



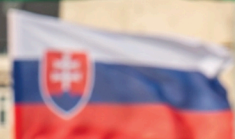
DANUBE

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Small States, Heavy Pressure: Hungary and Slovakia in the Crosshairs of Liberal Power

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Image: Slovak and Hungarian flag at chain bridge Budapest, capital city of Hungary, from Shutterstock.



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About the Danube Institute

The Danube Institute, established in 2013 by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation in Budapest, serves as a hub for the exchange of ideas and individuals within Central Europe and between Central Europe, other parts of Europe, and the English-speaking world. Rooted in a commitment to respectful conservatism in cultural, religious, and social life, the Institute also upholds the broad classical liberal tradition in economics and a realistic Atlanticism in national security policy. These guiding principles are complemented by a dedication to exploring the interplay between democracy and patriotism, emphasizing the nation-state as the cornerstone of democratic governance and international cooperation.

Through research, analysis, publication, debate, and scholarly exchanges, the Danube Institute engages with center-right intellectuals, political leaders, and public-spirited citizens, while also fostering dialogue with counterparts on the democratic center-left. Its activities include establishing and supporting research groups, facilitating international conferences and fellowships, and encouraging youth participation in scholarly and political discourse. By drawing upon the expertise of leading minds across national boundaries, the Institute aims to contribute to the development of democratic societies grounded in national identity and civic engagement.

About the Author



Michael O'Shea is an American-Polish writer and translator. He researched at the Danube Institute in 2021-22 as a Budapest Fellow, sponsored by the Hungary Foundation and Mathias Corvinus Collegium, and rejoined the Danube Institute in 2023. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from the University of North Carolina and a Master of Business Administration from Indiana University. His articles have appeared in numerous North American and European publications. His primary areas of interest are Central Europe and the North Atlantic.

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Micheal O'Shea

Abstract

This paper examines the information and opinion campaigns conducted against the governments of Hungary, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and Slovakia, under Prime Minister Robert Fico, waged by foreign governments and NGOs and the EU itself. Both are small, post-communist states bordering war-torn Ukraine. Both governments are widely described as sovereigntist and sceptical of EU federal mandates. Both feature long-serving leaders who have endured significant political controversy. Among European governments in power as of this writing (January 2026), those in Hungary and Slovakia are uniquely subject to pressure campaigns from Brussels and other liberal Western capitals. This paper aims to present critical interpretations of two uniquely maligned governments in a manner unlikely to be encountered in Western corporate media.

Introduction

On 30 June 2025, *EUobserver* published the following editorial from a foreign-affairs editor in its daily subscriber newsletter:

Predictably enough, Slovakia's prime minister Robert Fico has joined Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán in trying to blackmail the EU in return for agreeing to new Russia sanctions. Why "predictably"? Not because they're both Kremlin shills (which they are), but because the EU made the mistake in the past of giving Orbán concessions whenever he wavered around his veto. It was only a matter of time before someone else wanted a piece of the same action. So here's my advice: Instead of offering either of them anything, take away everything instead. Call their bluff: Let them block the 18th round of Russia measures (which are fairly weak anyway) and justify this to their shrinking voters. At the same time, hit them with anything you can: Frozen funds, infringement proceedings, court cases, intrusive audits, public insults, boycotts. Also, my advice to member states: Get your intelligence services to work and put some hard truths in the hands of Hungarian/Slovak/European journalists. Who else in Orbán's homophobic party goes to gay orgies? How did Orbán's friends and family really get so rich? Is anyone linked to Fico skimming cash off energy imports from Russia? If these two little traitors want a war with the EU - let's give them one.¹

EUobserver purports to be 'editorially independent and not aligned with any political party, government, or corporate interest' and bills itself as 'the only independent news media covering EU affairs in Brussels and beyond'.² This text articulates ideas that are usually left unsaid, but it accurately represents liberal Western institutional stances toward the two small Central European states.

Liberal institutional efforts to hinder the governments in Budapest and Bratislava extend well beyond journalistic excesses. They have included active support of opposition political groups, election activities meant to support anti-Fico and anti-Orbán political figures, and economic, political and judicial machinations on the part of EU institutions.

