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# Viktor Orbán: The EU's Biggest Bully

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to show how Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, as a leader of EU member state, has damaged the EU's normative power and exposed pre-existing flaws within the EU system of governance. In my paper, I delve into how Orbán has impacted EU foreign policy in recent years, becoming the EU's "problem child" regarding several current issues. Additionally, I argue that he has helped embolden other EU countries in their illiberalism. I provide analysis for each of these cases to support my main argument that Orbán damages the EU's normative power. In the final section of my paper, I discuss how Orbán could impact the EU's future, especially how the EU will handle Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I conclude by providing two courses of action that the EU can take in face of the challenge that Orbán is posing.

## **KEYWORDS**

EU normative power, illiberalism, system of governance

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

“We do not want to become peoples of mixed race,” Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary recently proclaimed to Hungarian students (Noack, 2022). This racist and inflammatory rhetoric represents his far-right ideological platform and political agenda. As the prime minister of Hungary for the past twelve years, many describe Orbán as an autocrat, or even Europe’s “king” of illiberal democracy. In filling this notorious role within the European Union, Orbán is a black sheep among EU leaders, causing the supranational body numerous problems in recent years. The European Union’s requirement for member unanimity in making decisions has presented a significant hurdle in achieving its broader goals, and Viktor Orbán lies at the heart of this problem. His actions also highlight a larger structural issue within the EU itself in dealing with illiberal democracies that will take more than the absence of his divisiveness to solve.

In recent years, how has Orbán impacted EU foreign policy? What strategies has he used in his attempts to promote illiberal democracy within the EU’s policy domain? How has this challenged the normative power of the EU? These are questions worth investigating because they help reveal how there are pre-existing flaws within the EU system of governance, and how one bad egg can cause the spoiling of the entire dozen, or in this case the other 26 member states. In addition to Orbán’s past actions, how are his current actions impacting the EU’s response towards Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and how does his strategy for this situation compare to his past behavior?

In this paper, I argue that Viktor Orbán disrupted progress within the European Union in recent years. In doing so, he exposed the larger internal flaws of the EU’s governing system, and has damaged the normative power of the EU in the process. He used his veto powers to impede EU foreign policy in situations regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, taxing multinational corporations, and attempts to expand EU sanctions on Russian oil, as well as other actions against Russia relating to Ukraine. While these four actions are the central focus of this research, I incorporate other examples as well to further support my argument regarding the current political role that Orbán plays. In what would otherwise be unanimous decisions to move forward, Orbán and his government have been the outlier in terms of EU decision-making, although it is important to note that other EU member states are beginning to grow into this role as well, such as Poland, France, and the Czech Republic, in part because of their political connections to Orbán.

In this paper, I draw on speeches from Orbán and other influential figures within the EU, as well as reports from widely-recognized research groups such as The Brookings Institution. Using these speeches as a primary source is highly valuable in being able to compare Orbán’s political messages and how they are interpreted by other groups, whether that is other countries or the media. Additionally, I use several articles of policy analysis from credible news sources such as the New York Times and Politico, as well as several journal articles which provide insight into how Hungary’s actions are affecting the course of action for other EU members. In my research, I ensure that not just past actions of Orbán’s are discussed, but what his patterns of behavior in the realm of the EU could mean for future endeavors.

The rest of this paper is divided into four parts. In the first part, I sketch how Orbán’s own authoritarian regime directly influences his decisions to veto various EU proposals, including those related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, multinational corporations, and Russia. In the second part, I show that the EU’s inability to properly counter Orbán demonstrates how this system of governance struggles to deal with illiberal democracies, which is

exacerbated by the policy requiring unanimity when it comes to making policy decisions. In the third part, I analyze how Orbán's influence on Poland, France, and the Czech Republic has damaged the normative power of the EU. In the fourth part, I explain the impact of Orbán's past and present actions on the future of the EU and specifically on how it deals with Russia's invasion in Ukraine and whether it can effectively create deterrence in the form of sanctions and other strategies.

