

# Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Hungarian Government: How Viktor Orbán Capitalized on the Invasion



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**T**he Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a wake-up call for Europe. EU member states united in taking up a strong stance against Vladimir Putin's aggression. Everyone seemed to hold the same front – everyone except for one country: Hungary. While other European states redoubled in a *tour de force* of liberal values, the Hungarian government sunk even deeper into illiberalism and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán further consolidated his power, despite a dismal economic performance and international ostracism.

In order to better understand how this could have happened when all of the favorite analysts of the Hungarian government (going against the warning of the international community) were predicting that there will be no invasion, one needs to look at the situation in Hungary and examine its foreign and domestic policies with regards to the war in Ukraine. This will also help explain how Viktor Orbán is still popular, despite Hungary having the highest inflation in the European Union (EU), and how he managed to win the election with a supermajority again by utilizing the war in the neighborhood. It is important to do so, as the Hungarian model of illiberalism – which enables authoritarian figures such as Viktor Orbán to rule strongly in the face of economic crisis and become an international pariah – is not unique.

### **THE CASE OF HUNGARY CAN HAVE GLOBAL EFFECTS ON REDEFINING POLITICS**

Populism has been gaining ground in Europe. Although other countries are not echoing Vladimir Putin's propaganda on the war, such a U-turn would not be unexpected if it would gain more votes, stemming from the nature of such politics. Outside of the EU, a prime example of a lukewarm

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WHILE OTHER EUROPEAN STATES REDOUBLED IN A *TOUR DE FORCE* OF LIBERAL VALUES, THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT SUNK EVEN DEEPER INTO ILLIBERALISM

approach towards the war is embodied by former U.S. President Donald Trump, who desperately seeks reelection on an extremist populist ticket.

Hungary is a country that experienced Russian aggression several times in the past<sup>1</sup>. Viktor Orbán is a popular figure because of his apparent stance against the Soviet Union, yet now he goes against the Western nations, often condemning them, and plays a dangerous game in maintaining risky alliances with Russia and its satellites.

It is, therefore, crucial to understand the reasons behind these tendencies and the benefits to the Hungarian regime, because only then can one start working on preventing the spread of similar politics.

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Hungarian revolution of 1848 against the Habsburgs had been defeated with Russian help, and the revolution of 1956 against the communist regime had been crushed with Soviet tanks.

Illiberalism has no place among European values. However, if liberals fail, illiberals might redefine the meaning of these values. Numerous freedoms – such as freedom of speech, assembly, movement, and press – as well as such values as tolerance, free markets, democracy, and peace, are at risk.

Valdimir Putin has shown his true colors. He is waging a war he cannot win, and which does not benefit him in any real way – apart from the propaganda value. In order to sustain his power, he needs to repress the people of Russia – a process which destroys whatever freedoms Russian citizens could still grab onto.

By not standing firmly against such mayhem, destruction, and aggression, Hungary is getting closer to Putin – not only diplomatically, but also in its policies. If a country, which had reasons to be weary of a Russian aggression, now supports a government which is warming towards Putin (a feat achieved through disinformation, propaganda, and authoritarian measures) can go through such a turn, any country can. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how it has all unfolded and heed the warning signs. It is of utmost importance for Europeans to ensure it never happens anywhere else, and to figure out how can Hungary find its way back to European values.

### **HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF HUNGARIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: FROM AN UNBEARABLE RUSSIAN BEAR TO A GIANT TEDDY BEAR THAT PROTECTS THE HUNGARIAN DREAM**

Hungary and Russia, by whatever name, have a long and battered history, which resulted in the Russians being present in the Hungarian psyche as monsters from



## ILLIBERALISM HAS NO PLACE AMONG EUROPEAN VALUES

folktales to scare children with<sup>2</sup>. In order to understand the history better and to explain how the boogeyman-esque Russian scare turned into a reluctant acceptance of a working relationship, let us take a stroll through the capital of Hungary: Budapest.

Liberty square is a central area in the city. The building of the Central Bank, the U.S. Embassy, and the former building of the Budapest Stock Exchange (which turned into the headquarters of Hungarian Television for a while) are all scattered around here. The name of the square derives from the Revolution of 1848, when Hungary fought for freedom from the Habsburgs. The most prominent feature of the square, however, is a large obelisk with a golden star at its peak wedged between the statue of Ronald Reagan and the U.S. Embassy.

Yet, not all that glitters is gold, and the star on top is a gilded red star of the Soviets, capping the memorial of the fallen Soviet troops who died for ‘liberating’ the city during its Nazi occupation of the WWII. The liberators quickly became the oppressors, as they forgot to leave the country, thus sustaining a puppet regime to enforce communism on the people.

<sup>2</sup> Soviet troops raped more women in Hungary than elsewhere (2,028 cases were reported). See: Index.hu (2018) *A szovjet katonák Magyarországon több nőt erőszakoltak meg mint máshol*. Available [online]: [https://index.hu/techtud/2018/08/03/peto\\_andrea\\_szovjet\\_katonak\\_ii\\_vilaghaboru\\_nemi\\_eroszak/](https://index.hu/techtud/2018/08/03/peto_andrea_szovjet_katonak_ii_vilaghaboru_nemi_eroszak/) [in Hungarian]

This was not the first time Russian boots trampled Hungarian freedom. When Hungary rose up against the Austrian overlords in demand of more liberties, the Habsburgs asked for help from Russia, which they got. In order to signal that the surrender was not to the Habsburg but to the invasionary force of the Tsar's army, it was in front of the latter that the Hungarian army laid their arms down. Thus, the failure of the military conflict is blamed on Russian help. Now, the memorial for the fallen Soviet troops who 'liberated' Hungary from the Nazis is located in a square, the name of which is a callback to the revolution of 1848 surpassed with Russian help.