From 2021 to 2023, NGOs received at least €7.4 billion in EU funding, including €4.8 billion from European Commission programs and €2.6 billion managed by member states. In 2022, the EU launched the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) program, with the intention of more easily disbursing EU funds to NGOs. According to the

European Court of Auditors, more than 12,000 NGOs have received EU funds, though the Court warns these numbers cannot be verified. There is currently no mechanism that allows public transparency into the precise amount of EU money flowing to NGOs.³

Lavish funding – to the tune of hundreds of thousands of euros – of issue-specific NGOs, including organizations related to climate, migration, and LGBT advocacy, draws obvious questions about the line between EU grants and legislation. A scandal ensued in 2025 when contracts revealed a climate-advocacy organization receiving EU funds was tasked with influencing EU legislation.⁴

In December 2025, American academic Nathan Pinkoski wrote in the American online magazine *Compact* (not to be confused with the German publication by the same name):

The latest budget proposal from the European Commission proposes a 600 percent increase to its already generous NGO funding, bringing it up to more than \$10 billion. The project makes no secret of its progressive priorities: The proposed structure for distribution, AgoraEU, aims to make Europeans "more aware and appreciative of diversity." For at least the next four years, the EU bureaucracy will act as an official, left-wing opposition to the US federal government, promoting the ideology within the West that Washington won't. More EU legislation is codifying the state-society partnerships crucial to expanding progressivism's reach. This means that we can expect the cultural war over wokeness within the West to intensify over the next decade rather than subside.⁵

One year into the second Trump Administration in the United States, Brussels observers effectively had the answer to a key political question: What, if anything, would replace the formerly lavish activist spending on the part of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)? The new administration in Washington has undoubtedly brought relief to these embattled governments of Central Europe, but some pressure points have merely shifted within Europe.

This European institutional behaviour is unprecedented. It was a constant reality for the sovereigntist governments in Poland led by the *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Law and Justice) party from 2015 to 2023. It was readily apparent in the annulment of the 2024 presidential election in Romania. It is an unpleasant fact for opposition parties deemed hostile to

the liberal order, such as the *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany) and France's *Rassemblement national* (National Rally).

However, as of this writing, in January 2026, no other active European governments can be said to face the same invective from liberal institutions as those in Bratislava and Budapest. Hungary will hold parliamentary elections in April 2026, meaning the country will continue to be a magnet for political-influence campaigns. The Fico government in Slovakia holds a narrow parliamentary majority, leading analysts to question whether it will endure until the next scheduled elections in 2027. Even with new realities in Washington, EU institutions have demonstrated little inclination to compromise on liberal hegemony. The dynamic by which Hungary and Slovakia wield outsize continental influence, and draw outsize institutional invective, is certain to continue.



Robert Fico, Prime Minister of Slovakia, speaks at a joint press conference with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, from Shutterstock.

Slovakia

Slovakia has become a fascinating player in European geopolitics. In 2023, Robert Fico prevailed in parliamentary elections and began his fourth term as prime minister. In 2024, in a precursor to events in the United States, Fico survived an assassination attempt—though his injuries were life-threatening. Responses from European leaders and institutions were lukewarm.

Other politicians might have resolved to keep a low profile in these circumstances, but Slovakia (population: 5.4 million) has continued to punch above its weight during this Fico government. Fico has joined Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in vocal criticism of the EU's martial posturing in Ukraine, migrant-relocation machinations and social activism. For Hungarians accustomed to clashing with the Slovakian government over historical and social issues, and aligning closely with the Polish government, the last two years have presented a remarkable departure from normal regional relationship dynamics.

Observers in Brussels, Washington and elsewhere have noticed this transformation as well. In 2024, after the discussion of the assassination attempt subsided, the EU threatened to withhold billions of euros from Bratislava due to 'rule of law' concerns,⁶ a tactic familiar to Hungarians and Poles. Western journalists have regularly branded Fico a far-left (or far-right) extremist, a Russian lackey, or an emboldened autocrat.

