult position. It unanimously supports Ukraine and condemns Putin's aggression, though also faces smears from Fidesz, accusing it of warmongering and seeking a broader, potentially nuclear war. In reality, the opposition does not have a clear strategy for handling the conflict, apart from its unconditional support for NATO: these are forces that never condemned wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, or Palestine, and avoid any criticism of NATO expansion or militarism in general.

It is also unclear whether the opposition would actually support a ban of Russian energy imports. Some liberal influencers claimed on social media that "we are willing to pay more for utilities in support of Ukraine," but such a move risks catastrophe for millions of working-class Hungarians already crippled by energy poverty and rising inflation rates.

Refugee Crises

Orbán's government has long vaunted its intent to keep out refugees — installing a huge barbed-wire fence at the Hungarian-Serbian border in 2015, visited and praised by Tucker Carlson last year. The fence has become a symbol of rising Hungarian fascism and the government's inhumane treatment of non-European refugees. Faced with the people fleeing wars in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, Hungary closed its border, criminalized aid and entry, and repeatedly violated international law protecting asylum seekers' rights.

Apart from a few NGOs and people with leftist sympathies, Hungary not only failed to help refugees along their journey toward Western safe havens, but also made their transfer unbearably dehumanizing. For years, Orbán has abused the images of the refugee crisis for shameless fearmongering and racist and antisemitic domestic propaganda. Orbán often claimed that "Soros-backed Muslim invaders" would destroy Hungary's great Christian nation and that only he could protect it.

Nonetheless, since the February 24 invasion, Hungary has accepted hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians fleeing the Russian bombs. Unlike in 2015, this time around the Hungarian government and population alike welcome refugees with open arms. This is the right thing to do — but also

shows an obvious discrepancy. Orbán told reporters that “we can tell the difference between a migrant and a refugee” — meaning, only white Europeans are worthy of solidarity and empathy.

Such a stance is not unique to Hungary, and coverage of the war in Ukraine has clearly exposed Western hypocrisy. The same EU leaders who turned away refugees in 2015, who still spend billions on border military technology to deter refugees and protect “Fortress Europe” have now proven that it is more than possible to welcome refugees with dignity and hospitality. In Hungary, Ukrainians crossing the borders are greeted with comfort food, free transportation, translation services, and medical assistance, where Muslims fleeing the same risks in recent years have been “welcomed” with beatings and resentment.

This itself provides some perspective on this election. Despite the left-wing criticism, the combined opposition announced that they would not remove the border fence, and measures undoing Orbán’s shameful racist legacy are nowhere to be found in their electoral programs. The 2015 refugee crisis changed the dynamics of Hungarian politics in a lasting way, and opposition parties turned their backs on immigrants and refugees in the hope of gaining conservative votes.

While positive change in Hungary is nowhere in sight, the goal in this election is surely to bring down Orbán’s cruel authoritarian establishment. With an opposition like this, clearly the election offers no hope of the Hungarian left gaining more political power for now. Greater hope lies in the prospect that defeating Orbán could make the political playing field less hostile toward an alternative agenda in the future.

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