However, the most telling sign of the relationship between the two countries lies not in the liberation monument, or in the square it is erected at. It is derived from the walls around the city still bearing the bullet holes fired from the guns of Russian soldiers. There are holes from the 'liberation' of the city, and those from the suppression of the revolution of 1956. Even though the Russians finally left in the early 1990s, the holes are still left behind. They are empty sockets now, as the sentiments turned, the history is forgotten. By now, the Russians, when they behave more devilishly than ever, are demonized no more.

In 1989, when the ever-growing chinks in the armor of communism finally showed, Hungary, along with its neighbors, stood on the verge of democratic changes. At an event symbolic of this transformation – the reburial of a former prime minister, Imre Nagy<sup>3</sup>, who had been executed by the Soviets after a kangaroo court trial for supporting the uprising of 1956 and wanting to Soviets to leave Hungary (albeit he was

also of communist convictions) – current prime minister, Viktor Orbán (back then only a budding politician) stood in front of the crowd and delivered a youthful speech, calling on the Russians to leave Hungary<sup>4</sup>.

And the troops did leave. Although not as a direct consequence. Truth be told, Orbán could deliver his speech unpunished because the political and international environment with the Soviet Union crumbling, favored him. At the time, it seemed daring – yet, in retrospect, not so much anymore. It was, nevertheless, a welcome change in the torpid and repressive communist era. Orbán and his then liberal ideas were celebrated, and he was hailed as a freedom fighter. However, his commitment to liberty was too radical for most, so it took years before he first gained office as the leader of the country.

In 1991, the Hungarian people welcomed democratic changes with open arms. Market and social liberalization, liberal values, the rule of law, and political pluralism were lauded. According to a Pew Research Center poll<sup>5</sup> conducted that year, 74% of Hungarians approved a multiparty system. For comparison, in the region which shifted to democracy at the time, it was East Germans who welcomed democratic changes in the highest numbers, with 91%, and Russians were the least keen on the transformation (with 61% being in favor of the changes).

The approval of the market economy in 1991 was also high, with 80% of Hungarians being positive about it. The highest support of capitalism was in the Czech Republic (with 87%), whereas the lowest was

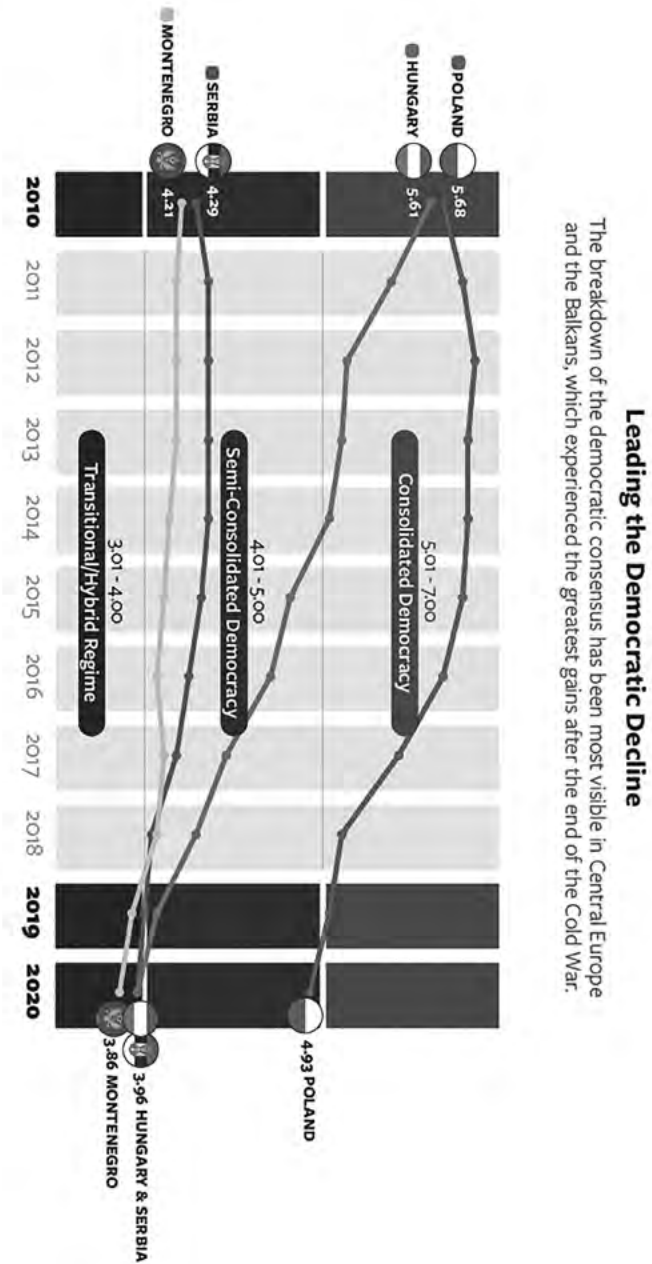
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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/16/hungarians-remember-imre-nagy-hero-of-56-as-orban-tightens-grip>

<sup>4</sup> <https://4liberty.eu/review-11-orbanization-of-the-magyar-state-hungary-in-the-past-30-years/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2009/11/02/end-of-communism-cheered-but-now-with-more-reservations/>

Figure 1: Comparison of democratic decline of Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Montenegro from 2010 to 2020, according to the Nations in Transit 2020 report of Freedom House



Source: Freedom House<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

observed in Ukraine (with 52%). Both these numbers show that people in the region had relatively high hopes for democracy and free markets.