In late 2024, a series of well-coordinated protests began to shake the Prime Minister's narrow parliamentary majority. The events paralleled those of 2018, when Fico resigned from the prime-ministerial office amid civic protests and political unrest stemming from the mafia-linked murder of a journalist couple. The recent round of protests continued into January 2025, when Fico asserted: 'We are too seasoned and experienced for some NGOs...to subvert our state'.⁷

At the heart of the protests was the organization Mier Ukrajine (Peace for Ukraine), which, despite its recent origins, has demonstrated impressive choreography, networking and media reach. The group contends that the Fico government is reorienting the country away from Europe and toward Russia, an accusation to which Hungarians have become accustomed. It has orchestrated several rounds of demonstrations in Bratislava and other cities since late 2024.

At the time of those protests, the newly installed Trump Administration began to draw widespread attention to the global web of NGO activities, government funding and

ideological staffing realities. Washington targeted the USAID ideological patronage network, and Brussels reportedly sought to fill the resulting financial gaps.⁸ Similarly, Vice President J.D. Vance chastised the European leadership class for its flagrant anti-democratic behaviour at the Munich Security Conference. These phenomena—like Trump and Fico themselves—are not new in the European political landscape, but they are now eliciting meaningful societal dialogue.

For a small country, Slovakia has an extensive NGO ecosystem. Globsec is among Europe's most prominent international-relations organizations, and its annual Globsec Global Security Forum (which moved from Bratislava to Prague in 2024, following tension with the Fico government)⁹ regularly attracts luminaries of global governance. Globsec's funding is opaque, though some coordination with institutions such as the United States Embassy and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is publicly documented. Its 2023 report notes: 'Institutions (including governments) contributed 38 per cent of the total income', while 'Approximately 20 per cent of the total income came from foundations and NGOs'.¹⁰ The 2024 report notes: 'Corporate partners played the most significant role in supporting our initiatives, contributing 54% of the total income', while 'Public sector contributed 19% of the total income', and 'Approximately 27% of the total income came from foundations and NGOs'.¹¹

Other prominent liberal think tanks include the Bratislava Policy Institute and the Institute for Public Affairs. Via Iuris is a legal organization that states, 'Our role is to defeat myths about NGOs...'¹² The country also features a plethora of civic activist groups like Peace for Ukraine. Early analysis of Biden-era USAID funding revealed the following grants to activist groups in the country:

- Sapling, o.z. – 'to help promote and protect the human rights of LGBTQI+ people in Slovakia';¹³
- Iniciatíva Inakost' – 'to create a supportive environment for Slovakia's LGBTQI+ minority';¹⁴ and
- Dúha na východe, o.z. – 'to support diversity, acceptance, and solidarity towards LGBTQ+ people and their families in eastern Slovakia'.¹⁵

Among organizations headquartered abroad, the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) and the German Marshall Fund (GMF) feature Slovak figures and aim to influence policy affecting Slovakia. Visegrád Insight, a media platform of the Polish Res Publica Foundation, presents its view of

Slovakia to journalists, economists and policy figures. The Soros Open Society Foundations network is active in the country. All of these organizations promote a liberal, transnational worldview and enjoy the backing of the Western political class.

Fico and allies have brought their battle against NGOs to parliament. In 2025, parliamentarians debated and approved legislation necessitating financial transparency for NGOs. The law requires a transparency report—including sources of funding and membership data—for such institutions with annual income exceeding €35,000 and regulate how they engage in lobbying.¹⁶ Factions of the government coalition quibbled extensively over the wording of amendments, which delayed its passage.¹⁷

Outside the halls of parliament, NGOs reacted with predictable outrage.¹⁸ ‘Together, we are ready to use all transparent and democratic means to stop this law’, vowed Peace for Ukraine.¹⁹ Via Iuris submitted a report claiming the law runs afoul of European law and the Slovak constitution. The Open Society Foundations unveiled in Bratislava the remnants of an ambulance reportedly destroyed by Russian drones in Ukraine; it was an allusion to the NGO ecosystem’s rallying cry that the law is Russian-inspired.²⁰

The Slovakian law’s sponsors counter that it is closely based on a German law governing NGOs. In fact, the German law levies a €50,000 penalty for transparency non-compliance, far more severe than the Slovakian version.²¹ The German law also mandates a public registry of lobbying entities,²² as well as annual reports.²³ Britain, France, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands sent delegations to the Slovak Constitutional Court to insist the law be ruled unconstitutional.²⁴ As of this writing, it is unclear whether this lobbying will impact Slovakian judicial rulings.

