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Why do conservatives now love autocrats?

by Anne Applebaum

They were not members of the communist party, just sympathizers. They didn't carry out any murderous policies, just turned the other way when others did. Known as "fellow travelers," these intellectuals were enthralled by the ideals of the Soviet Union but blind to the impact of those ideals in practice. The British socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb [praised](#) the slave labor camps used to build the White Sea Canal as "a triumph in human regeneration." "I have seen the future and it works," said the journalist Lincoln Steffens, after a trip to the U.S.S.R.

The fellow travelers of the 20th century have many modern counterparts, starting with the European leftists and Code Pink activists who [keep faith](#) with Hugo Chávez's Venezuelan regime, now led by Nicolás Maduro, which has created an economic catastrophe in the name of "Bolivarian socialism." But it isn't necessary to be a left-wing Chavista to misunderstand a foreign country and celebrate its ugly ideas. Intellectuals of the right are just as susceptible to the lure of exotic ideologies, and equally prone to admire foreign authoritarians who seem to achieve things that democracies, with their boring coalition politics and their tedious rule of law, cannot.

On Monday, President Trump [hosted](#) one of these exotic foreign ideologues at the White House. Viktor Orban, prime minister of a country with just under 10 million inhabitants — less than the population of North Carolina — has set out to persuade British and American intellectuals to join his war against liberal democracy. At embassy dinners in London and at Washington events sponsored by Hungarian government foundations, elegantly dressed Hungarian officials expound the values of their [corrupt](#), authoritarian state — and now some U.S. conservatives, perhaps frustrated because they can't vanquish their own opponents so easily, have come to believe them. Mike Gonzalez of the Heritage Foundation [imagines](#) that other Europeans dislike Orban because Hungarians are "constantly reminding their neighbors not to be embarrassed by Europe's history." Christopher Caldwell, writing recently in the *Claremont Review of Books*, [admires](#) Orban's attack on "neutral social structures and a level playing field," presuming that the Hungarian leader derives these policies from some mystical need for organic community.

In fact, European anger at Orban has nothing do with being reminded of history, and [everything to do](#) with Orban's all-out assault on his country's legal and judicial institutions, on independent media, on academia and on culture. And the purpose of this assault has nothing to do with mystical organic communities: The reason the ruling party has undermined judicial independence and [expelled](#) the country's leading university is because it wants to maintain its monopoly on power and [continue accumulating wealth](#). No large business can operate in Hungary without ruling-party approval; many in Orban's inner circle [have mysteriously](#)

managed to make fortunes; independent businesspeople who do not toe the line are quietly threatened until they leave the country.

It's not hard, of course, to see why this might appeal to an amoral operator such as Trump, who openly admires the leaders of Russia and Saudi Arabia. As Trump's ambassador to Hungary [recently put it](#), in an overly honest interview in the Atlantic, Trump "would love to have the situation that Viktor Orban has, but he doesn't."

But how does it appeal to conservative intellectuals? That's easy: Orban not only presents a much milder, bloodless form of authoritarianism, he also dresses it up in an elaborate costume, offering a fairy tale, a lie about how he defies the European Union (in fact, he is happy [to take its money](#)), opposes "elites" (he, his family and his cronies are Hungary's elite), [supports](#) "Christianity" (if Christianity is understood to mean repression and theft) and, of course, fights the Muslim hordes (who don't exist).

With great fanfare, Orban put a length of razor wire along his country's border with Serbia a few years ago, to stop Syrian refugees who were trying to get to ... Germany. Nobody was trying to get into Hungary then; nobody is trying to get in now. But the fantasy of an ethnically pure state, pushing back against immigration and multiculturalism, continues to appeal to a certain kind of American who wishes their country could do the same. And never mind that the wave of immigration in Europe was finally halted by centrist politicians such as Germany's Angela Merkel, who persuaded Turkey to take more refugees, and by stepped-up European Union border controls. And, never mind that the amount of hateful rhetoric spouted about refugees in Hungary, or indeed in Italy or France, has risen [since the refugee crisis subsided](#). It bears no relation to the number of refugees actually coming into the country, and never did.

To be absolutely clear: We are talking about a European leader who uses overt racism and covert anti-Semitism in his election propaganda, speaking of fighting an unnamed "enemy" who is "crafty" and "international" and "speculates with money." We are talking about a European leader who [has thumbed his nose](#) at the United States, bent over backwards [to welcome a Russian bank](#) that is thought to have espionage links and undermined U.S. policy in Ukraine. We are talking about a European leader who inspired one Hungarian academic [to write](#), in a tragic, elegiac article, that his country had "committed suicide in plain sight." The educated young [are leaving](#) Hungary, if they aren't already gone; the prospects for anyone who rejects the public festivals of hatred and prejudice are dire. But because they don't actually have to live in Hungary, a certain kind of American conservative, just like a certain kind of American leftist long ago, will continue admiring this leader, because they can.