

DAHRENDORF SCHOLARSHIP ESSAY 2024/2025

The 'Enemy Within' and Beyond

*How Hungary's autocratic regime
has influenced Trumpism*

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During the September 2024 presidential debate – viewed by an estimated sixty-seven million Americans –¹ Donald Trump offered a striking commendation of the Hungarian Prime Minister stating “Viktor Orbán, one of the most respected men – they call him a strong man. He’s a, he’s a tough person. Smart. Prime Minister of Hungary.”² His decision to elevate the autocratic leader of a small Central European state was not incidental, instead reflecting a deeper ideological alignment. By late 2024, Hungary had come to occupy a central position in the American right’s reimagining of conservative governance, serving as both a model and a metaphor for the illiberal transformation of democratic institutions.

Since Donald Trump’s return to power in January 2025, the pace of democratic erosion in the United States has been unexpectedly swift, with senior officials acknowledging the rapid weakening of institutional constraints and the Democratic Party struggling to mount an effective counterresponse.³ Increasingly, commentators have drawn parallels to Hungary’s post-2010 trajectory under Viktor Orbán, a comparison echoed by Senator Chris Murphy’s February 2025 warning that “they are copying the path taken by other would-be dictators like Viktor Orbán.”⁴ The growing recognition that America’s democratic backsliding follows a discernible “Hungarian model” signals the erosion of the long-held belief in American democratic exceptionalism, as familiar authoritarian strategies now threaten to unravel a 250-year-old democratic experiment.⁵

This essay argues that during Trump’s period out of office (2021–2024), Viktor Orbán became a symbol of legitimacy and inspiration for the project of constructing an enduring conservative order in the United States. It demonstrates how Trump’s 2020 defeat prompted right-wing intellectuals to look abroad for models of success, fuelling an obsession with Hungary as a “conservative utopia” in which the “enemy within” had been subdued and the “enemy without” contained. This fascination fostered growing institutional and ideological linkages between the American right and the Orbán regime, evident in the language and policy framing of Trump-aligned think-tank initiatives. The essay then traces how these connections evolved into an explicit transnational illiberal alliance, expressed through Trump’s increasingly open admiration for Orbán. Ultimately, Trumpism has become increasingly infused with Orbánism, representing an adaptation of Hungary’s illiberal model to the American context.

Orbánism – The Hungarian “Illiberal Democracy” Model

Viktor Orbán began his political career as a liberal dissident during Hungary's transition from communism, co-founding the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz) in 1988.⁶ Initially a pro-Western, anti-authoritarian movement, Fidesz shifted decisively to the right during the 1990s as Orbán recognised the political opportunity created by the collapse of Hungary's traditional centre-right.⁷ After serving one term as prime minister from 1998 to 2002, he spent eight years in opposition refining a strategy that combined cultural nationalism with institutional engineering. When the 2008 financial crisis discredited the incumbent Socialist government, he re-emerged as the defender of national sovereignty against liberal incompetence and foreign influence.⁸ Fidesz's 2010 victory granted him a two-thirds parliamentary supermajority, enabling a constitutional transformation that marked the beginning of Hungary's illiberal turn.⁹

The 2011 Fundamental Law consolidated executive control over the state, judiciary, and media, embedding long-term political dominance behind a façade of legality.¹⁰ Key institutions – regulators, prosecutors, and media authorities – were brought under loyal leadership, while independent outlets and civil society organisations were pressured through regulatory and financial levers rather than overt repression. This strategy combined institutional capture with selective economic redistribution, producing a system of patronage and dependency that Bálint Magyar characterises as a “post-communist mafia state.”¹¹ This consolidation enabled Orbán to remake the state with remarkable speed, leading Kim Lane Scheppelle to conclude that “Orbán did almost everything to undermine democracy for Hungary's future just in the first three years.”¹² By 2014, when he declared that “the new state we are building in Hungary is an illiberal state,” the process of democratic dismantling was largely complete.¹³

Orbán's rejection of liberal democracy exposed the ideological underpinnings of the Orbán project – or Orbánism. Orbánism can be understood as rooted in Carl Schmitt's notion that the essence of the political lies in distinguishing “friend” from “enemy.”¹⁴ Orbán's politics have operationalised this logic by maintaining a permanent state of crisis where the nation's survival depends on the defeat of internal and external enemies.¹⁵ This framing serves to legitimise the centralisation of authority and the instrumentalisation of legality in the service of a unified national will. In April 2020 Donald Tusk remarked that “Carl Schmitt would be very proud of Viktor Orbán.”¹⁶

Two central strategies operationalise this Schmittian mode of politics. The first is “autocratic legalism”, which, as Scheppelle defines it, arises when “electoral mandates plus constitutional and legal change are used in the service of an illiberal agenda.”¹⁷ Orbán’s government exemplified this approach by lowering judicial retirement ages to replace judges with loyalists, appointing politically aligned local officials, and constraining NGOs and media organisations under the pretexts of transparency and national security.¹⁸ Through these measures, legality itself was transformed into a mechanism for consolidating executive authority and restricting civil society.