## 2. ORBÁN'S IMPACT ON EU FOREIGN POLICY

Due to the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has a complex and deep history, the EU makes efforts to release statements that position them as a neutral entity (Cseh, 2021). Orbán has proved himself to be the political actor that contradicts the neutrality the EU intends on upholding. In 2021, the EU planned to release a statement regarding the conflict which ordered a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas, as well as boosted humanitarian aid for Gaza. In vetoing the statement, Orbán argued that it did not help Israel and was not harsh enough on Hamas (Euractiv, 2021). By doing this, he took away the EU's leverage in peacemaking over the conflict. The EU's rule of unanimity in foreign affairs means that Orbán requires no one else except for himself in order to influence EU foreign policy, and he certainly abuses this power. This particular veto is just one example of how Orbán exposes the EU's structural weaknesses in terms of decision-making. The same weaknesses can also allow for more authoritarian leaders to get away with human rights abuses, as long as the EU is never unified in releasing a statement. Given Orbán's status as the "king of illiberal democracy," those leaders have found an EU ally in the Hungarian prime minister.

Another example of a controversial veto from Orbán came with his rejection of the proposition for a global minimum tax plan that seeks to increase taxes on multinational corporations. The OECD had previously been working for many years on maintaining negotiations between 140 countries on tax policies focused on "taxing cross-border digital services and limiting the erosion of the tax base" (Reuters, 2021). The main feature of this project was an agreed increase to 15% of the global corporate tax rate, which Orbán strongly opposed. He argued that the increase would not be in the best interest of Hungary due to the country's supposed economic growth during his time in office. The authenticity of this progress was questioned by pundits, who believed Orbán was skewing the numbers to benefit his image (Smith-Meyer et al., 2022). More recently, it was reported that Orbán was working with GOP lawmakers in the United States to block the passing of the global minimum tax (Stein, 2022), and this collaboration has created a significant obstacle for President Biden and his administration. This is not the only time that Orbán has worked with Republicans in the U.S.; he was also recently invited as a speaker for the Conservative Political Action Conference in Dallas, Texas (Weigel & Arnsdorf, 2022). Orbán's collaboration with American officials demonstrates that he has the ability to not just influence EU policy, but American policy as well, which indicates how much power the EU has inadvertently given him.

Orbán is a long-time ally of President Vladimir Putin, and this alliance certainly manifested itself when the Hungarian prime minister stalled the EU's recent embargo on Russian oil. In doing this, he also helped prevent the EU from approving a larger package of sanctions against Russia for its crimes in Ukraine (Amaro, 2022). Both Hungary and Slovakia were against a total ban on Russian oil, as they argued their economies were too dependent on it. Orbán himself, however, can be considered the largest source of resistance to this policy. While he argues that his opposition is strictly based on economic impact, he has

several other intentions, including trying to weaken the EU from within and strengthening Hungary's connection with Russia (Schmitz, 2022). His efforts resulted in Hungary receiving an exemption from the oil embargo (Kim, 2022), allowing Orbán to reinforce his ties with Putin. Overall, the embargo will still impact Russia significantly, but in the case of Orbán, it is his distinct divergence from EU goals that is symbolic. This separation indicates that especially within the EU, Orbán still feels confident in his ability to influence decision-making as he veers towards authoritarianism. Cases such as these reveal that his confidence is well-founded, because he has indeed exposed and taken advantage of the EU's structural weaknesses. In a time where the EU must at least appear strong to both Russia and China, Orbán is making this increasingly more difficult. He continues to feel empowered in promoting his illiberal democratic ideals and his strong political ties with Russia, neither of which align with EU values.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Orbán has been clear in distancing himself and his country from the conflict, which is also seen as a betrayal by Hungary's Western allies (Dalos, 2022). Orbán also stated that all EU sanctions against Russia are failures and should be abandoned by the end of 2022 because they have only damaged European economies (Reuters, 2021). His criticisms have not stopped him from complying with these sanctions, as Hungary's economy is largely dependent on the EU (Aron & Holland, 2022). Orbán's claim that his opposition is strictly based on economic concerns is clearly false, as he recently declared that Hungary would not support the EU's plan to provide billions in budget assistance to Ukraine over the course of the next year. This particular decision has the potential for dire consequences. Without the consent of Hungary, the entire plan could fall apart completely, given that changes to EU budget rules must be approved unanimously by EU member states (Spike, 2022). Considering how much Ukraine would be harmed by not receiving this assistance, it is clear that Orbán not only has his own interests at heart, but Russia's as well. This declaration against Ukraine indicates a clear pattern of harmful behavior towards the EU.