The same poll was conducted in 2009, around the time of the financial crisis, and later in 2019. In 2009, there was a fall in support of both democracy and free markets in Hungary – 56% approved of the former and 46% the latter [See: Figure 1]. Although this backslide was present generally in the region, the dissatisfaction with capitalism was most prominent in Hungary. The 2019 poll revealed, however, that the number of people satisfied with the way democracy is working in their country, including Hungary, was increasing<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, though, by 2020, Hungary had been downgraded to being a hybrid regime, no longer a democracy<sup>8</sup>, something that has not changed since<sup>9</sup> [See: Figure 1].

At any rate, the great expectations of the early 1990s were not met, and it laid the bed for authoritarianism in Hungary. After his election in 2010, Prime Minister Orbán started to dismantle democratic institutions slowly but gradually, and until in 2014 he showed his true colors. The man who gained prominence by calling for the Soviets to leave, who in his speeches supported Western values, democracy, and free markets, went on to declare he is building an illiberal state modeled upon Russia, among others<sup>10</sup>. Orbán's speech came shortly after

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/political-and-economic-changes-since-the-fall-of-communism/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade>

<sup>9</sup> Freedom House (2023) *Nations in Transit*. Available [online]: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/nations-transit/2023>

<sup>10</sup> <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>



BY NOT STANDING FIRMLY AGAINST SUCH MAYHEM, DESTRUCTION, AND AGGRESSION, HUNGARY IS GETTING CLOSER TO PUTIN – NOT ONLY DIPLOMATICALLY, BUT ALSO IN ITS POLICIES

Russia annexed Crimea and started the war in Ukraine's Donbas region.

When the West condemned Russia (though not effectively enough to stop Putin from taking more drastic steps in February 2022), PM Orbán cited Russia as an example to follow. And follow he did. A rather telling gesture is that PM Orbán was the first EU leader to host Putin on a visit to Hungary (in 2015) since the annexation of Crimea<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> BBC (2015) *Hungarians Protest as Putin Meets Orban*. Available [online]: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31499654>

### THE RUSSIAN PLAYBOOK: HOW THE ILLIBERAL HUNGARIAN STATE WAS MODELED UPON RUSSIA

Hungary did its utmost to build its illiberal system. The role model of Russia sure helped, as there was no need to reinvent the wheel, and the Fidesz government could simply just transplant it onto a different setting. Hungary balanced its allegiances carefully so as to still be part of the EU while doing so.

The reason behind copying the *Russian modus operandi* was quite simple. Vladimir Putin is a master of shaping his environment and a whole country to serve one specific purpose: for him to retain power. This is what Viktor Orbán admires about him<sup>12</sup>. The Hungarian prime minister also wants to retain power, so he does not shy away from doing U-turns all the time – and so he shifted from being a liberal freedom fighter to an illiberal useful idiot of Putin<sup>13</sup>. At some point, a number of policies and their propagandistic explanations were introduced to mirror the Russian example.

### BIRDS OF A FEATHER: HOW ORBÁN COPIES PUTIN

The term ‘foreign agent’ conjures up something sinister. People in tuxedos drinking vodka martinis during suave conversations and working against the regime. Or simply malicious people working against social order. The undesirable figures, who were often the critics of the regime, were branded as ‘enemies of the people’ in communist countries<sup>14</sup> – interestingly, similar sentiments were used also

<sup>12</sup> <https://4liberty.eu/is-hungary-becoming-the-second-russia/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.economist.com/europe/2023/07/03/vladimir-putins-useful-idiots>

<sup>14</sup> Courtois, S. and M. Kramer (1999) *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.



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during the red scare of McCarthyism in the United States<sup>15</sup>.

Foreign agent laws were introduced in Russia in 2012, requiring foreign-funded organizations to register as such to be branded as foreign agents<sup>16</sup>. A crusade against the civic society started by blaming them for wanting to meddle in the

<sup>15</sup> National Archives. *McCarthyism / The “Red Scare”*. Available [online]: <https://www.eisenhowerlibrary.gov/research/online-documents/mccarthyism-red-scare#:~:text=%5BThe%20American%20Heritage%20Dictionary%20gives,in%20order%20to%20suppress%20opposition.%5D>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/russia>

internal affairs of Russia, which was allegedly directed by international forces – mainly from the United States. The law mandates that any non-commercial organization posing a threat to Russian interest and receiving funds from U.S. citizens or organizations be shut down and their assets seized. The term ‘Russian interests’ is, however, vague and broad, thus creating a fertile ground for attacks against the civic society.

In 2014, the same year when Russia started its aggression against Ukraine, and PM Orbán declared his intention of building an illiberal state, a new law was adopted in Hungary. According to the law, NGOs which received at least EUR 22,000 from abroad were mandated to register as foreign-funded organizations<sup>17</sup>. The law has been ruled by the European Court of Justice as incompatible with EU law in 2017, but it took four additional years for the Hungarian government to repeal it<sup>18</sup>. However, a new law was created in its place, assigning the State Audit Office the competence to investigate NGOs whose activities can influence public life<sup>19</sup>.