The second strategy is “civilisationalism,” a moral and cultural narrative that casts politics as an existential struggle to defend national identity against globalist and cosmopolitan forces.¹⁹ It links sovereignty to solidarity among culturally similar nations and draws on racial, religious, and demographic anxieties to legitimise exclusionary politics in the name of protecting a white, Christian Europe.²⁰ Within this framework, Hungary is reimagined as the guardian of “Christian Europe,” positioned against the perceived encroachment of “Brussels bureaucrats,” migration, and liberal multiculturalism.²¹

Together, these strategies define Orbánism as a Schmittian project that dismantles liberal democracy while preserving its procedural façade. The resulting illiberal order instrumentalises legality and mobilises culture to expand authoritarian control while preserving democratic procedure. This became increasingly attractive as a model to segments of the American right between 2021 and 2024.

Trumpism – Evolution and Ideological Convergence with Hungary

Although the term Trumpism was occasionally invoked during Donald Trump’s first presidency, it did not yet denote a coherent political ideology. The 2016 campaign was driven less by doctrine than by personal grievance and populist spectacle. The slogan “Make America Great Again” – borrowed from Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign – served as a unifying refrain that fused nostalgia, nationalism, and resentment.²² Yet this Reaganite register increasingly operated at the level of rhetoric rather than substantive guidance. While Trump continued to situate himself within Reagan’s symbolic lineage, the movement steadily diverged from core Reaganite commitments, particularly in its embrace of protectionist economic measures and

a more circumscribed vision of American leadership abroad. These tendencies originated in Trump's earlier tariff policies but have been systematised since January 2025 through expansive trade barriers and strategic retrenchment. Trump's early success rested less on ideological coherence than on his instinctive ability to channel disaffection toward liberal elites and to present himself as an outsider to the political establishment.²³

During Trump's first term (2017–2021), the populist energy of his campaign was constrained by the institutional inertia of government. His cabinet included traditional Republican appointees such as Rex Tillerson, Jeff Sessions, and H. R. McMaster, who later described their roles as "guardrails" against his impulses.²⁴ The result was a fragmented administration characterised by internal conflict and limited policy coherence. Among Trump's loyalists, this dysfunction was interpreted as evidence that the administration had been sabotaged from within by "deep state" bureaucrats and ideologically unreliable appointees.²⁵ The perceived sabotage of the first term became a foundational myth of Trumpism, reinforcing the belief that any future administration must be ideologically unified and staffed exclusively by loyal actors.

Trump's defeat in the 2020 election transformed personal grievance into ideology, as the "Big Lie" of electoral fraud operated as a loyalty test that unified the movement. Between 2021 and 2024, Trumpism evolved into a fully-fledged political project with a coherent institutional base. The Claremont Institute—an outlier among conservative think tanks in 2016 for its early embrace of Trump—was joined by a network of organisations dedicated to designing an effective and enduring model for conservative governance.²⁶ Russ Vought's Center for Renewing America (CRA) issued annual reports described as a "blueprint" for future governance;²⁷ the America First Policy Institute (AFPI) published the America First Agenda (2022);²⁸ and most prominently the Heritage Foundation coordinated Project 2025: Mandate for Leadership (2023), a 900-page manual produced in partnership with more than sixty conservative organisations.²⁹ Collectively, these documents outlined detailed plans for a future Republican administration to expand executive authority, dismantle key institutions of the administrative state, and promote governance around Christian nationalist principles.

Hungary has long held symbolic significance for American conservatism, rooted in the 1956 uprising's anti-communist legacy. Orbán's attempts to cultivate this affinity during Trump's

first term had limited impact, but after 2020 Hungary gained new relevance as both an ideological reference point and empirical validation for Trumpism.³⁰ Orbán's consolidation of power through constitutional reform, bureaucratic control, and appeals to "Christian civilisation" demonstrated how liberal democracy could be hollowed out through legal and cultural means while retaining its institutional façade.

