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## As Viktor Orban goes, so goes MAGA?

*di Jim Geraghty*

The Trump administration is extremely invested in the outcome of the April 12 Hungarian election. Vice President JD Vance [travels to Budapest](#) this week for a series of events with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. In February, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [made the same trip](#), touting the “[golden age](#)” of U.S.-Hungarian relations. Late last month, President Donald Trump [gushed on Truth Social](#) that Orban is “a truly strong and powerful Leader, with a proven track record of delivering phenomenal results.”

If, two decades ago, you had predicted that the prime minister of the [54th-largest economy](#) in the world (two spots behind Angola) [would speak](#) at [Conservative Political Action Conference](#) gatherings at least six times — [five times hosting it](#) in his home capital! — and his reelection would be a high priority for a Republican president, people would have checked you for a concussion.

And yet a handful of American conservatives hold Orban in wildly overinflated esteem. Steve King, a former Iowa Republican congressman who was never a contender for the sharpest knife in the drawer, [once contended](#), “History will record PM Orban the Winston Churchill of Western Civilization.” (My former National Review colleague [Jay Nordlinger observed](#) that the Winston Churchill of Western Civilization really ought to be ... you know, *Churchill*.)

You rarely see Republican congressmen’s hearts aflutter over the prime ministers of Bulgaria, Croatia or Slovakia. No, Orban stood out because [five years before](#) Trump descended the escalator at Trump Tower and declared his presidential bid, Orban [loathed immigrants](#) and wanted [traditional values](#) and greater state control of the economy. When it comes to the nationalist-populist-nativist trend dominating global politics this century, Orban was ahead of the curve.

Polling suggests Orban is also ahead of the curve in terms of wearing out his welcome. His Fidesz party is [about 10 percentage points behind](#) the pro-European Tisza party led by Peter Magyar. A ex-Fidesz member, Magyar surged to prominence in 2024 by denouncing his [former party's corruption](#). I know this will be hard for Americans to imagine, but sometimes nationalist populists who want ever-greater power for themselves don't always have the public's interest in mind and are inclined to cover up embarrassing scandals of political allies.

The April 12 results are not guaranteed to mirror the latest polls, however. A 2021 law pushed through by Fidesz allowed Hungarians to vote wherever they had a registered address, not just where they lived, creating a form of "[voter tourism](#)." The Fidesz party's [extensive access to voter data](#), not shared with opposition parties, gives it a major advantage in allocating votes where it needs them most. In 2022, "phantom residents" who allegedly lived across the border in Ukraine crossed over and [cast ballots for Fidesz candidates](#), according to a Hungarian watchdog group. "In one village," it reported, "there are 37 people living in one house according to the official registry."

But corruption allegations aside, Orban simply hasn't delivered the prosperity he promised. Ilona Gizińska, a research fellow at the Warsaw-based Center for Eastern Studies, [writes that](#) "after 16 years of Orbán's rule, the Hungarian economy has entered a state of 'stable stagnation.'" She notes that "this model has from the outset been based on the selective redistribution of benefits, the privileging of economic elites loyal to the authorities, and the perpetuation of dependence on foreign capital and exports. In subsequent years, problems intensified."

Go figure, the "oligarchisation of the economy" that Gizińska describes isn't a formula for sustained economic growth or widespread public satisfaction.

Orban has spent this year fearmongering that [if his party is not reelected](#), Hungarian men will be sent to fight against Russia in neighboring Ukraine. That's nonsense; Marton Gellert of the German Marshall Fund [writes that Magyar](#) "has consistently condemned Russia's invasion and emphasized Ukraine's right to defend its sovereignty, but he has also maintained that Hungary should avoid direct involvement in the war."

Quick refresher: Ukraine is *not* a NATO ally but is [offering the United States](#) and U.S. allies help in fighting Iranian drones; Hungary [is a NATO ally](#), but Orbán and his government have [congratulated Vladimir Putin](#) on his fraudulent election “victory,” signed a trade agreement [with the Iranian mullahs](#) and have talked about a [long-term security guarantee with China](#). For a guy who’s supposed to be “the Winston Churchill of Western Civilization,” Orbán sure plays a lot of footsie with Western civilization’s geopolitical foes.

After 16 years of minimally challenged power, Orbán has remade the Hungarian state and economy in his image. Though Hungarians are not entirely united against him, if the latest polls are right, about 6 in 10 are dissatisfied and ready for a change. Nationalist-populist-nativist strongmen like to boast they speak on behalf of the people. Eventually, enough people look around at the results these rulers have produced and conclude, “Nah, that’s enough.”