The rationale behind the Russian and the original Hungarian anti-NGO law was that the United States passed similar legislation – the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA), which requires foreign-funded organizations pursuing political activities to register under the law. However, FARA exempts organizations funded by foreign countries that are allies of the United

States, or it exempts new organizations and those of religious, scholastic, academic, or scientific pursuits<sup>20</sup>.

Another example of similarities between the two countries is their treatment of the media. Ever since Putin gained power in Russia, atrocities against journalists were not investigated satisfactorily. Journalists have been murdered and abducted<sup>21</sup>. Independent outlets were leaned on and shut down or taken over by Putin’s cronies<sup>22</sup>.

Moreover, Vladimir Putin uses fake news stories not only in his own country, but also worldwide to push his own agenda<sup>23</sup>. This is needed to utilize his media control and to influence the population and public opinion of foreign nations. Hungary is less ambitious in this regard, but not so in its media control. Through punitive taxation, the control of the media authority, and media purchases by government cronies, Orbán exerts his influence over the majority of the country’s media<sup>24</sup>. This media control in Hungary is used to spread misinformation and propaganda.

Furthermore, PM Orbán also copies Putin in the treatment of private universities<sup>25</sup> – in the case of Hungary, this is visible in the form of chasing the Central European

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short-news/hungary-repeals-ngo-law-but-civil-rights-group-deem-replacement-is-unconstitutional/>

<sup>18</sup> hvg.hu (2021) *Visszavonja a kormány a civiltörvényt*. Available [online]: [www.hvg.hu/itthon/20210421\\_civil-torveny\\_visszavonas](http://www.hvg.hu/itthon/20210421_civil-torveny_visszavonas) [in Hungarian]

<sup>19</sup> Telex.hu (2022) *Az ÁSZ szerint ez még nem a civilek ellenőrzése, csak tanácsadás*. Available [online]: <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/05/31/az-asz-arra-keri-a-sajtot-tartozkodjon-a-panikkeltestol> [in Hungarian]

<sup>20</sup> Rohac, D. (2017) “Opinion: Crackdown on Hungary’s NGOs: Mirage or Reality?”, [in]: *The Budapest Beacon*. Available [online]: [https://budapestbeacon.com/op-ed-crackdown-hungarys-ngos-mirage-reality/?sf\\_data=all&sf\\_s=foreign+Agent+Registration+Act](https://budapestbeacon.com/op-ed-crackdown-hungarys-ngos-mirage-reality/?sf_data=all&sf_s=foreign+Agent+Registration+Act)

<sup>21</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/25/how-russia-independent-media-was-dismantled-piece-by-piece>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/country/hungary>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/european-university-in-st-petersburg-threatened-with-closure/a-38093963>





## PM ORBÁN WAS THE FIRST EU LEADER TO HOST PUTIN ON A VISIT TO HUNGARY (IN 2015) SINCE THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

University away from the country<sup>26</sup>. Last but not least, LGBTQI+ rights are also disregarded in both Russia<sup>27</sup> and Hungary, although to a somewhat lesser extent in the latter<sup>28</sup>.

### VIKTOR AS 'THE VICTOR' OF THE WAR: HOW PM ORBÁN BENEFITTED FROM THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Ever since 2014, it was apparent to anyone willing to go through the news that President Vladimir Putin has further plans for Ukraine, and that the tensions in Donbas and the annexation of Crimea were just the beginning. Yet, there were a handful of intelligence agencies in Europe who turned a deaf ear towards the persistent warning of their U.S. and UK colleagues<sup>29</sup>. The most

cocksure deniers of the fact that there is going to be a war were the Hungarian political, diplomatic, and intelligence apparatus. What unfolded in the weeks leading up to the war and soon thereafter was revealed by the excellent work of investigative journalists<sup>30</sup>.

On February 1, 2022, Viktor Orbán traveled to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin. The usual entourage was to accompany him (aids and advisors) until at the last-minute President Putin requested that it be only PM Orbán and his translator that visited him, and the Hungarian head of the government had to undergo a myriad of COVID-19 tests and isolation. After the intimate meeting, which was supposedly about technical details of economic cooperation, Viktor Orbán returned with the firm belief that there will be no war<sup>31</sup>.

The same conclusion was reported to a Parliamentary Committee by the intelligence services just a day before the invasion. There were several reasons for this mistake. Diplomatic reports were self-censored, reporting conversations verbatim rather than adding analysis and opinion, because the environment in the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade were of the position that there will be no war, so diplomats and analysts were trying to accommodate facts to this bias. The ministry's hubris was due to the leadership thinking that they were the only ones understanding Russians, others cannot<sup>32</sup>.

The continued intelligence sharing from the United States and the United Kingdom was disregarded, and the Hungarian leadership dismissed this as fake news and U.S.

<sup>26</sup> <https://bbj.hu/economy/statistics/analysis/unmoved-by-pressure-president-ader-signs-lex-ceu->

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/2023/06/29/why-is-russia-ramping-up-its-attacks-on-lgbt-rights-during-the-ukraine-invasion>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/15/lgbt-rights-under-renewed-pressure-hungary>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-ukraine-invasion-predictions-wrong-intelligence/32275740.html>

<sup>30</sup> <https://telex.hu/direkt36/2022/10/26/inside-viktor-orbans-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



## THE RATIONALE BEHIND THE RUS- SIAN AND THE ORIG- INAL HUNGARIAN ANTI-NGO LAW WAS THAT THE UNITED STATES PASSED SIMI- LAR LEGISLATION

meddling. The pundits of the pro-government media (who benefit from plenty of taxpayers' money and are the unofficial mouthpieces of the government) laughed at the idea of a looming war<sup>33</sup>.

