

# [***American conservatives embrace Hungary's authoritarian leader at Budapest conference***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BXN-WWN1-DY7V-G0S4-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Budapest, Hungary (CNN) &#8212; At a conference center plastered with slogans like "Let's drain the swamp," Republican after Republican endorsed harsh immigration policies, crackdowns on LGBTQ rights, and a battle against "woke ideology."

The scene could have been any recent GOP event - except it was taking place roughly 4,000 miles away from the US at the Conservative Political Action Conference's third annual gathering in Hungary.

The visiting GOP dignitaries' praise for Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his authoritarian government showed how the small central European country has become an unlikely model for a potential Trump second term - despite what international observers have described as an alarming backsliding of democratic rights.

The American right's growing embrace of Orban builds upon millions of dollars that his government has spent on lobbying in the US, and new connections between Hungarian and American conservative think tanks.

In his opening speech at the CPAC conference in Budapest last week, Orban endorsed former President Donald Trump's reelection bid and painted this year's elections in the US and European Union in militaristic terms.

"Make America great again, make Europe great again!" Orban [*declared*](https://twitter.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1783856219066646873) in English, before continuing in Hungarian: "Go Donald Trump! Go European sovereigntists! Let us saddle up, don our armor, take to the battlefield and let the electoral battle begin."

Trump, who [*hosted the Hungarian leader*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/08/politics/trump-orban-mar-a-lago/index.html) at his Mar-a-Lago resort in March, sent a pre-recorded video message to the conference that echoed similar themes. The former president called Orban "a great man" and hailed "so many patriots in Hungary who are proudly fighting on the frontlines of the battle to rescue Western civilization."

The bromance between the two leaders comes as some Trump allies are turning to the Orban playbook as they plan for his potential return to the White House. In his own video message, Trump confidant Steve Bannon described Hungary as "an inspiration to the world" and called Orban "one of my heroes in the world today, in addition to President Trump."

After Trump's loss in 2020, "American conservatives started to look for what would be a successful conservative governing agenda," said Gladden Pappin, a conservative political theorist who moved from Dallas to Budapest and now leads the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, a state-run research organization. "When American conservatives look to Hungary, they see a prime minister in a government that actually delivered on the slogans that they promised."

Over his 14 years in power, Orban has transformed Hungary into a laboratory for conservative policies and eroded democratic rights and civil society protections, according to his critics and[*European Union*](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/15/hungary-is-no-longer-a-full-democracy-says-european-parliament) officials.

Orban has centralized power by dismissing judges, changing election rules to favor his party, cracking down on NGO's and appointing loyalists to key institutions. His government built a fence along the country's southern border amid a migrant crisis in 2015 and passed stricter immigration policies. It tightened its grip on state media, reducing space for dissent.

The prime minister has also promoted a Christian nationalist view of Hungarian society, passing laws restricting transgender rights and adoption by same-sex couples, redefining marriage in the constitution to only cover unions between a man and a woman, and banning materials related to LGBTQ issues in schools.

Those are policies that some Trump allies would love to see him adopt if he returns to the White House next year. (Trump himself has [*previously called*](https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/16/republicans-gay-marriage-wars-505041) same-sex marriage settled law.)

Orban's policy platform "shows you what the recipe is for maintaining your national identity in a conservative way," Pappin said in an interview. "Conservative politicians in America had this negative mindset toward government. They need to think about how to use government," as Orban has done.

The rhetoric on display at CPAC Hungary - a branch of the decades-running political confab in the US - showed that the American right is increasingly onboard with that idea. Conservatives from around the US, Europe and beyond traveled to Budapest for the two-day event, which was organized by a Hungarian government-funded think tank.

The meetings and speeches took place at a conference center inside a sprawling park on the west bank of the Danube River. The venue featured posters with English slogans that would have been right at home at a Trump rally, like "Let's drain the swamp!" and "We win, they lose." At least one attendee [*wore*](https://twitter.com/patriottakes/status/1783468019483615503) a shirt emblazoned with Trump and Orban's faces that declared the two leaders "saviors of the world."

Security guards told reporters to stop filming in the park and organizers denied CNN's request to attend the conference, writing in an email that the venue was "a NO WOKE ZONE."

"We look forward to welcoming you to future events when and if your organization becomes significantly less woke," the email read. Several other independent news outlets received similar denials.

