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Why Donald Trump loves Viktor Orban

by [Heather A. Conley](#), [Charles Gati](#)



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban addresses parliament last week. (Bernadett Szabo/Reuters)

Two important American [visitors](#) showed up in Budapest on Wednesday. One was Stephen K. Bannon, the former White House adviser who is an admirer of Hungary's strongman, Viktor

Orban; he addressed a conference on “[Europe’s Future](#)” organized by Mária Schmidt, an Orban counselor with Bannon-esque ideas about maintaining a Christian culture in Europe. Bannon had [called](#) Orban “a man of principles” as well as “a real patriot and a real hero” earlier this year. The two [spent](#) an hour together Thursday.

The [other visitor](#) was Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs A. Wess Mitchell, the highest-ranking American official responsible for U.S. relations with Hungary. Mitchell came to usher in a new era of accommodation between the Trump administration and the Orban government. This policy dispenses with the traditional foreign policy practice, followed by previous Republican and Democratic administrations, of conveying benefits for cooperative behavior and disapproval for abandoning American interests and values. Instead, this administration believes that offering high-level contacts and withholding criticism will improve an authoritarian regime’s behavior. For those who know Hungary’s politics, this is appeasement — the victory of hope over centuries of experience.

Orban’s odyssey began in 1998 when, during his first term as prime minister, he started to flirt with nationalistic, anti-American and anti-Semitic sentiments to try to win reelection in 2002. When Istvan Csurka, the head of an anti-Semitic party, [blamed](#) the United States for the 9/11 attacks (it got what it deserved, he said), the premier declined to dissociate himself from Csurka, despite a White House request to do so. Orban lost his reelection bid and did not return to power until 2010. He has since [managed](#) to change the Hungarian constitution five times to reduce judicial independence, restrict press freedoms and modify the electoral system to ensure that no viable opposition could ever form against him and his coalition. He has placed pliant and corrupt loyalists in positions of authority. And he still [embraces](#) anti-Semitism as a political tool, [praising](#) a Nazi-allied wartime leader of Hungary and using stereotypes to [cast](#) Jewish emigre George Soros as an outside [puppeteer](#).

In the past, U.S. administrations kept a certain distance from countries that espoused such policies and attitudes. During Orban’s first premiership, for example, President George W. Bush sent the Hungarian leader a hard-hitting, confidential “non-paper” — essentially a list of complaints — that was never answered, so the White House decided not to invite Orban to the Oval Office. The Obama administration [denied visas](#) for six Hungarian government officials because of corruption (and it certainly never invited the premier to the White House).

The Trump administration’s friendly and intensive contacts with the Orban government represent a radical departure: It watches idly as Orban dismantles his nation’s democratic institutions. For instance, the pro-government weekly Figyelo recently issued [an enemies list](#) of about 200 prominent opposition individuals. Most were local civil society advocates, but the list also included U.S. citizens, many of them scholars of economics, Judaism and nationalism at the Soros-funded [Central European University](#) (such as [Leon Botstein](#) and [Allen Feldman](#)). The government has [erected](#) contrived legal barriers in an effort to close the institution, a graduate school devoted to liberal values and based in Budapest. Meanwhile, Hungary [harassed](#) the U.S.-based Open Society Foundations until they decided to move their operations from Budapest to Berlin. Two Hungarian newspapers, [Magyar Nemzet](#) and [Budapest Beacon](#), shut down this spring as advertisers vanished because of their opposition to the Hungarian government, leaving only one print opposition daily.

The State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Budapest have remained almost entirely silent about all of this.

The compliant new U.S. approach was initially discussed at a Dec. 18, 2017, meeting of the National Security Council's policy coordinating committee led by Fiona Hill, the council's senior director for European and Russian affairs, and Assistant Secretary Mitchell, according to two sources familiar with the proceedings. They concluded that previous efforts under the Bush administration, and especially the Obama administration, had not paid off, so it was time to try something else.

Accordingly, the first high-level meeting between the two sides took place at the White House on May 15, when John Bolton, Trump's national security adviser, received Jenő Megyesy, Orbán's chief adviser on the United States. (Megyesy was also the official point of contact for then-Trump aide Carter Page's meetings in Budapest during the campaign.) This coming week, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto is scheduled to [meet](#) Secretary of State Mike Pompeo; although Szijjarto has visited Washington an eye-popping seven times in the past 18 months, this will be the first such high-level bilateral meeting since 2012. The only step left would be for Trump to receive Orbán — the first European head of government to endorse Trump over Hillary Clinton and congratulate him on his victory — at the White House.

What, if anything, is the United States getting from Hungary for this appeasement? The \$12 billion Russian-financed and secretly signed Russian Paks II nuclear plant in southern Hungary is one reflection of Orbán's Russian orientation. (Orbán previously welcomed energy investments from the now-failed Russian South Stream pipeline.) Hungary spends only 1 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, among the lowest levels for NATO members, despite Trump's insistence that nations step up their payments. (Budapest [said](#) last year that it would increase spending, but it has said this many times before.)

Many intelligent Hungarians — watching the complicity, or at least inaction, of the U.S. government — do not understand what is happening, they tell us. They know that Trump wants to be different from Barack Obama, including in his approach to Hungary. But they search in vain for logic in Trump's posture. For those who still [believe](#) in the merits of a Western-style democracy there, which is a large majority in Budapest and a large minority in the countryside, the policy of appeasement signifies abandonment. They would like Washington to keep hope alive. People who suffer from, or are ashamed by, the government's anti-Semitic discourse and attacks on liberal norms long for a different America.

And there may be one. David Cornstein, the new U.S. ambassador to Hungary, who will arrive in Budapest in a few weeks, might make a difference. In his appearance before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in early May, he [spoke](#) eloquently about promoting American values. He promised to fight against anti-Semitism, not just in Hungary but elsewhere in Europe, too. His nice, old-fashioned remarks were even cleared by the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Budapest. He received strong expressions of support from Republican and Democratic senators, including Sen. Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.), who is something of an expert on Hungarian politics. There is still hope, then, that decent, humane values will be heard by Hungarians who, in search of answers, continue to look to the United States.

But the hour is late. Orban's vision has **gained** considerable appeal throughout Europe. In 2014, when he **declared** the end of the age of liberalism, he was seen as a pariah; today he is the leader of a xenophobic, authoritarian and often anti-American trend that haunts Poland, Austria and Turkey. He has won many converts to the cause of strengthening nation-states and weakening multilateral institutions, notably the European Union. His hostility to migration, particularly what he **calls** the "Islamic multitude" that "leads to the disintegration of nations," is widely shared. He is admired for having built the first wall in Europe — on the Hungarian-Serbian border — to stem the flow of migrants in 2015. (Paradoxically, Hungary used to be admired for tearing down the barrier between itself and Austria, precipitating the fall of the Berlin Wall.)

It remains as true today as it was in the 1930s that appeasement — the sacrificing of one's principles to avoid confrontation with illiberalism — does not pay. Although we hope the Trump administration will reconsider its flawed strategy, recent events are not promising.

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