Hungary was going to hold a general election in April 2022, and the governing party, Fidesz, was sure to win unless an external event interferes with their winning streak. So, when the war broke out in late February of that year, the opposition hoped that it would be to their benefit rather than Fidesz's, a party which got ever closer to Putin since 2010, when they took over.

Sure enough, the Hungarian foreign policy wavered in its balancing a Western alliance with the European Union and NATO and its friendship with Putin. PM Orbán condemned Russia, signaled support for upcoming EU actions, and considered exiting the International Investment Bank (IIB), which is located in Budapest and is often monikered as a 'KGB Bank'<sup>34</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

This stance, however, was not because of moral conviction or a sudden return to liberal values. Orbán hoped that because of his gestures the European Union will be more lenient with him in releasing the recovery funds withheld by the EU in fear of it being lost to corruption in Hungary<sup>35</sup>. He was mistaken in assuming Brussels would send him money, so after the initial shuffling towards the Western mainstream, Hungary not only reverted, but even intensified its anti-Western propaganda. Orbán was claiming that the war is the fault of the United States, which wants a unipolar world and the ensuing increase in energy prices would give a competitive edge to American business interests as everything in the EU will be more expensive<sup>36</sup>.

The opposition in Hungary was wrong to think that the war in Ukraine will help them in internal affairs. Despite the government not believing a war is likely to break out, polls and surveys were ordered given the closeness of elections. When the full-scale war eventually broke out on February 24, 2022, government officials responsible for propaganda held a meeting with pro-government pundits, to tell them what messages to spew forth, based on the results of the polls. It turned out Ukrainians were unpopular with the general population<sup>37</sup>. Government voters disliked them for the language laws affecting the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, whereas opposition voters had reservations about Ukrainians for thinking Ukrainian nationals were transported to Hungary and voted illegally for Fidesz<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> <https://telex.hu/direkt36/2022/10/26/inside-viktor-orbans-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine>



## THE OPPOSITION IN HUNGARY WAS WRONG TO THINK THAT THE WAR IN UKRAINE WILL HELP THEM IN IN- TERNAL AFFAIRS

The government wanted to put forward a message that they were on the side of peace, whereas the opposition, the European Union and the United States want war, and that the Hungarian government will protect its citizens from such bellicose politicians and measures. As it happens, this 'peace narrative' is an old Russian and Soviet tactic, according to which they (usually the aggressor) only want peace<sup>39</sup>. This strategy is mirrored also by Putin's 'useful idiots'<sup>40</sup>.

Meanwhile, the opposition suffered from dilettantism and disorganization and failed to capitalize on the narrative of the war. The opposition's prime ministerial candidate, Péter Márki-Zay, claimed in an interview that if he won, he would provide military assistance to Ukraine<sup>41</sup>. His words

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/commentaries/pro-ukraine-forces-need-develop-their-own-narrative-peace>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/feb/13/hungary-war-and-peace-opera-spotlight-russia-stance-ukraine>

<sup>41</sup> Political Capital (2022) *Hungary 2022 – Campaign Finale: Warmongers vs. Peace-Lovers*. Available [online]: [https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article-read=1&article\\_id=2988](https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article-read=1&article_id=2988)

were intensively used by the government's propaganda saying that if the opposition won, Hungarian youth would be shipped off to war<sup>42</sup>.

The government would have probably been reelected in any case, but it seems that the thematization of the war helped them retain a supermajority. In his victory speech, Viktor Orbán sounded the usual conspiracy theories, saying that despite the efforts of the United States, George Soros, and Ukraine, they had won<sup>43</sup>.

Hungary remained in the IIB long after other countries in the region had already left (though they left eventually as well, but only because the bank was severely hit by US sanctions)<sup>44</sup>. The anti-Ukraine and anti-West propaganda remained, and Hungary continued to nurture a close friendship with Putin.

It is because PM Orbán generally pursues an increasingly anti-Western propaganda, and with a lack of EU funds, Hungary could drift even further from the EU to the point of a breakup<sup>45</sup>. Yet, the foreign policy of Orbán was to balance between east and west, to stay on the fence. Hungary is pushing the boundaries of the EU and NATO alliance. In the former, Hungary supported many of the sanctions, despite the Hungarian government communicating towards its voters that Hungary opposes them.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> <https://telex.hu/direkt36/2022/10/26/inside-viktor-orbans-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungary-quit-russian-international-investment-bank-after-us-sanctions-report-2023-04-13/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-07-24/hungary-getting-closer-to-leaving-the-eu-former-central-banker-simor-says#xj4y7vzkq>

However, Hungary also holds some of the sanctions (for example against Russian individuals) in limbo, as it wants to remove some names from the sanction's list. Recently, Hungary successfully lobbied to get Patriarch Kirill's (who is close to Putin and had been a KGB agent<sup>46</sup>) name dropped from it. Moreover, Hungary has also delayed the NATO membership of Finland and it is still hindering Sweden's membership<sup>47</sup>.

### ENERGY AND POWER

The reason behind all these actions undertaken by the Hungarian government is energy. Hungary is wholly dependent on Russian gas [See: Figure 2]. The Orbán government's most important promises revolve around socialist welfare benefits – such as the utility price reductions. In order to sustain this, although it was partially unphased (but prices are still government controlled) Hungary needs Russian gas. As the country was exempted from the import ban on Russian energy, it could buy gas relatively cheaply, but due to unfavorable conditions this is less and less the case. The Russians would not let Hungary buy in big batches and instead required the Hungarian leadership to go and beg for every drop. Russia is thus controlling Hungary through energy, just like it has been blackmailing Europe through it for years<sup>48</sup>.

