The Trump-Musk power grab has happened before — in Hungary

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Politics

Their democracy died. They have lessons for America about Trump's power grab.

Hungarians who lived through Viktor Orbán's 2010 power grab warn Americans: Act now, before it's too late.

by Zack Beauchamp

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President Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister, stand for photographers at the White House in May 13, 2019.
Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Zack Beauchamp is a senior correspondent at Vox, where he covers ideology and challenges to democracy, both at home and abroad. His book on democracy, *The Reactionary Spirit*, was published 0n July 16. You can purchase it here.

A leader who voters rejected several years ago returns to power, largely thanks to discontent with the incumbent party's economic performance. Almost immediately upon taking office, the leader launches a blitzkrieg designed to strengthen his personal grip on power. He claims unprecedented power over the budget, fires the leaders of government oversight agencies, and places vast policymaking power in the hands of an unelected wealthy ally. The opposition, divided and disorganized after electoral defeat, struggles to formulate an effective response as democracy begins to buckle.

The country I am describing is, of course, Hungary in 2010.

That year, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán returned to power after his defeat in 2002. He then launched an ambitious plan for turning a vibrant democracy into an authoritarian state, moving so swiftly to remove all formal checks on his power that few Hungarians truly understood how much power he was accruing. Judges and watchdogs were replaced with pliant cronies; his top allies took command of policymaking apparatus while developing tools for controlling the press.

The power Orbán had accrued in those early days made it possible for him to systematically and secretively erode the fairness of Hungarian elections in the coming years. By the time he was up for reelection in 2014, the opposition barely had a chance. In hindsight, the first year may have been the entire ballgame — even if no one quite knew it at the time.

I've spent the past week speaking with Hungarians and experts on Hungary, asking them to reflect on what happened then and offer advice to Americans today. For these observers, events in the US feel like déjà vu. One Hungarian, speaking anonymously for fear of career ramifications, warned Americans that they may see democracy slip away if they don't act *now*.

"There's no time for waiting and watching," they said. "They can do so much — *so much* — counting on the fact that everyone is paralyzed."

Yet my Hungarian sources also sounded a note of hope. When they look at Donald Trump, they see a leader with far less power than Orbán had in 2010. And when they look at the United States, they see a country with many more resources to resist an autocratic takeover than they had 15 years ago.

On the Right

The ideas and trends driving the conservative movement, from senior correspondent Zack Beauchamp.

Orbán's 2010 takeover depended crucially on his legislative dominance. His Fidesz party had a majority large enough to amend the Hungarian constitution at will. With that much power, it was easy for him to seize full control over the government in record time.

By contrast, Trump's House majority is one of the narrowest in history. And in the Senate, the filibuster severely limits what Republicans can pass. The legislative balance of power situation forces Trump to rely on executive orders of dubious legality, creating a number of different ways to check his abuse of power (like lawsuits) that wouldn't have worked in Hungary of 2010.

But democracy will not defend itself. If Americans don't learn Hungary's lessons — don't appreciate that we are facing an extinction-level threat to democracy — we will surely live to regret it.

How Trump is following in Orbán's footsteps

Orbán was first elected to be Hungary's prime minister in 1998, serving until his conservative Fidesz party lost its majority in the 2002 elections. While he governed as a (mostly) normal center-right leader, it appears that defeat radicalized him.

He spent the next eight years developing extensive and detailed plans for consolidating power once returned to high office. The planning included hiring law firms to develop a policy blueprint for seizing control of the government once he was elected — a more detailed, aggressive version of Project 2025.

The 2010 election provided a perfect opportunity for him to turn these ideas into reality. The Hungarian economy was in shambles after the 2008 financial crisis — so bad, in fact, that it required an emergency $25 billion from the International Monetary Fund and others to avoid fiscal ruin — and the current prime minister was embroiled in scandal.

Much in the way that Trump and Elon Musk have seized control of an obscure but critical federal payments system, Orbán targeted the *guts* of democracy.

"Hungary was in a similar situation in 2010 as the US has been in recent months," says Szabolcs Panyi, a journalist at one of a handful of Hungary's remaining independent outlets. "There was a lot of disillusionment with the previous government, and everyone was like, 'We don't care, Orbán has been in power [before].'"

Orbán rode the incumbent's unpopularity to a commanding victory. Though Fidesz only won 51 percent of the vote, Hungary's strangely apportioned legislature meant that it now had a two-thirds majority in parliament — enough to amend the constitution, which Orbán did 12

times in the first year alone.