It has also been said that Orbán's general intention with these kinds of vetoes is to gain leverage within the EU in order to release billions in funds that have been held over rule-of-law concerns within Hungary (Schmitz, 2022). He abuses the power that comes with Hungary being an EU member state in order to undermine democracy within his country, and he is becoming an example to other illiberal leaders of how flaws within the EU system can be exploited for personal gain. This is demonstrated by EU membership candidates Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia using Orbán as a source of inspiration (Vachudova, 2020, p. 334). Orbán's refusal to condemn Russia reveals to not just the EU but the world the close connection they have in terms of both Hungary's dependence on Russian energy commodities as well as their political ideals. His actions demonstrate how detrimental one EU member state's position can be to foreign policy, both within the EU and beyond. The added tension from this situation does place Hungary in a more precarious geopolitical situation (Cafiero, 2022), but there is little evidence that shows Orbán will do anything other than act to benefit his own interests.

### **3. STRUCTURAL ISSUES WITHIN THE EU**

During the creation of the EU, its founders intended for all countries who are granted membership to meet a strong set of democratic requirements. Regardless, countries have learned how to modify their governments temporarily in order to get past the threshold to become an EU member state (Vachudova, 2020, p. 332). After being granted membership, they proceed to retreat towards undemocratic tendencies, as shown by Hungary. Initially,

the EU is able to use its status and resources to impose its will on countries while they apply for membership, as both the costs of exclusion are harmful and the benefits of membership lucrative. These costs and benefits are what have influenced the transitions in Eastern Europe from planned to market economies (Vachudova, 2005, p. 68). That being said, past a country's entry into the powerful regional organization, there is significantly less enforcement of both political and economic requirements. While making their conditions for entry strict by using both passive and active leverage (Vachudova, 2005, p. 243), the EU does not remain consistent with ensuring EU member states uphold these democratic standards after joining, and this is apparent in Hungary's case.

There are numerous instances of corruption and censorship within Hungary during Orbán's regime (Freedom House, 2021), but there is little the EU can actually do in terms of preventing this democratic backsliding from occurring. While it has withheld a significant amount of funds from Hungary due to these concerns, this has not stopped Orbán and his political party Fidesz from asserting their authoritarian control over many different areas, including the media and the courts (Bayer, 2020). Since taking power in 2010, Orbán and Fidesz have slowly but surely undone the democratic system that Hungary has fought so persistently throughout its recent history to create (Polyakova et al., 2019, p. 13). If the EU were to currently assess Hungary for membership, the country would be far from meeting the relevant standards. This brings about the question of if and how the EU could remove Hungary as a member state. While a member state can choose to leave, the EU would essentially be unable to remove Hungary by force, because they simply never planned for that possibility (Tidey, 2022). Orbán is still a growing threat to the strength of the EU, and how this will play out in the future is highly dependent on how the EU chooses to react to his illiberal agenda.