Slovak political scientist and former government minister Juraj Draxler believes NGOs’ ‘financial flows and personnel networks are relatively well known, even without the law’. In April 2025, he asserted:

Everyone who needs to know, knows what [Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund] Pavol Demeš is doing, where [Deputy Mayor of Bratislava and protest organizer] Lucia Štasselová came from, who [Senior Research Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations] Milan Nič is, what transnational networks formed around entities like the [British pro-market think tank] Legatum Institute are doing, what the various “security analysts” like [journalist] Victor Breiner and co. are capable—or, rather, incapable—of doing, who pays for

*Globsec, which “NGO” figures are friends with which journalists...etc., etc.*²⁵

Draxler also contends that government ministers know that, when they depart a public role, they are certain to find a landing place in the NGO ecosystem. Hungarians might note, for example, that former Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai sits on the board of directors of Globsec.²⁶ Former President Zuzana Čaputová, counted among Anne Applebaum’s ‘harbingers of something else, something better, something that we can’t yet imagine’²⁷ in the 2020 book *Twilight of Democracy*, is currently a Visiting Fellow at Stanford University in California.²⁸ It is no surprise, then, that this milieu is reacting with alarm to a threat to the status quo, one that ensures personal enrichment and political hegemony.

In September 2025, the Slovakian parliament passed a constitutional amendment confirming recognition of only two sexes, bolstering parental schooling rights, banning surrogacy, and assuring the primacy of Slovakian law over EU equivalents.²⁹ Unsurprisingly, this led to near-immediate threats from European institutions. Passing the amendment required a strange alliance of political actors, with some members of the opposition joining most members of the government coalition. This is not unusual in Slovakia, where political camps don’t fit neatly along a left-right axis.

In this political landscape, journalists and politicians struggle to characterize Prime Minister Robert Fico. They often employ terms like ‘left-wing nationalist’. In 2025, the European Parliament’s Party of European Socialists expelled Fico’s Smer-SD party for, effectively, insufficient commitment to the proxy war in Ukraine.³⁰

A recent scandal in Slovakia illuminated one corner of the shadowy web linking governments, NGOs, and transnational institutions that precipitated the NGO reporting law.³¹ In a development that garnered little attention outside Slovakia, the UK Foreign Office under a Conservative government was caught interfering in elections to benefit a Slovakian left-liberal party. Both countries are NATO members. The episode illustrates a realignment of Western politics along attitudes to liberalism, with the Western foreign-policy apparatus openly working to promote liberal aims abroad.

In a scandal dubbed ‘Zincgate’ in Slovakia, the British government paid influencers to affect the 2023 Slovakian parliamentary elections to the detriment of Fico, who nonetheless prevailed and formed a narrow governing coalition.

The independent British publication Declassified UK has conducted a years-long investigation that revealed the Foreign Office paid Zinc Network Ltd nearly £10 million to ‘counter disinformation in 22 countries across Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, and in the Baltics’.³² Influencers signed nondisclosure agreements, and content was subject to approval by the Foreign Office. To date, only pre-election projects in Slovakia have been publicly confirmed. (Though the public does not yet know whether Hungary is one of these countries, the mathematics of ‘22 countries across Central, Eastern and Southern Europe’ suggests it is likely.)

Independent outlet Marker broke the story in Slovakia,³³ and Slovakian conservative daily Postoj later confirmed Zinc Network provided the nonprofit MEMO 98 with over €63,000, while the British Foreign Office directly spent an additional €35,000 on the related CHCEM TU ZOSTAŤ (I want to stay here) campaign.³⁴ Most of the funds distributed through Zinc Network financed an election calculator aimed at undecided voters.