“From Day 1, he started with the blitz of stuff,” says Kim Lane Scheppele, a professor at Princeton University who studies Hungarian law and politics. “And it was endless.”

The purpose of these changes was not, primarily, to end democracy in one fell swoop. Rather, it was to remove as many checks on Orbán’s authority as possible, so he could then quietly undermine key democratic institutions — like fair elections and the free press — over the course of several years. The power grab was designed not to accrue power for power’s sake, but to enable democratic death by a thousand cuts down the line.

For this reason, many of Orbán’s changes focused on seizing control of the country’s judiciary, through mechanisms like forcing judges into retirement and stripping the high court of its capacities to review Fidesz’s actions. Key oversight positions, like the state audit office and public prosecutor, were given over to Fidesz operatives.

The takeover of the prosecutor’s office was, functionally, the equivalent of Trump’s ongoing purge of the Department of Justice and FBI.

“The public prosecutor’s office was quite central, as this is the office that could prosecute any kind of wrongdoing by state authorities and politicians,” says Zsuzsanna Végh, a Hungarian expert on democracy at the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

The power grab overwhelmed the Hungarian public and opposition through two different, interconnected strategies.

First, it happened so rapidly and on so many different fronts that it was difficult for them to find any one cause to focus on. Second, many of the changes sounded technical and obscure, making it hard to explain to the public why they needed to get up in arms.

Much in the way that Trump and Elon Musk have seized control of an obscure but critical federal payments system, Orbán targeted the *guts* of democracy: the things that ensure its smooth functioning behind the scenes. It’s the kind of stuff that doesn’t excite passions like banning elections would have, but allowed him to subtly undermine their fairness without much of the public grasping what had truly happened.

Lajos Simicska, the Musk before Musk

Once Orbán cowed the courts and law enforcement, he was able to fundamentally corrupt Hungarian policymaking — deputizing his cronies to make policy that benefited themselves and their party rather than the nation.

Chief among these allies was a man named Lajos Simicska, a wealthy childhood friend of Orbán’s who played a strikingly Musk-like role in the 2010 power grab.

In her book *Tainted Democracy*, former Fidesz member of Parliament Zsuzsanna Szelényi recalls Simicska spending "many weeks at Viktor Orbán's country house" after the election, much as Musk took residence at Mar-a-Lago in November.

"When the government was formed," she writes, "Simicska's people cornered key positions in the apparatus of government, including the management of the National Development Agency, which oversaw the distribution of EU funds, and the Public Procurement Authority." This is, in effect, the power Musk is currently attempting to assert — control over the mechanisms through which the government spends and distributes money.

Notably, Simicska did all of this *without holding any kind of actual position*. Like Musk, he bypassed the traditional government appointment process, turning crucial questions about federal spending and policy over to an opaque clique. Szelényi explains:

> Simicska did not hold public office and could not be held to account, his vast influence was a particularly serious problem. The most critical economic bills were proposed to the Parliament as private members' bills, which made it difficult to identify which business group's interests were actually being served by any given proposal. Government decisions became entirely inscrutable.

When I spoke to Szelényi on the phone, she warned that opacity was a necessary step toward the consolidation of Orbán's power. Once the policy processes were brought under Simicska's thumb, he began using that power to build a private sector empire — using policy tools to sell him controlling stakes in a huge number of industries, including (most dangerously) the media.

"He was a 100 percent partner of Orbán," she tells me. "They were really doing everything together."

The assault on the press did not formally abolish press freedoms, but rather abused and politicized normal state functions. Visit from the audit agency, harassment by government lawyers, withholding state support via ad revenue — all these tools were used to force independent outlets to sell to either the government or a private sector ally like Simicksa. By 2017, around 90 percent of Hungarian media were controlled by the state or an allied entity.

The United States today has a far more robust and diverse media sector than 2010 Hungary. Yet Musk's purchase of Twitter is a warning sign — as are recent capitulations by major media companies, including Facebook and CBS.

On this, Panyi, the journalist, was particularly scathing: "At least in Hungary, these people had to be pressured."

Even aside from media, the corruption of economic policy turned into a source of stability for the Orbán regime. The more that the country's elite class got in bed with the state, the more they depended on staying in the government's good graces — which meant that they couldn't rebel even if they wanted to. Simicska became a case in point: When he and Orbán had a falling-out in the mid-2010s, the latter used state power to crush the former's business empire.

