



## BREAKING THE MYTH OF ORBÁN'S INFLUENCE ON EUROPEAN POPULIST FOREIGN POLICY

**Regional Update Europe and the Mediterranean Sea** | Hungarian oil and gas company MOL is leading the race to acquire Russian Gazpromneft's majority stake in Serbia's NIS, adding to the Orbán government's list of controversial foreign economic and political ties. This deal highlights several aspects of Orbán's geopolitical thinking and the extent to which Hungarian foreign policy under Viktor Orbán is intertwined with his personal and business interests and illiberal governance.

Since Viktor Orbán became prime minister in 2010, Hungary has been in the process of democratic backsliding, becoming a well-known example of illiberal populist governance. He pioneered in setting up an illiberal system within Europe, inspiring several parties and politicians across the continent. The question is whether he played such an influential role in shaping populist foreign policy-making and geopolitical thinking as well or whether his is a unique case. Two renowned Hungarian foreign policy experts, Botond Feledy (Red Snow Consulting) and Zsolt Kerner (24.hu), contributed to the analysis.

### Orbán, the Populist Norm Setter?

Both Botond Feledy and Zsolt Kerner agree that it is difficult to answer which populist characteristics originated with Orbán or whether, amid fractures in the post-Cold War world order, many others came to the same conclusion at the same time.

Botond Feledy argues that "when it comes to foreign policy trends generated by populist domestic political positions, it is difficult to decide who is the real trendsetter among Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, the AfD, Marine Le Pen, and Benjamin Netanyahu: the players have learned a lot from each other, and after a while, they are shaping each other's geopolitical space, a process that is now harming each other's interests." He further continues that in foreign policy populism, Donald Trump can be considered a trendsetter, while Orbán is more of an innovator in "shaping domestic political manoeuvring to suppress his opposition."

Zsolt Kerner argues that there are indeed thematic similarities between European populists that can be traced back to Orbán, such as opposition to migration, concern over population decline and anti-Ukrainian sentiments regarding foreign affairs. He adds that in terms of themes, the MAGA movement also uses many of the same topics, but Orbán's extreme state intervention in the economy is much less common, as it is quite foreign to American politics.

### The Reality of Orbán's Foreign Policy

The overlaps highlight that Orbán has indeed been influential in shaping the repertoire of populist themes and political communication, however, the influence could not be directly applied to foreign policymaking. Among the reasons, Zsolt Kerner emphasized it is since his foreign policy can be considered unsuccessful from the nation's point of view, arguing that Hungary's foreign policy over the past 16 years has been largely Orbán's personal foreign policy, based on his and his circle's personal and business interests. Zsolt Kerner adds that it is why entrepreneurs close to the government attend diplomatic events, an example of which is the growth of the company 4IG and the fact that its CEO, Gellért Jászai, was present at a meeting with Trump and Elon Musk at Mar-a-Lago.

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Botond Feledy largely agrees and notes that such “particularistic, hyper-pragmatic and often very materialistic steps” are the essence of populist foreign policy. He highlights the key factor that distinguishes Orbán from other populists: “as the state became increasingly captive, foreign policy increasingly pursued particular interests. From relations with Russian oligarchs to Chinese investors, the interests of smaller economic groups close to the government and successful strategic corruption channels in third countries were able to create decision-making situations, rather than the consistent pursuit of national interests.”

Therefore, Orbán's rise to prominence is not solely the result of his populist political style and his own political talent, but above all the consequence of the illiberal domestic system that has been in place since 2010, in which the checks and balances have been so weakened that foreign policy has fallen into the trap of Orbán's personal and economic interests. Such depth of the state capture has not yet been achieved by other European populist parties; leaders such as Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel, or even Robert Fico operate within more competitive political systems.

### Narrative Versus Reality

Experts agree that there is a significant gap between narrative and reality in populist foreign policy. On the one hand, Botond Feledy highlights that the rhetoric of Orbán as a visionary leader who transcends the nation's size has been less in line with the reality of achievements; regardless of his personal connections and strategy to hold close ties with all great powers, Russia still sells gas at high prices, and investors face legal uncertainty. Furthermore, “without EU funds, the domestic economy has been steadily falling behind even its regional competitors, with living standards and inflation among the worst in the EU.” – says Feledy. However, Orbán has still managed to gain international recognition, as the narratives prepared for foreign audiences do not concern economic performance or the interests of Hungarian citizens.

On the other hand, Botond Feledy highlights the strong and multi-layered divisions within the Patriotic group, which refutes the populist model and Orbán's leading influential role. As examples, Feledy mentions Le Pen's refusal of the AfD, forcing German radicals to form a new EP group; Meloni and the Polish PiS, which are cooperative and compromise oriented with the European platform parties. Zsolt Kerner agrees with the notion of differences within populists in Europe, highlighting that while Fico and Babis are the closest allies with Orbán, they always find a way to compromise on the EU level, understanding that Orbán's level hostility led to the loss of billions of euros through the EU fund cuts.

Feledy continues highlighting the differences in foreign affairs: “Hungarian foreign policy reflects the interests allowed in by Orbán, while the French RN, for example, is fundamentally attentive to the interests of French workers, as evidenced by its opposition to Trump's tariff policies, and Alice Weidel also criticized the intervention in Venezuela as a violation of sovereignty, in contrast to Vox, which supported it because of its pragmatic political relations with Venezuelan leaders”. In addition, both experts agree that there will always be tension between net contributors and net beneficiaries in the EU, regardless of ideology.



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## Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no coherent foreign policy model within European populists, in fact, they are becoming increasingly divided on geopolitical developments. Furthermore, Orbán's case with Hungary is not a generalizable example; Orbán is rather overestimated in his influence on other populists because the state of state capture is an underestimated factor.

His electoral support allowed him to build a domestic illiberal system, which then allowed him to personalise (among other areas) foreign policymaking and align it with his and his circle's personal and business interests to an extent that other European populist leaders could not replicate. His real innovation rather lies in setting up the repertoire of a populist leader from themes to political communication, as well as in building an illiberal domestic system.

Feledy adds that “foreign policies that are fundamentally based on national interests, even if they choose different tools for their implementation and communication for ideological or party reasons, are fundamentally different from the much narrower foreign policies of countries in a process of state capture”, concluding that “the populist model is basically a communication recipe book rather than a profound reinterpretation of international relations.”



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