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## **Orban's defeat shows the Achilles' heel of populist power**

*di Max Boot*

What's the biggest danger [facing Europe](#)? I would argue it's not Russia, China, Iran or even the United States. It's the threat of homegrown illiberalism — of right-wing populists who will mismanage economies, undermine democracy, victimize minorities, corrupt the government and cozy up to dictators such as Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping.

The threat appeared to be reaching critical mass last year with the ascension in the U.S. of President Donald Trump, who has pledged to [use American power](#) to help his far-right compatriots. In August, polls showed far-right parties [in the lead](#) for the first time in Europe's three powerhouses: Britain, France and Germany. The threat is far from over, but there is some heartening evidence from the past month suggesting that the fever may be breaking.

In Italy, the right-wing populist prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, [suffered a defeat](#) on March 23 when voters rejected a proposed constitutional reform that could have given the executive more power over the judiciary. In France last month, the far-right National Rally party did not do as well as expected [in municipal elections](#), winning in Nice but losing in Marseille, Lyon and Paris. In the latter city, the right-wing candidate collected just [1.6 percent](#) of the vote. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) surged to its strongest results in state voting in the western part of the country but still [lost decisively](#) in two major contests.

And now, in the most significant result of all, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, after 16 years in power, lost his reelection bid [in a landslide](#) on Sunday to center-right challenger Peter Magyar. This is a blow that really hits hard for MAGA types on both sides of the Atlantic.

A long line of illiberal leaders [endorsed Orban](#) — not only the usual European suspects such as France’s Marine Le Pen and Germany’s Alice Weidel, but also Trump, Putin, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Argentine President Javier Milei. Vice President JD Vance went to Hungary [last week](#) to campaign for Orban, while Trump offered Hungary [financial support](#) if Orban prevailed.

It’s little wonder that these right-wingers felt so invested in the leader of this small Central European nation with [a population](#) smaller than North Carolina’s. Orban became to the far-right what Fidel Castro had once been to the far-left: a beau ideal. Orban pioneered the attacks on immigrants and globalist elites — especially George Soros — that have become standard populist fare around the world. He launched [his own version](#) of the Conservative Political Action Conference, and attracted gullible fellow travelers such as [Tucker Carlson](#) to Hungary to extol Orban’s supposed successes. He even put a lot of Western conservatives [on his payroll](#) via a handful of academic institutes.

Orban was “[Trump before Trump](#),” Trump’s former adviser Steve Bannon once said. Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation, [gushed in 2022](#) that “modern Hungary is not just a model for conservative statecraft, but *the* model. Americans, Brits, Spaniards, Australians — everyone — can and should learn from it.”

Trump, for one, has been trying to apply [the Orban model](#) in the U.S., emulating his idol’s attempts to stamp out media criticism, bring universities under his control, deport immigrants, undermine the judiciary, gerrymander elections and provide lucrative business deals to his friends.

So what does it say that Orban has been so decisively repudiated by his own electorate — and that other right-wing populists in Europe are seeing [their popularity sag](#)?

For one thing, it shows that Trump’s support may be the kiss of death at a time when the U.S. president is recording record-low approval ratings: In a recent [YouGov poll](#), just 14 percent of people in Britain and France had a favorable view of Trump. In Germany, it was 10 percent, and in Denmark, 3 percent. In Hungary, a poll by [the Publicus Institute](#) found that 59 percent of respondents believe that Trump is

contributing more to global conflict than to peace. That's what Trump gets for his nonstop abuse of European allies, his threats to annex Greenland and his reckless war with Iran.

But of course, the adage that all politics is local applies in Hungary. Orban's downfall owed more to his mismanagement of the country than to Trump's unpopularity. As the [Financial Times notes](#), Orbanoconomics has turned Hungary into one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the European Union. Under Orban, prices have risen 57 percent since 2020 — nearly double the E.U. inflation rate overall. As Jimmy Carter and Joe Biden can attest, inflation is political kryptonite.

Orban's flagrant corruption, with billions of euros in public contracts funneled [to his cronies](#) and to [his home village](#), may have been tolerable to voters when the economy was growing, but not when it was stagnating. Magyar was the perfect candidate to take advantage of voter discontent: A telegenic former Orban supporter, he eschewed cultural issues such as LGBTQ or immigrant rights to focus on corruption and economic mismanagement.

There's a lesson here for the U.S., where Trump presides over [flagrant corruption](#) while [inflation is rising](#) and [economic growth slowing](#).

While the differences between Hungary and America are vast, both show the Achilles' heel of populists in power. It's almost impossible for them to be successful because they shun experts, undermine the independent bureaucracy (including central banks), channel economic benefits to friendly executives in return for their support, and act in unpredictable and mercurial fashion.

Facing electoral repudiation, populists resort to changing the political rules and repressing dissent to hang on to power. That was a successful strategy for Orban until the amount of voter dissatisfaction became too great to repress using the methods of soft authoritarianism. Trump is likely to suffer similar repudiation if U.S. elections — beginning with the midterms — remain free and fair.