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Orban pushes big tax breaks to persuade Hungarian women to have more babies

by [Griff Witte](#)

BERLIN — Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has built his political brand on saying “no” to immigration.

But his stalwart resistance — when combined with an [exodus of young workers](#) and low birthrates — has created a demographic nightmare. Hungary’s population is shrinking, a trend that poses long-term risks for the economy. It has also caused short-term political trouble for Orban, who has had to enact unpopular labor laws to try to wring more hours from a declining workforce.

Rather than rethink his immigration policies, the prime minister on Sunday doubled down on his preferred solution: Hungarian women need to have more babies.

In his annual state of the nation address, Orban announced a slew of incentives to get his countrymen and women in a baby-making state of mind. Most dramatically, he said any woman who has four children or more will never have to pay income tax again.

As he does with almost every speech, the right-wing and [increasingly autocratic](#) prime minister used the announcement to contrast his approach with that of Western Europe, and to take aim squarely at those who see any upside to immigration.

“In all of Europe there are fewer and fewer children, and the answer of the West to this is migration,” Orban said. “They want as many migrants to enter as they are missing kids, so that the numbers will add up.”

Hungary, he insisted, has a better answer: “We Hungarians have a different way of thinking. Instead of just numbers, we want Hungarian children. Migration for us is surrender.”

In addition to the tax exemption for mothers of four or more, the prime minister offered state support for those buying seven-seat vehicles, mortgage relief for parents with multiple children and additional places at nursery schools.

Orban did not say how the measures would be funded.

The proposals still need parliamentary approval. But in Hungary, where Orban won a two-thirds parliamentary majority last spring to secure his fourth term, approval for the prime minister's initiatives is all but guaranteed.

This is not the first time Orban — who, with his wife, has five children — has tried to prod Hungarians into picking up the reproductive pace. Earlier in his tenure, he introduced a measure that offered families reduced taxes for every new child.

He has said his current term is dedicated to solving the country's demographic problems and that convincing women to have more children is at the heart of that effort. He vowed shortly after last year's victory to "reach a comprehensive agreement with Hungarian women."

In the male-dominated world of Hungarian politics, he is doing so with little input from women themselves.

There are more men named Laszlo (two) than there are women (one) in [his cabinet](#). The lone female member has no portfolio, giving her little sway in a government that has moved aggressively on gender issues, including banning the funding for gender studies programs at Hungarian universities.

Orban has explained the absence of women in top government jobs by suggesting they cannot handle the "stress" of the rough-and-tumble world that is Hungarian politics.

Hungary's fertility rate — 1.45 children per woman — is lower than the 1.58 average across the European Union. With large numbers of young Hungarians leaving the country in search of better wages and greater freedoms elsewhere in Europe, the population is steadily declining. Nearly 10 million today, it is projected to be just over 8 million by 2050.

Other countries across Central and Eastern Europe are facing similar population declines. And other governments have discovered incentivizing child birth can be a politically popular way of addressing the problem. In Poland, the ruling Law and Justice party found favor with a plan to offer subsidies to families with two or more children.

Orban's proposal comes as he prepares to contest European parliamentary elections that he has cast as a binary choice between the cosmopolitan liberalism of the West and the nationalist, "illiberal democracy" that he has helped to pioneer in Hungary.

Orban built fences in 2015 and 2016 to keep asylum seekers out even as other European countries — notably Germany — welcomed large numbers of newcomers. In Germany, the arrivals have helped the country to arrest a long-term [demographic slide](#).

In his speech Sunday, Orban railed against "mixed population countries" and warned that Christians were becoming a minority in Europe. "There is no return ticket," he said.

Normally sure-footed politically, Orban had stumbled recently with legislation intended to allow employers to demand more overtime from their workers. Dubbed "the slave law" by critics, it

was widely seen as an attempt to address a labor shortage that has left employers without enough workers.

Passage of the law triggered [mass protests](#) from unions, opposition parties and civil society in December and January.

One such protest was held on Sunday as the prime minister spoke, though the crowd was smaller than the ones that had filled central Budapest squares in previous weeks. Opponents say the labor law puts strain on home life by keeping parents from spending time with their children and runs counter to the government's insistence that it is family-friendly.

"If the government is serious about supporting families," opposition lawmaker Bernadett Szel wrote on Facebook after Orban's speech, "it must start by withdrawing the family-breaking slave law."