When discussing the structure of the EU, it is important to analyze how it has already responded to the problem of Orbán. The consensus among pundits is that the reaction has been far too slow and far too weak (Dempsey, 2022). In the eyes of many, the EU has failed to prevent significant democratic backsliding from occurring within Hungary, as well as Poland and the Czech Republic (Vachudova, 2020, p. 333). Part of what the EU has found difficult in its ability to respond to Orbán has stemmed from the fact that he is a member of the European People's Party, which holds the largest number of seats in the European Parliament as of 2019 (Wike et al., 2019). The EPP has been hesitant to expel Orbán from its ranks, because he is not viewed as a threat by all of the party's leaders. Some merely view him as "provocative," such as Joseph Daul, who is the former president of the EPP (Bayer, 2020). This categorization of borderline authoritarianism as "provocative" is a dangerous precedent to set; it helps embolden other EU members such as Poland to follow Orbán's example in disrupting EU plans.

#### **4. ORBÁN'S ILLIBERAL INFLUENCE ON OTHER EU COUNTRIES**

In addition to Orbán's own illiberal efforts to veto EU decisions, his government has supported and emboldened illiberal actors in other EU countries such as Poland, France, and the Czech Republic. Orbán has set the example for many other EU politicians and political parties that it is possible to use illiberal practices and not bear any of the expected consequences from the EU, which in turn erodes EU's normative power. While there have been recent promises of reform as Hungary begins to feel pressured by the European Commission (Valero & Simon, 2022), there is no indication that these promises will be fulfilled anytime soon given Hungary's promotion of illiberalism in other countries.

Within Poland's current political sphere, Jarosław Kaczyński of the Law and Justice party (PiS) has been recognized as the country's most powerful politician (Cienski, 2015), and he has used Orbán and Hungary as a model for his own political endeavors. This was made clear in a speech by Kaczyński to the PiS party electorate after their loss in the 2011 parliamentary elections (Rydliński, 2018, p. 101), in which he stated "I am fully convinced that there will be a day when we will manage, when we will have Budapest in Warsaw." Both the current president, Andrzej Duda, and prime minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, are tied to the PiS party and are strictly supervised by Kaczyński, which has allowed him to make his 2011 prediction come true. Following Hungary's example, in 2016, Poland consolidated public radio, television, and press into an institution called the Council for National Media, within which there are numerous PiS politicians who have heavily pushed their party's agenda onto Polish public media, including anti-refugee rhetoric (Rydliński, 2018, p. 102). In addition to this new wave of government-controlled media, both Orbán and Kaczyński have been outspoken critics of the EU, and PiS has rejected the rule of law on numerous occasions, such as President Duda's rejection of the election results of three new judges for the Constitutional Tribunal, which was considered a direct violation of the Polish Constitution (Rydliński, 2018, p. 102). It is clear that in his role as the "king of Poland" (Cienski, 2015), Kaczyński has followed in Orbán's footsteps in undermining the democratic values that all EU member states are meant to uphold, and thus undermining the EU's normative power.

The French National Front and Hungary's Fidesz share similarities in terms of their ethnopopulist ideals (Geva, 2018), which has fostered close relations between the two parties. Their leaders, Marine Le Pen and Viktor Orbán, met in October 2021 to discuss their right-wing populist agendas and attack the EU as an institution (Euronews, 2021). The common criticism from both Orbán and Le Pen was that the EU was imposing its support for migration and open societies upon Hungary and France, and that this was a violation of member state sovereignty. Additionally, both leaders supported the Polish Constitutional Court's ruling that parts of EU law were not compatible with Poland's constitution, further undermining the influence of EU normative power over its member states. This rhetoric from right-wing leaders in both France and Hungary shows that populist actors in Europe are beginning to oppose EU ideals such as the rule of law, leading to democratic backsliding in the process. The definition of normative power states that the EU has a normative identity based on the rhetoric of EU political actors (Noureddine, 2016). The shared sentiment between Fidesz and the French National Front, two prominent political parties in their respective countries, indicates a notable shift in the expected rhetoric towards democratic backsliding, which goes directly against the values of the EU. It is clear that the erosion of democratic standards within the National Front has been fueled in part by Orbán's influence, which is once again indicative of damage to the normative power of the EU, as they have been unable to prevent this rise of illiberalism.