After 2020, intellectual and organisational ties between the American right and Hungary developed into a formal transnational illiberal network. The Danube Institute, closely aligned with Orbán's government, became a key conduit by hosting American conservative commentators such as Rod Dreher and Christopher Rufo and later officially partnering with the Heritage Foundation to connect Hungary's policy apparatus with the US conservative movement.³¹ Orbán's address at the 2022 CPAC conference in Texas, where he urged conservatives to "unite our forces" in defence of Christian civilisation, and the subsequent launch of CPAC Hungary further institutionalised the alliance.³² Political exchanges also intensified, with Orbán seeking Trump's endorsement for his 2022 re-election campaign. At the same time, Orbán has become the central node of a wider illiberal ecosystem across Eastern Europe, whose confidence and assertiveness have grown alongside the expectation of renewed support from a Trump-led United States.³³ By 2024, Orbán's declaration that Hungary had "entered the programme-writing system of President Donald Trump's team" confirming active involvement in shaping the ideological direction of a future Trump administration.³⁴

Trump's selection of J.D. Vance as his 2024 running mate symbolised the movement's firm ideological alignment with an Orbánist model of illiberal governance. In the Senate, Vance had openly praised Viktor Orbán's pro-natalist policies and advocated drawing lessons from Hungary's approach to universities.³⁵ His rhetoric fused civilisational anxiety with conspiracy narratives, most notably his claim that George Soros would "send a 747 to Columbus to load up disproportionately Black women to get them to go have abortions in California," if abortion access across state lines were permitted.³⁶ Trump's choice of Vance thus marked the internalisation of Orbán's illiberal logic into his political agenda.

Hungary's status and influence on the American right were firmly consolidated, further exemplified by Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts's declaration that "modern Hungary is not just a model for conservative statecraft, but the model," a sentiment reflected

in the strategies and institutional ambitions of Project 2025.³⁷

Implicit Influence of Orbánism in Project 2025

Although Project 2025 was published in 2023 before Donald Trump had formally secured the Republican nomination, it presents itself as a blueprint for restoring his administration, this time equipped with weapons to defeat the "enemies" that had allegedly undermined him during his first term. Framed as a manual for "policy and personnel" in the next conservative presidency, it also serves as a broader ideological manifesto that translates Viktor Orbán's strategies of autocratic legalism and civilisationalism into the American political context.³⁸ The document constructs two primary categories of threat, the "enemy within" represented by disloyal domestic institutions, and the "enemy without" embodied by globalist elites and migrants. It recommends responses that combine legal mechanisms of centralisation with moral narratives of cultural survival, reproducing the logic of Orbán's illiberal governance.

The administrative state is presented as the central "enemy within." Civil servants are depicted as a self-serving elite entrenched within the Washington "Beltway," and the proposed remedy is to "deconstruct the administrative state."³⁹ Project 2025 instructs incoming officials "how to fire supposedly 'un-fireable' federal bureaucrats; how to shutter wasteful and corrupt bureaus and offices; how to muzzle woke propaganda at every level of government."⁴⁰ The call to restore "accountability" is framed as justification for reinstating Trump's Schedule F executive order, which would reclassify tens of thousands of career civil servants as political appointees.⁴¹ Such a measure would erode long-standing employment protections, enabling ideological purges and the installation of loyalists throughout the state apparatus. This closely parallels Orbán's first-term strategy of weaponising corruption allegations to consolidate political control and install loyalists throughout the administrative apparatus.

A similar logic shapes the document's vision for the Department of Justice. Project 2025 insists that "litigation decisions be consistent with the President's agenda"⁴² and that the White House counsel "should not erect roadblocks out of an abundance of caution but instead offer practical legal advice on how to promote the President's agenda within the bounds of the law."⁴³ This framing situates the justice system within the president's chain of command and implies that the Department of Justice should not act as an independent constraint on executive power. The transformation of legality into an instrument for advancing partisan

objectives exemplifies the Orbánist method of entrenching executive dominance under the guise of formal legality.⁴⁴

The protection of the "American family" is also central to Project 2025's conception of the internal enemy. The document presents abortion, "gender ideology," and comprehensive sexuality education as coordinated assaults on "family stability" and, by extension, on national survival.⁴⁵ Programmes that "undermine family formation" or fail to "respect human life and conscience rights" are to be eliminated, and the Department of Health and Human Services is urged to use "every available tool," including funding restrictions, to discipline non-compliant states.⁴⁶ The repeated claim that the American family is "in crisis" and that the nation is approaching "social implosion" establishes a civilisational framing that legitimises bureaucratic intervention, resulting in restrictions on healthcare provision.⁴⁷ While abortion occupies a uniquely central place in American politics, Hungary similarly tightened its restrictions in 2022.⁴⁸ The broader pro-natalist agenda, presented as essential to saving the family, mirrors Orbán's portrayal of declining birth rates as a demographic crisis and an existential threat to national survival.