Other countries, however, managed to gain independence from Russian energy sources<sup>49</sup>. Supposedly, Hungary could do it



## THE ANTI-UKRAINE AND ANTI-WEST PROPAGANDA REMAINED, AND HUNGARY CONTINUED TO NURTURE A CLOSE FRIENDSHIP WITH PUTIN

as well<sup>50</sup>, but it hangs on tightly to Russian independence in both gas and its willingness to get the Russians to build another nuclear power plant in Hungary<sup>51</sup>.

Polls indicate that the general population of Hungary supports the government's policy to stay friendly with Putin in order to receive gas and oil<sup>52</sup> [See: Figure 2]. 76% are in favor of maintaining relations to such an end. Yet, much of these sentiments towards Russia are not necessarily due to reason, but rather due to prolonged propaganda. Exposure to these tactics has long-term consequences in Hungarians supporting the ties with Russia, which, in turn, will make the country vulnerable to Russian influence.

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/patriarch-kirill-sanctions-eu-ukraine-hungary/31880523.html>

<sup>47</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/hungary-sweden-nato-vote-finland-turkey-65809a5f0e660ae91400e9ff3a8e3092>

<sup>48</sup> <https://telex.hu/direkt36/2022/10/26/inside-viktor-orbans-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>49</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/12/21/europe-russia-energy-climate-change-policy-renewable/>

<sup>50</sup> Direkt36.hu (2023) *How Viktor Orbán Angered His Closest Friends in Europe*. Available [online]: <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/igy-haragitotta-magara-orban-viktor-a-legkozelebbi-baratait/> [in Hungarian]

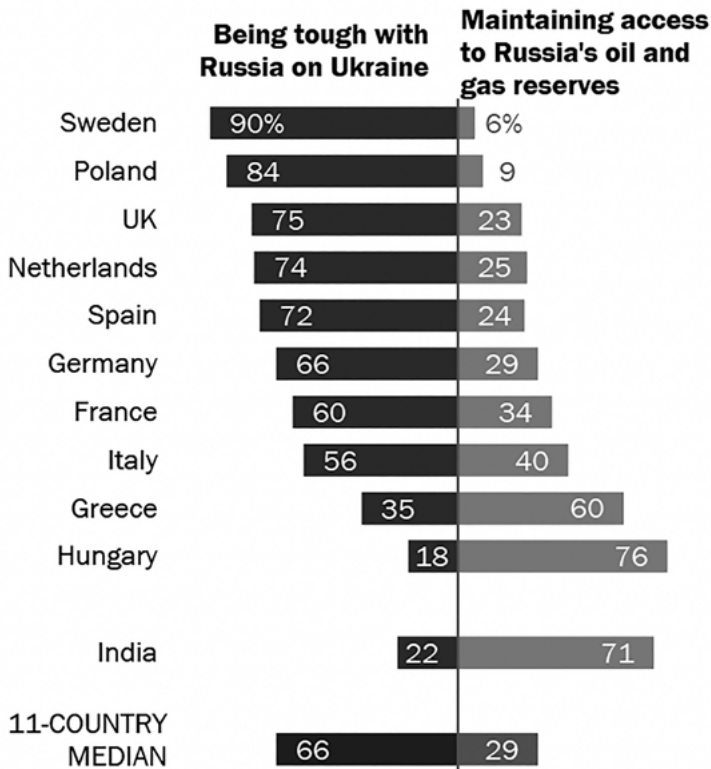
<sup>51</sup> <https://telex.hu/direkt36/2022/10/26/inside-viktor-orbans-response-to-the-war-in-ukraine>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Figure 2: Support of being tough on Russia vs maintaining relations with Russia for its oil and gas. Source: Pew Research Center

## Most support being tough with Russia, although Greeks, Hungarians, Indians prioritize Russian energy

*% who say, when thinking about their country's relations with Russia, \_\_\_ is more important*



Note: Those who did not answer not shown.

Source: Spring 2023 Global Attitudes survey. Q36.

“Large Shares See Russia and Putin in Negative Light, While Views of Zelenskyy More Mixed”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: PEW Research<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/attitudes-toward-russian-oil-and-gas/>



## THE POPULARITY OF PUTIN AND VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY GOES AGAINST WESTERN TRENDS

In light of Orbán's policy to balance his ties between east and west, reports suggest that Hungary is sending a considerable amount of gas to Ukraine<sup>54</sup>, but the Hungarian propaganda machine fails to disclose this to the government's supporters, as the propaganda depicts Ukraine as an enemy, and a Hungary that is completely absent from helping its eastern neighbor in any way.

### REAP WHAT YOU SOW: WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF A PRO-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA?

The constant barrage of propaganda and disinformation that aids Russian efforts<sup>55</sup> has its consequences. Recently, I had a conversation with someone from a small Hungarian village, who claimed that the crops failed not because of frost, but because chemtrail sprayed by Ukrainian planes. This is a rather telling example of how effective the ongoing propaganda and disinformation campaign is.