Three Republican members of Congress spoke at the conference, and prominent GOP figures including Bannon, Arizona Senate candidate Kari Lake, and Trump's former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows sent video messages that were played for attendees.

The Republicans lauded Orban despite his authoritarian bent. Lake gushed about how her experience meeting the prime minister "changed my life." Rep. Andy Harris of Maryland said that "Hungary has become one of the most successful models as a leader for conservative principles and governance."

"Hungary's immigration policy should serve as a model to the United States in terms of border, border security and immigration enforcement," said Rep. Paul Gosar of Arizona. "I hope and pray one day that the United States might take a similar prioritization to the safety and security of its citizens."

Hosting CPAC is just one example of how Orban and his allies have worked to build ties with conservatives in the US. Since Orban became Hungary's prime minister in 2010, his government has paid American lobbyists at least $4.4 million, according to a CNN review of disclosures filed with the Department of Justice. The lobbyists met members of Congress, pitched Hungary's economy and strict border policies, and coordinated appearances by Hungarian officials in right-wing US media, the filings show.

More recently, pro-Orban groups have also made connections that aren't reported as foreign lobbying. According to documents obtained by the Southern Poverty Law Center, a Hungarian government-funded foundation has [*paid grants*](https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2023/12/13/contracts-between-hungarian-nonprofit-and-christopher-rufo-others-raise-foreign-agent) to American conservative writers and activists like Christopher Rufo, who [*inspired*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/08/politics/critical-race-theory-panic-race-deconstructed-newsletter/index.html) the right's movement against "critical race theory" in schools.

Two American nonprofits that are actively planning policies for a second Trump term have shown an interest in Hungary and Orban's model. The Heritage Foundation, which has [*released*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/27/politics/trump-federal-workers-2nd-term-invs/index.html) a 900-plus-page policy roadmap called "Project 2025," and the America First Policy Institute, another nonprofit that is [*working*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/06/politics/trump-donor-america-first-policy-institute-invs/index.html) to prepare for a second Trump term, have [*both*](https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/cooperation_agreement_heritage_foundation_danube_institute/)[*partnered*](https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/america-first-visits-hungary) with think tanks that receive funding from the Hungarian government.

The collaborations include [*visits*](https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/america-first-visits-hungary) to Hungary by researchers from the pro-Trump groups to learn about its policies. Istvan Kiss, the executive director of the Orban-linked Danube Institute, [*told*](https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/cooperation_agreement_heritage_foundation_danube_institute/) a Hungarian publication that the partnerships showed the interest that American conservatives had in his country and suggested that Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' policies limiting the discussion of LGBTQ issues in schools was inspired by the Orban government.

"Hungary has become the beacon of what it would be like if Trumpists ruled the world," said Princeton sociologist Kim Lane Scheppele, an expert in Hungarian ***politics***. Orban, she said, "wants a friendly government that won't demand that Hungary become a democracy again."

In Budapest, critics of Orban's regime argued in interviews with CNN that Americans should see Hungary as a warning sign - not a model to emulate.

Zsuzsanna Szelenyi, who was once a member of Orban's political party but broke with him and now works at a pro-democracy group, said that the policies the prime minister is pushing have stripped away Hungarians' fundamental rights.

"Democracy means there is a fair competition of political forces to get into power," Szelenyi said. "This we do not have."

Orban has pushed rhetoric about LGBTQ issues and migrants to avoid talking about "the problems with our hospitals, the problems of our social care services, the problems of the teachers, the problems of all of these essential institutions of the country, which are in a deep, deep trouble right now," said [*Marton Gulyas*](https://humanityinaction.org/person/marton-gulyas/), a left-leaning political commentator who runs a popular YouTube channel.

But some of the American conservatives who flew into the country for CPAC seemed more focused on the optics of Budapest than on democratic rights. Right-wing influencers strode the banks of the Danube and marveled at what Joey Mannarino, a conservative political strategist who attended the conference, [*described*](https://twitter.com/JoeyMannarinoUS/status/1784633699813707807) in a social media video as an apparent absence of homelessness and crime.

"We need to figure out whatever this country did," he declared, "and we need to get it back."

By Casey Tolan, Kyung Lah, Anna-Maja Rappard and Curt Devine, CNN

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