MEMO 98 and CHCEM TU ZOSTAŤ meet the legal definitions of non-partisanship. However, Slovaks would immediately recognize the ‘98’ in MEMO’s name refers to the 1998 Slovakian parliamentary elections, in which a powerful NGO apparatus helped defeat populist Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar.

Key figures of the CHCEM TU ZOSTAŤ campaign included activist Veronika Cifrová Ostrihoňová, who later become a MEP for the left-wing opposition Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia – PS) party; former technocratic Prime Minister Ľudovít Ódor, who also later joined PS; and former Prime Minister Iveta Radičová, who led a government between previous administrations of current Prime Minister Robert Fico. The campaign website is unsubtle, as primary organizers include the Open Society Foundation, as well as other prominent liberal NGOs.³⁵

‘The main faces of the Chcem tu zostať campaign...as well as many other artists and public figures...who joined the campaign are clearly associated with a specific political camp, which is currently in opposition’, noted journalist Jozef Majchrák in Postoj.³⁶ ‘Several of them are associated with its progressive wing’. He added, ‘Although not openly declared, it was completely obvious. A quick glance at the target group, the actors, and the form of the campaign is enough to confirm this’.

Then, Zinc Network features an image from a British anti-immigration rally on its website to demonstrate its work in ‘Countering extremism and radicalisation’.³⁷ Former

employees said their work was ‘state propaganda’ and that influencer relationships were ‘extremely exploitative’.³⁸

UK officials have maintained innocence. A Foreign Office statement asserted, ‘This activity was aimed at encouraging young people to participate in the democratic process in their countries by participating in elections, regardless of their political affiliation or support’.³⁹ One Foreign Office spokesman explained ‘the UK will always promote truth and democratic values...We are working with partner governments to resist and refute disinformation spread by those who seek to undermine the British people and our allies’.⁴⁰ Then-Ambassador Nigel Baker told the liberal Slovakian publication Denník N, ‘It is both sad and ridiculous that my first summons came from an ally’.⁴¹

These assertions of non-partisanship and NATO friendship are duplicitous. Exit polls confirmed the conventional wisdom that young voters supported Progressive Slovakia and other left-liberal parties.⁴² This has been consistent since the NGO-driven 1998 campaign. In this era of advanced analytics, elections feature precise targeting of demographics like young female voters. On the NATO front, European behaviour toward Slovakia and Central European neighbours confirms liberal dogma is more important than EU or NATO membership.

Slovak journalists have noted the UK Foreign Office ran this hybrid campaign in secret, targeted a left-liberal demographic, and refused to deliver a list of influencers to the Slovakian government. Politicians and journalists across the West regularly assert this is unacceptable Russian behaviour.

Slovakia, of course, is a self-sufficient democracy. President Peter Pellegrini noted:

*Voter turnout in Slovakia has been steadily increasing in the last four parliamentary elections: from 59.1% in 2012, to 59.8% in 2016, to 65.8% in 2020, to 68.5% in 2023. It therefore does not seem necessary for a foreign country to explain to people in Slovakia why it is important to vote. In contrast, voter turnout in the 2024 parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom was 59.7%, a 7.6% decrease compared to the previous elections. So isn't promoting voter turnout more of a challenge for British governments on their home turf?*⁴³

This scandal also should not be dismissed simply because Robert Fico’s camp prevailed. Numbers from pollster Focus and the Open Society Foundation suggest young voters participated at approximately the same rate as the general populace, after reporting willingness to vote of just over 50 percent before the UK-funded campaigns.⁴⁴ Fico’s Smer-SD

party thus won only a razor-thin parliamentary majority, which has significant ramifications to this day.