<sup>54</sup> Hvg.hu (2023) *Egy német elemzés szerint jelentős részben Magyarország látja el olajjal az ukrán hadserveget, ami óriási segítség.* Available [online]: [https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230725\\_oroszukran\\_konfliktus\\_oroszukran\\_haboru\\_uzemanyagellatas\\_olajexport\\_Mo\\_Nyrt\\_Magyarország\\_Torokország](https://hvg.hu/gazdasag/20230725_oroszukran_konfliktus_oroszukran_haboru_uzemanyagellatas_olajexport_Mo_Nyrt_Magyarország_Torokország) [in Hungarian]

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-war-narrative-hungary-disinformation/>

The effect of the government's ties with Russia and its populist propaganda and disinformation campaign lead to only 10% of Fidesz voters blaming Russia for the war, 36% blame Ukraine and a quarter blame the USA<sup>56</sup>. Meanwhile, the popularity of Putin and Volodymyr Zelensky goes against Western trends. Hungarians trust President Zelensky the least in Europe, with 86% not being confident he would do the right thing. In the case of Putin, although most Hungarians have no confidence in him, still 19% do trust him to do the right thing, which is the second highest ratio<sup>57</sup> [See: Figures 3 and 4].

In the meantime, children are also indoctrinated in schools, with teachers showing them images that the war in Ukraine is a civil war, denying Russian aggression, blaming the whole situation on the United States and the European Union, and claiming Ukraine's territory to Hungary<sup>58</sup>.

While Hungary is serving Russian interests, it is becoming further alienated from its allies – the European Union and the United States. American-Hungarian relations are getting increasingly strained over the topic of Ukraine, as well as Hungary's violation of democratic values<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>56</sup> Telex.hu (2023) *IDEA: Minden harmadik Fidesz-szavazó szerint Ukrajna miatt tört ki a háború.* Available [online]: <https://telex.hu/belfold/2023/05/11/dk-idea-intezet-felmeres-orosz-ukran-haboru-megitelese-felelosseg> [in Hungarian]

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/large-shares-see-russia-and-putin-in-negative-light-while-views-of-zelensky-more-mixed/>

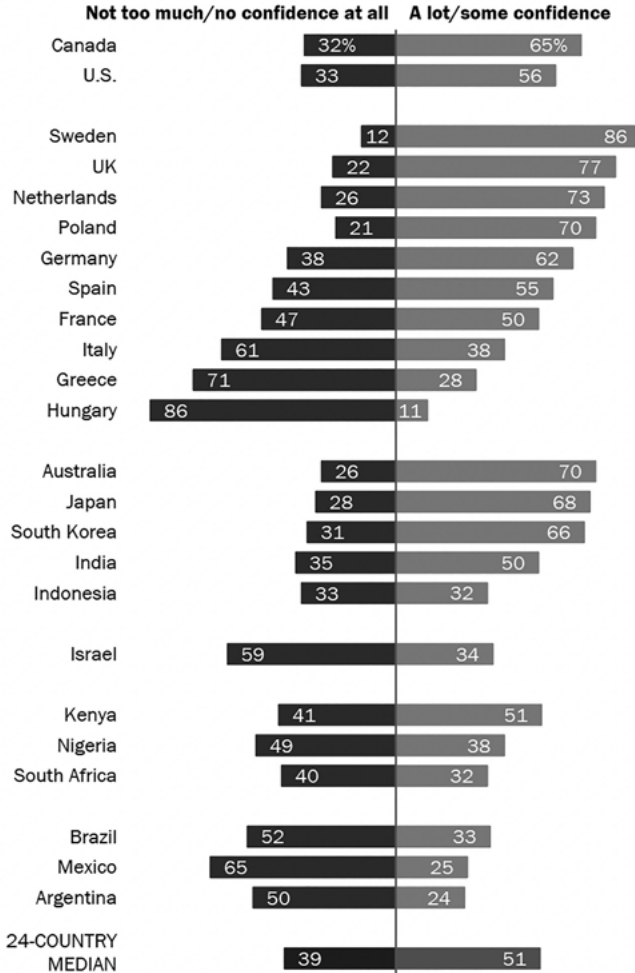
<sup>58</sup> European Pravda (2022) *Orbán's School Propaganda: Hungary Raising Generation Hostile to Ukraine.* Available [online]: <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2022/09/7/7146307/>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/us-concerned-over-hungarys-close-relations-with-russia/>

Figure 3: Confidence in President Volodymyr Zelensky

### Views of Zelenskyy

% who have \_\_\_ in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to do the right thing regarding world affairs



Note: Those who did not answer not shown. In Australia and the U.S., the question included a "never heard of this person" response option, which was new in 2023. For full trend data, see topline.

Source: Spring 2023 Global Attitudes survey. Q15f.

"Large Shares See Russia and Putin in Negative Light, While Views of Zelenskyy More Mixed"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