The power consolidation, in short, enabled all kinds of corruption — which then itself became a tool for bringing the press and the economic elite under Fidesz control.

Why the Hungarian parallels should give Americans warning — and hope

There are two main lessons that my Hungarian contacts wanted Americans to learn from their experiences.

First, what is happening right now in the United States is exactly what a dying democracy looks like.

Democracy doesn't die overnight, but rather in stages. While Trump hasn't moved to abolish elections or even rig campaign finance rules, he is setting the stage for future power grabs that would enable all sorts of anti-democratic behavior.

The best chance to stop it is *now*, before the power consolidation succeeds to the point where Trump will feel emboldened to attack electoral fairness directly. Hungarians, by in large, didn't mount much resistance in Orbán's early days — and that's part of why it succeeded so well.

"I think our society has been quite passive," Panyi says. "That's something we inherited from communism, where the survival strategy was to mind your own business. Passivity always favors these kinds of regimes."

Second, and more optimistically, the United States in 2025 is far better positioned to fight off this type of blitzkrieg power grab than Hungary was in 2010.

This isn't just because the United States has been (at least somewhat) democratic for centuries, giving it a far more robust history of political activism than Hungary. It's also because Trump is orders of magnitude weaker, in terms of formal powers, than Orbán was.

Hungary is a small country, around 10 million people, where nearly all power is concentrated in the national government. Key powers that the US reserves to the states, like drawing the lines of legislative districts, are done nationally — which allowed Orbán to do things like slip an egregious gerrymander into one of his early constitutional amendments. The federal system gives Americans opportunities for resistance that Hungarians simply didn't have.

But even on the national level, Trump's powers (at least on paper) pale in comparison to Orbán's. This is because of both constitutional design and the balance of power in the legislature.

Hungary's 1990s-vintage constitution was easy to amend, as its 1990s-era framers were concerned about making mistakes that their descendants would have to live with. The US Constitution is the opposite — requiring not only approval from Congress but also three-fourths of the states. So while Orbán could practically legislate regime change, Trump doesn't have the power to make even the slightest constitutional change. On issues ranging from birthright citizenship to freedom of the press to running for a third term, he's formally bound by a seemingly unchangeable document.

Nor can he do much by statute.

Republicans in the Senate don't have a filibuster-proof majority, and it's unclear if there are enough Republican votes to "go nuclear" and eliminate the filibuster entirely. Even if there are, Republicans still have the smallest House majority since the Great Depression, meaning that just a handful of defections from principled Republicans would be enough to derail any legislative power grabs.

Perhaps for these reasons, Trump has shown no interest in engaging in Orbán-style lawmaking sprees, passing bill after bill in rapid succession. Instead, the administration has chosen to engage in a series of unilateral power grabs — where either Trump or Musk declares that they're doing something and dares someone to stop them. Oftentimes, what they're doing is straightforwardly illegal or even unconstitutional.

Hungary shows us that the courts are *the* critical battleground

Yet laws aren't self-enforcing. They need someone with authority to order that the lawbreaking is going to stop. Which means that many of the biggest battles are likely to come down to the courts.

In Hungary, the courts were hamstrung by design: Many of Orbán's biggest early moves were designed to bring the courts to heel. Without their oversight, he and Simicska could get away with whatever they wanted. Which is why the Hungarians I spoke with warned Americans that protecting their authority, and those of other watchdog institutions, would be central in the weeks and months to come.

"Whenever there is a power to constitutional practices, the judiciary needs to step in," Vegh says. "Civil society and the general public [need] to call out unconstitutional and undemocratic practices … to not shy away from speaking truth to power and drawing attention to what's going on."

Trump certainly did fill the federal judiciary with appointees in his first term. But he's simply unable to do an Orbán-like takeover of the courts without legislative buy-in. And so far, there's zero indication that he's even contemplating introducing bills that would (for example) strip the Supreme Court of jurisdiction over his actions.

That means the courts remain a powerful check on his authority — at least, on paper. There are some early optimistic signs, like rulings against the unconstitutional order against birthright citizenship or the illegal spending freeze.

But many of these issues will assuredly go all the way to the Supreme Court, where so much depends on the personal feelings of the six Republican justices.

That so much can depend on six people is a troubling state of affairs for any democracy: a sign that things really are going in a dangerous direction. But the comparison for Hungary also shows that things could be far worse — and that Americans still have a chance to stop Trump from using the Orbán playbook to tear down the world's oldest democracy.

A version of this piece appears in On the Right, my newsletter on conservatism. Subscribe here.