MEMO 98 and CHCEM TU ZOSTAŤ were not the only nonprofit groups engaged in leading pre-election activities in 2023. For example, the organization Mladí proti fašizmu (Youth against Fascism) funded and organized trips for students living in Czechia to return to Slovakia to vote in the parliamentary elections.⁴⁵ While such activities met a technical definition of nonpartisan behaviour, they targeted at least two demonstrably left-leaning voting blocs (young voters and expatriates). Expatriates voted in record numbers in that election,⁴⁶ and more than half of them voted for the left-wing Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia – PS) party.⁴⁷ Similarly, leading television channel Markíza and lifestyle magazine Refresher collaborated on the election campaign Nerozhoduj za mňa (Don't decide for me) aimed at young voters. One week before the parliamentary elections, the campaign staged a 'Concert for the Future' in central Bratislava with an appearance by PS party leader Michal Šimečka, who called it a 'mobilization concert'.⁴⁸ A campaign video featured lesbian imagery and climate-change content.⁴⁹

In April 2025, Erik Kaliňák, deputy leader of Prime Minister Fico's Smer-SD party, and a member of the European Parliament, released videos alleging comprehensive government and NGO interference on behalf of PS and other opposition parties, as well as a plan for organized resistance in the event of a Fico victory. Kaliňák presented evidence that, during the previous government, Globsec had organized a 'whole-of-society' network of public and private sectors, NGOs, and members of government ministries. The network reportedly coordinated communications and responses to 'disinformation'. In late 2022, they began to coordinate election activities.⁵⁰

Kaliňák's allegations suggest that the network, known as Stratcom Hub, reportedly coordinated 'undecided/non-voters' with expressed left-wing leanings. 'Three strong campaign points should be established with a focus on convinc-

ing young people to vote correctly, and to go to the polls at all'. Minutes of one meeting suggest Dominika Hajdu and Katarína Klingová, both affiliated with Globsec, discussed media influence and NGO social-media campaign strategies. Another document outlines collaboration with the aforementioned NGOs Youth against Fascism and MEMO98, the latter of which 'works continuously with Ukrainian journalists and strives to bring the stories of refugees to the media as much as possible'.⁵¹

Yet another Kaliňák document suggests Globsec's Klingová asked whether NGO Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS) had a backup plan 'if SMER wins the election'. 'How should NGOs deal with opponents after the elections?' Meeting participants determined that five NGOs would be selected for training and would operate on microgrants in the event of a Fico victory. PDCS representatives reportedly asserted that Slovakia would avoid an 'Orbán scenario' and that, 'at a meeting in Hungary, [a PDCS] partner from the third sector told them how to circumvent the laws in Hungary necessary for the functioning of NGOs (e.g., how to change the names of projects and their composition so that they comply with legislation and subsequently draw funds for their purpose)'.⁵²

Some network relationships can be traced without relying on Kaliňák's testimony. For example, Miroslava Sawiris, a member of the government at the time and a listed attendee of Stratcom Hub meetings, is now a senior fellow at Globsec.⁵³ Reflecting on the relatively small amount of private documents that have surfaced, and the degree of domestic and foreign institutional resistance to the Fico government, one can get a sense of how coordinated forces are shaping politics in Slovakia.

Regardless of his motivations, Prime Minister Fico has become the uncontested face of postliberal Slovakia, and one of the key faces of postliberal Europe. This has earned him a near-fatal gunshot wound and regular invective from the European political establishment, with more of the latter surely forthcoming into 2027 and beyond.



Viktor Orbán, arrives to attend an meeting of Heads of State or Government in Prague, from Shutterstock.

Hungary

In January 2026, *POLITICO Europe* published an analysis calling the upcoming Hungarian parliamentary elections ‘the most important’ to take place in the European Union in 2026. ‘The Brussels establishment is praying for [opposition leader Péter] Magyar to win’, assert the authors. They note how European People’s Party leader Manfred Weber ‘quickly welcomed’ Magyar’s Tisza party into their political camp ‘to secure influence over Budapest’ and to ‘give them resources’.⁵⁴ It was standard fare for *POLITICO Europe*, billeted as the mouthpiece of the European governing class, and a regular source of invective aimed at Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s government.