The Department of Education forms another key arena in the broader effort to confront the "enemy within," explicitly in Project 2025 as "a one-stop shop for the woke education cartel".⁴⁹ Project 2025 urges Congress to "shutter" the department and threaten to withhold funding from institutions that fail to conform to prescribed ideological standards.⁵⁰ It specifically calls for the removal of "critical race theory" and "gender ideology," which are said to "poison our children," from educational curricula.⁵¹ By granting the Secretary of Education authority to withhold recognition from accreditors deemed hostile to religious institutions, this proposal would empower the executive to reshape higher education indirectly through administrative threats rather than direct censorship.⁵² The focus on accreditation appears directly inspired by Orbán's campaign against the Central European University, which began by attacking its right to issue US-accredited degrees. Ultimately, sustained government pressure and the revocation of accreditation rights forced CEU to relocate to Vienna, marking a decisive moment in Orbán's campaign to assert political control over higher education.⁵³

The assault on CEU was further legitimised as a defence of sovereignty against "foreign influence," personified by financier George Soros, whom Orbán transformed into the embodiment of the "globalist elite" through an overtly antisemitic campaign in 2014.⁵⁴

"Globalist elites" are repeatedly contrasted in Project 2025 with "real Americans", as having "more in common with a socialist, European head of state" than with their fellow citizens.⁵⁵ These elites are accused of supporting "supranational organisations like the United Nations and European Union" that undermine the authority of national governments and lack accountability to elections.⁵⁶ The incorporation of the European Union as an adversary within American conservative discourse reflects the adoption of an Orbánist illiberal narrative, which places sustained emphasis on portraying "Brussels bureaucrats" as instruments of liberal imperialism undermining national sovereignty.⁵⁷

Migrants are portrayed in Project 2025 as an existential threat – both to national security and to Western civilisation – depicted as participants in an orchestrated effort to subvert the nation. It claims that "today's progressive Left so cavalierly supports open borders despite the lawless humanitarian crisis"⁵⁸ and calls for "a creative and aggressive approach to tackling these dangerous criminal organizations at the border".⁵⁹ It further recommends "mandatory appropriation for border wall infrastructure," thereby curtailing congressional control over funding.⁶⁰ Migrants are also cast as diverting resources from "American families" through programmes such as "DACA, mass parole for Afghans, Ukrainians, Venezuelans, etc." reinforcing their depiction as internal adversaries. These proposal frames increased executive power as a necessity to tackle immigration, echoing Orbán's approach, when the construction of border fences and the 2018 Stop Soros law were justified as acts of legal and moral self-defence against an orchestrated migrant "invasion."⁶¹

Throughout Project 2025, Orbánist influence is evident not only in the identification of internal and external "enemies" but also in the strategies proposed for their containment. The "enemy within" is confronted through autocratic legalism, expressed in bureaucratic restructuring and the instrumentalisation of legality, while the "enemy without" is addressed through civilisational narratives that frame migration and globalism as existential threats, thereby legitimising expanded executive authority. Ultimately, Project 2025 does not simply echo Orbán's methods; it adapts them to the American context, serving as the ideological foundation for the emerging narrative alliance between Trump and Orbán.

Explicit Invocation of Trump-Orbán Alliance

During Trump's first term, the asymmetry in their relationship was clear: while Orbán sought proximity to Washington, Trump showed little sustained interest in a small Central European state.⁶² However, following the 2020 election defeat and the subsequent loss of institutional authority and international standing after January 6th, this dynamic shifted. In this period of political exile, Orbán provided Trump with both a model of successful illiberal governance and a form of external validation from a sitting head of government.

Orbán signalled his continued recognition of Trump's political relevance by seeking his endorsement ahead of the 2022 Hungarian election and by visiting him at Bedminster during his trip to the United States to address CPAC Texas.⁶³ At the 2023 CPAC Hungary event, Orbán further reaffirmed his loyalty to Trump, declaring, "I'm sure if President Trump would be the president, there would be no war in Ukraine and Europe. Come back, Mr President. Make America great again and bring us peace."⁶⁴ The resonance of this statement was evident in its frequent – although often distorted – reappearance in Trump's campaign speeches as proof of his global credibility and moral authority.