A third country that has acted in partnership with Orbán is the Czech Republic, with former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš having notable ties with the Hungarian prime minister (Zachová, 2023). In recent years the Czech Republic has been significantly influenced by Orbán's political agenda. While the country has been hesitant to directly state its support of Orbán, the fact that both Hungary and the Czech Republic are a part of the Visegrad group requires cooperation between the two countries (Dostál, 2018, p. 18). This allowed Babiš to draw inspiration from both Orbán and Kaczyński when creating a more confrontational policy regarding EU institutions (Dostál, 2018, p. 22). In terms of the political discourse



around migration in the EU, rhetoric in the Czech Republic has continued to become more aligned with that of Hungary (Dostál, 2018, p. 23), which has utilized security concerns to justify human rights violations (OHCHR, 2019). This points towards a trend of democratic backsliding mirroring that of Hungary and Poland while Babiš was prime minister (Hanley & Vachudova, 2018, p. 278). Ultimately, this breakdown of democratic values can be connected to Orbán's ties with Babiš. With the current rise of illiberal ideology, the Czech Republic is also beginning to challenge the EU's normative power through the degradation of values such as democracy and the rule of law; although, this trend could change with the election of Petr Fiala as the new prime minister in December 2021.

## **5. ORBÁN'S IMPACT ON THE FUTURE OF THE EU**

The role Orbán will continue to play in the EU is dependent on the few allies he has, the most important being Putin and Poland's now former deputy prime minister Jarosław Kaczyński. After Ukraine was invaded, Kaczyński unexpectedly criticized Orbán's refusal to condemn Putin's actions (Scislowska, 2022). Orbán's unwillingness to distance himself from Russia has resulted in a relative dissolution of trust between Poland and Hungary. This separation indicates how Russia's invasion of Ukraine has forced Orbán to reveal his hand to the EU, as the world's eyes are now on Putin and anyone who is viewed as his ally. Prior to Russia's invasion, Orbán did not need to pick between the EU and his non-Western allies (Aron & Holland, 2022), but now he is being forced to do so. Up until now the EU tended to categorize Hungary and Poland as causing the same issues in regard to creating collective policy (Dempsey, 2022), but that is changing. Hungary is not the sole cause of concern for the European Commission, but what distinguishes the country is its distinct violation of legal fundamentals within the EC.

While there may be tension between Hungary and Poland, Hungary and Russia are closer than ever, and Orbán has the potential to become a puppet for Putin within the EU; to an extent, he has already fulfilled that role. The EU's ability to help Ukraine against Russia is being severely undermined by Hungary, which incentivizes Putin to maintain a close relationship with Orbán in order to help weaken the EU even further. The future implications of this alliance could be detrimental to efforts to support Ukraine, whose army has been successful largely due to aid from organizations like the EU.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

Based on my research, I expect that the EU will soon face choosing between two options: changing the structure of its organization in order to limit Orbán's influence, or simply continuing to let him freely test the legal boundaries of the EU. Both courses of action would have large political and economic consequences, but given how much Orbán is already damaging its values and integrity, the EU is at risk for a complete breakdown if it does not act to hold Orbán accountable. It is clear that he has already caused significant issues through his veto of various foreign policies, and that he will continue to abuse this power in the present situation with Ukraine. His pattern of authoritarian behavior has remained consistent throughout his time as prime minister; the only difference now is that Orbán can no longer keep his tactics discreet due to his continued connection with Putin and Russia even as they commit numerous atrocities in Ukraine. His constant disruption of EU progress causes a plethora of problems and exposes defects within the EU's governing methods that allow for severe democratic backsliding to occur without any real consequences, and the EU needs to act.



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