That description of *POLITICO Europe* could apply to most Western media, which openly jockey to push Orbán from the political stage. The examples are too numerous to count, but a few can illustrate the wider picture. In 2018, Deutsche Welle published an interactive module titled ‘Viktor Orban’s [sic] most controversial migration comments’.⁵⁵ In its saga-like telling of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s handling of the 2015 migrant crisis, Der Spiegel portrays Orbán as a central villain.⁵⁶ In January 2024, Dutch journalist Caroline de Gruyter wrote in EUobserver that ‘Orbán’s Budapest is decaying, literally and metaphorically...Many buildings are dirty. The streets have potholes. The woodwork of the main station, Keleti, is literally crumbling.’⁵⁷ It was a particularly striking case of cognitive dissonance from someone who traverses the cities of Western Europe. The New York Times published a July 2025 editorial⁵⁸ following a January 2025 interview⁵⁹ with departed U.S. Ambassador David Pressman; both portrayed the lawyer and activist as a sympathetic figure who endured dangerous conditions.

In 2020, then-candidate Joe Biden gave a clue of what was to come when he listed Hungary and Poland among the ‘thugs of the world’, along with dictatorship Belarus.⁶⁰ After taking office, the Biden Administration engaged in a consistent effort to bully and belittle these NATO and EU allies.

In its first years, the Biden Administration ignored Budapest. It conspicuously neglected to send an ambassador and excluded Hungary from events like the 2021 ‘Summit for Democracy’.⁶¹ This period would prove comparably productive for bilateral relations.

In late summer of 2022, attorney David Pressman arrived in Budapest as the Biden Administration’s ambassador. For better or worse, American ambassadors are often political donors or allies. Pressman, however, is an activist: he lives

openly in a homosexual relationship, sports ties to powerful liberal figures like George Clooney, and possesses a track record of legal activism on behalf of liberal causes, both at prestigious law firms and at a prominent left-wing legal organization that slanders conservative figures. In short, Pressman was hand-picked to be a belligerent figure in Budapest.

That proved precisely the case during the second half of the Biden Administration. For example, the U.S. Embassy posted a Twitter (now X) quiz asking users to guess whether a quote came from a member of the Hungarian government or Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁶² Pressman was frequently present at Hungarian LGBT-advocacy events and an unofficial spokesman for Hungarian opposition parties. Before Hungary’s 2022 parliamentary elections, left-wing political organizations reportedly received several million dollars from foreign sources, including the United States.⁶³ Similarly, in 2024, more than a dozen left-wing Hungarian NGOs announced their selection for U.S. State Department funding; all were actively opposed to Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz government.⁶⁴

Pressman’s tenure effectively ended with a speech on America’s Election Night, in which he claimed to ‘represent the United States of America, not a political party within it’ and accused Prime Minister Orbán of treating ‘this election like a card game at a casino’ and ‘gambling not with money but with the U.S.-Hungary relationship’.⁶⁵

Consider also the USAID Central Europe program, published in 2022, which aimed to ‘[support] new locally-driven initiatives in Central Europe with the goal of strengthening democratic institutions, civil society, and independent media, which are all pillars of resilient democratic societies’.⁶⁶ In practice, such sentiments have meant Soros-affiliated groups, advocacy for migration and sexual activism, and loyalty to Washington’s conception of 21st-century neoliberal empire. According to András László, MEP, a government commissioner appointed to study foreign political influence, this program wielded ‘a \$35 million budget and set specific objectives that include, but are not limited to, what [USAID officials] called building civil movements and networks, strengthening the state of the rule of law, and supporting their favoured media outlets’.⁶⁷

‘Some of these coordinating agencies are well-known due to their public activities, while little information is available about others’, said László. ‘Organizations like the German Marshall Fund, the National Democratic Institute, the

lesser-known Zinc Network [see ‘Slovakia’ section], the International Research and Exchanges Board, and the Dexis Consulting Group have surely received such assignments. Additionally, they identified and established national-level coordinating entities that ultimately decided how the funds were disbursed. We have a general idea of how much money was spent in Hungary within the framework of these initiatives’.⁶⁸

According to *Szuverenitásvédelmi Hivatal* (the Sovereignty Protection Office), the Hungarian government office tasked with investigating such foreign-influence activities, USAID ‘had managed an extremely complex, multi-stage, intricate funding scheme, in which it had also given a role to its allied private equity funds. The machinery was built and operated to conceal the real source and purpose’. Furthermore, ‘Regional and local organisations cooperating in the allocation of funds were expected to hide the origin of the money. USAID funding in Hungary reached political parties and politicians both indirectly and directly and drove the activity of the supported political pressure organisations’.⁶⁹

Political influence from U.S. elites has not completely ceased after President Donald Trump’s return to office. In October 2025, former U.S. President Barack Obama posted a video featuring three newly minted Obama Foundation Scholars working to ‘strengthen democracy in Hungary and Poland’.⁷⁰ The implications of ‘strengthening democracy’ in this context need not be elaborated.

