

JD Vance Stars in Our Man in Budapest

Editoriale

Vice President [JD Vance](#) made his way to Budapest on Tuesday to meddle in Hungary's national election on Sunday, and what a spectacle: America's second-in-command campaigning on behalf of a Prime Minister who may lose, in a small central European country, while America is prosecuting a war in Iran.

Mr. Vance must believe re-electing Viktor Orbán is a high priority, and it's worth wondering why as the Vice President prepares his own run to succeed President Trump in 2028. The Orbán affinity seems to be a combination of Mr. Vance's ideological conviction and domestic coalition maintenance. Both are instructive about his values.

Mr. Vance's junket is of a piece with the growing conviction of some American conservatives that Europe is ripe for a culturally conservative revolution, and that Americans can hasten it along. This belief led Mr. Vance last year to travel to Germany and support the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in that country's election. (That didn't work as planned, as the traditional center-right party led by Friedrich Merz won a plurality, and the AfD recently called for banishing U.S. troops from Germany amid the Iran war.)

Hungary and its Prime Minister for the last 16 years loom especially large in this conservative imagination. Mr. Orbán first won kudos for resisting the illegal migration from the Middle East that swept across Europe starting in 2015. Hungary's refusal to admit such migrants when Germany's Angela Merkel welcomed them has been vindicated by the subsequent fiscal, political and security problems that have developed in Europe.

American conservatives also like Mr. Orbán's feuds with a European Union bureaucracy that nearly everyone (including many Europeans) views as out of touch. Brussels frequently threatens to withhold grants when Mr. Orbán drags his heels on

various EU mandates, often concerning the judiciary and anticorruption measures. Mr. Vance trotted out the word “sovereignty” repeatedly during Tuesday’s appearance in Budapest to inveigh against putative EU meddling in Hungarian affairs.

Mr. Vance is convinced Mr. Orbán is on the front line of the West’s culture wars. The Hungarian leader presents himself as a bastion of Christian nationalism in Europe, including passing a law in 2021 banning the portrayal of homosexuality to minors. Mr. Vance’s campaign-rally speech included a paean to Hungary’s Christian heritage.

By showing up in Budapest, and doing a rally and presser with Mr. Orbán, Mr. Vance is pursuing his strategy of solidifying support on the MAGA right. Tucker Carlson is especially fond of Mr. Orbán, and Mr. Vance wants no degree of separation from the podcaster and his various acolytes. Think of the Hungarian visit as part of the MAGA podcast primary.

The biggest howler here is the sovereignty claim. Mr. Orbán has never proposed leaving the EU as Britain voted to do in 2016. Hungarians almost certainly would oppose such a move because they prefer being part of the bloc, and they enjoy significant economic benefits from trade and investment with their neighbors. Mr. Orbán knows Budapest needs EU aid money, and sovereignty for him is mostly a pose. Mr. Vance’s Hungarian romance wouldn’t matter all that much if it weren’t damaging to U.S. interests. The Veep hailed Mr. Orbán as a “statesman” for his alleged role in negotiations to end the Ukraine war, though the Prime Minister is Vladimir Putin’s best European friend west of Belarus. The Russian is also trying to help Mr. Orbán, for example, by blaming Ukraine Monday for the bomb allegedly discovered on a Russian gas pipeline to Hungary.

Mr. Vance likes to say Europe should play the leading role in supporting Ukraine, since Ukraine doesn’t matter to the U.S.—yet Mr. Orbán is obstructing a European financial plan to do exactly that. The Hungarian is also trying to deepen commercial ties with China.

Mr. Vance’s support for Mr. Orbán is so strong that he is wrapping his arms around him even as Mr. Orbán may lose Sunday’s election amid frustration with the poor state of Hungary’s economy. The alternative, far from a woke bogeyman, is a conventional

center-right politician, Péter Magyar. He'd also be a U.S. ally if Mr. Vance doesn't alienate him.

American conservatives have plenty of reasons to distrust Europe. But Mr. Vance isn't winning many friends for America by treating Hungary's election like it's the Iowa caucuses.