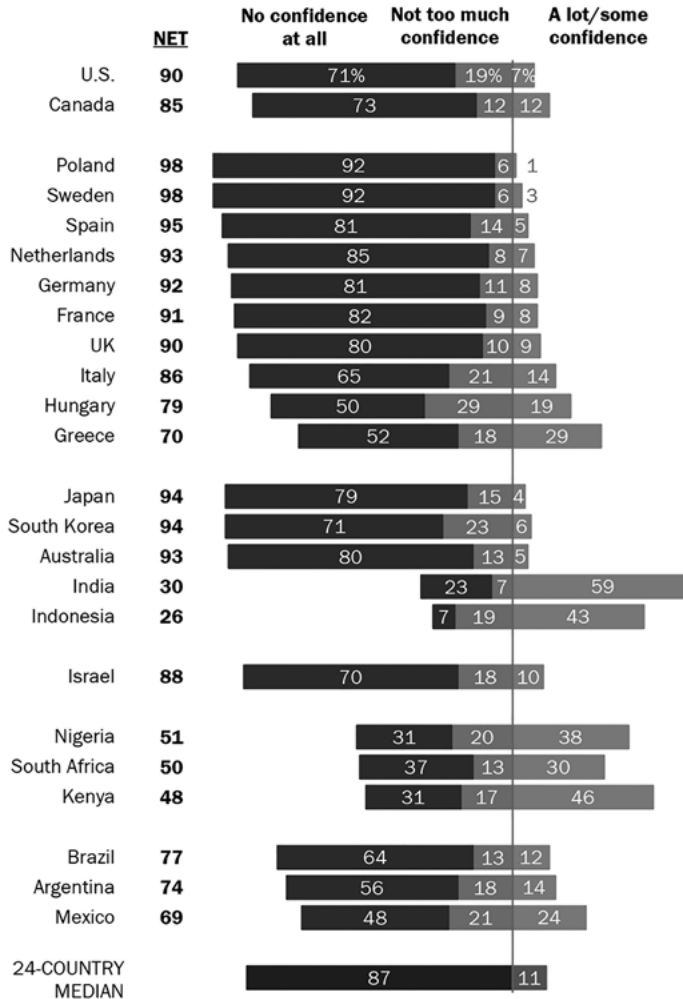
Source: Pew Research Center<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/confidence-in-zelensky-to-handle-world-affairs/>

Figure 4: Trust in President Vladimir Putin

**Views of Putin around the world**

% who have \_\_\_ in Russian President Vladimir Putin to do the right thing regarding world affairs



Note: Those who did not answer not shown. In Australia and the U.S., the question included a "never heard of this person" response option, which was new in 2023. For full trend data, see topline.

Source: Spring 2023 Global Attitudes survey. Q15c.

"Large Shares See Russia and Putin in Negative Light, While Views of Zelenskyy More Mixed"

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Source: Pew Research Center<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/confidence-in-putin-to-handle-world-affairs/>



Finally, Hungary serves Russian propaganda, according to which Russia (and, in Orbán's narrative, Hungary) are the 'guardians of normalcy' in a world tyrannically governed by gay lobby, political correctness, and socialism<sup>62</sup>. The fact that the only tyrants are those promoting this world view, and they themselves are often socialist in nature (like the populist welfare plan of Orbán mentioned before) is lost on the population.

### CONCLUSIONS

The key to understanding Hungary's 'on-the-fence' politics lies in the simple fact that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán wants to retain power at whatever cost. All his policies are subordinated to this premise. Ideologies factor less into his decisions, which are all about ruthless pragmatism. As such, his actions are not explained the same way as the Western support of Ukraine, which is more ideological in nature.

PM Orbán has been using the Russian model of retaining power at cost in order to extend his authority already for some time. His crackdown on democratic values, election laws, the takeover of the media, the harassment of the civic sector and minorities, all serve to make democratic and civic oversight harder, to lessen transparency, and to take over the flow of information with tightly controlled propaganda (or disinformation). This approach spans across the schools, impacting small children and elderly voters.

Furthermore, Viktor Orbán's populist approach requires socialistic measures. The promise of more money – either in the form of price reductions, price caps, more pensions and subsidies, or a careful shielding of the population from market



WHILE HUNGARY IS SERVING RUSSIAN INTERESTS, IT IS BECOMING FURTHER ALIENATED FROM ITS ALLIES – THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE UNITED STATES

prices – is not cheap. The budget suffers, and external help is needed for Hungary. The EU funds helped fuel Orbán's populism and socialism, but Brussels has had enough of the rampant corruption and rule of law violations, and so, it withholds these funds.

Russia assists PM Orbán by providing cheap gas (or now, 'gas at any price'<sup>63</sup>), so that prices can be kept at levels controlled by the Fidesz government. In exchange for this special treatment, Russia obviously asks favors, presumably, for example, the exclusion of certain people from sanctions or the delay in the decision making of the European Union or NATO.

On an internal level, Viktor Orbán plays to the sentiment and fears of his voters, the dislike of Ukrainians, and the distorted views of the war due to propaganda. It is,

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/17/russia-homophobia-and-battle-traditional-values>

<sup>63</sup> Hungary Today (2022) *G7: Hungary Pays Much More for Russian Gas Than Other EU Countries*. Available [online]: <https://hungarytoday.hu/russian-gas-prices-hungary-eu-member-orban-putin/>

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therefore, likely that he will continue the anti-Western communications, as this is what is working to his benefit and is the easiest narrative to employ.

While PM Orbán manages to win elections through his populist agenda, and balance Russian and Western interests, he will have enough legitimacy to continue on his current track. He will give minor support to Ukraine, but in communication will continue to oppose any aid. He will continue to mirror Putin domestically and condemn sanctions, but still vote for them occasionally.

Change in this trend will not come externally. The EU can either pay up and fuel Orbán's populism, or withhold funds and push Hungary closer to Russia. This is an unwinnable situation for Brussels.

It is Hungarians with whom the responsibility of making changes lies. It is up to them to choose their leaders, and it is their duty to inform themselves and not let themselves be misguided.



\*

MÁTÉ  
HAJBA

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Director of the Free Market Foundation, an independent think tank in Hungary focusing on free market economics, rule of law, civic liberties, and tolerance