Where American government institutions have ceased or limited their international activities, EU institutions have sought to exercise more influence. In the most obvious manifestation, the European Commission has withheld from Hungary, to date, over €19 billion in investment and Covid-19 recovery funds over what European officials call concerns over ‘rule of law’ and ‘judicial independence’.⁷¹ Though Hungary has experienced the superstate’s worst financial and diplomatic penalties, EU bodies have similarly punished Poland, prior to its 2023 change of govern-

ment,⁷² and threatened Slovakia.⁷³ Where geopolitical blackmail falls short, secretive endeavours will work in tandem. The European Commission’s NGO funding, distributed through AgoraEU, is certain to include a number of Hungarian projects.

As detailed previously (see ‘Slovakia’ section), minutes of a Stratcom Hub meeting, circulated by Erik Kaliňák, MEP, reveal Partners for Democratic Change Slovakia (PDCS) stated that Slovakia would avoid an ‘Orbán scenario’ and that, ‘at a meeting in Hungary, [a PDCS] partner from the third sector told them how to circumvent the laws in Hungary necessary for the functioning of NGOs (e.g., how to change the names of projects and their composition so that they comply with legislation and subsequently draw funds for their purpose)’.⁷⁴

On the fringes of European political discourse, circumvention and intrigue are insufficient to achieve what only physical violence can. One case that showcases the absurdity of EU governance is that of Ilaria Salis, MEP. In 2023, Salis was part of a foreign Antifa-linked gang that attacked nine innocent people on the streets of Budapest; the group claimed its victims ‘looked like’ neo-Nazis and beat the pedestrians with hammers and batons. A European parliamentary seat from the Italian Alleanza Verdi e Sinistra (Greens and Left Alliance) earned Salis a ticket out of a Hungarian prison and into the European Parliament.⁷⁵ Despite Hungarian protestations, the European Parliament voted to maintain her immunity in 2025, a course of action the EP has regularly shunned for parliamentarians accused of less serious offenses – and representing less acceptable political alliances.⁷⁶

As Hungary approaches its next parliamentary elections, battles both public and private will rage. Those campaigns undertaken secretly will not enter the public consciousness for years, if they enter it at all.



Handlová, Slovakia. Stunning autumn view of Catholic Church of St. Catherine of Alexandria, from Shutterstock. Prime Minister Robert Fico was shot in this town square on 15 May 2024.

Conclusion

Although many hoped otherwise, we do not seem to be returning to a world in which the center left and the center right compete over tax rates or budgets', wrote liberal luminary Anne Applebaum in 2025.⁷⁷ To her milieu, 'Right' and 'Left' are flavours of tax policy. Average citizens aren't supposed to have a choice on important issues.

It is this mindset that permits the vast network of excesses described herein. It permits frequent rhetoric of 'democracy' to coexist with annulment of inconvenient parties, leaders, and election results. It permits taxpayers to fund activist organizations working to undo that which they choose in the ballot box. It permits a class of people like Applebaum to steer a malignant form of late-stage liberalism that is not centre-left, -right or otherwise, but inherently radical and covetous of all rivals.

For every report like this one, there will be a dozen others, better-funded and better-marketed, asserting precisely the opposite. What they can never have is the beauty that derives from elevating spiritual belief over material certainty. Slovakia and Hungary exemplify this beauty in a way GDP figures could never reflect.

Hungary, Slovakia – and others that come and go – will encounter a succession of victories and defeats in this never-ending game of geopolitics. May the former exceed the latter.

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