Quantitative evidence underscores the deepening of this alignment. Between Donald Trump's announcement of his candidacy in November 2022 and the 2024 election, he made roughly 700 public appearances, according to Roll Call, which compiles transcripts of his campaign rallies, speeches, and interviews. Of these, 84 transcripts contained explicit references to Orbán or Hungary. As illustrated in Figure 1, such references began appearing in October 2023 and featured consistently throughout the remainder of the campaign, indicating the integration of the Trump-Orbán alliance into his campaign vocabulary. The frequency of these references increased markedly in the final months of the campaign, which included the Trump-Harris debate.

A systematic content analysis of these 84 instances reveals three recurring thematic clusters through which Orbán's influence was articulated in Trump's discourse: peace, legitimacy, and the Hungary model. Each theme served a distinct rhetorical function within Trump's broader campaign narrative and collectively demonstrates how Orbán's image was mobilised to reinforce Trump's ideological and political claims.

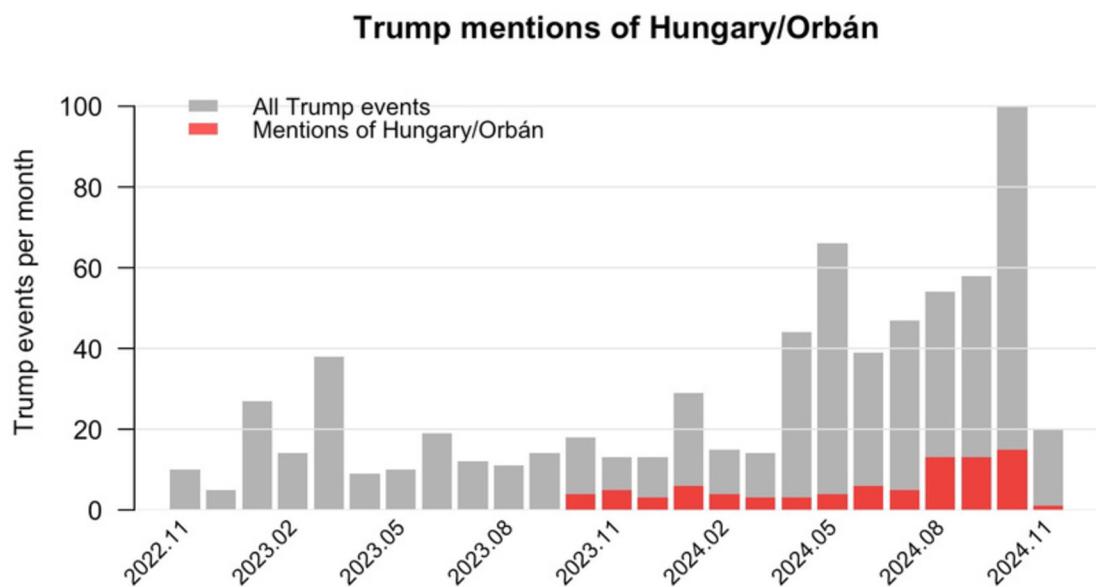


Figure 1: Frequency of Trump events mentioning Orbán or Hungary (November 2022 - November 2024).⁶⁵

Peace - The most frequent association related to Trump's mentions of Hungary or Orbán concerned Trump's own unique capacity for peace-making, a claim loosely derived from Orbán's 2023 CPAC statement. Trump repeatedly asserted that the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East "would never have happened" under his presidency, often attributing this view directly to Orbán, and extending it to claim that "we wouldn't have had inflation" or "any of the problems."⁶⁶ These remarks were often followed by alleged quotations from Orbán that "if Trump comes back, you won't have any wars"⁶⁷ and "everything's going to be good".⁶⁸ Finally, this is reinforced by warnings, also allegedly from Orbán, that if Trump isn't elected then "whole world is going to end up in a big fat world war",⁶⁹ or even more aggressively "You're going to end up in World War III".⁷⁰

These statements used Orbán's purported endorsement to validate Trump's foreign-policy narrative which contends that his leadership alone could restore global stability. Orbán thus functioned rhetorically as a proxy validator of Trump's leadership qualities and "peace through strength" strategy, allowing him to frame isolationism not as abandonment of America's allies but as an inevitable consequence of his deterrent power.

Legitimacy – Another central theme in Trump's references to Hungary and Orbán concerned legitimacy, encompassing both his personal authority as a leader and the perceived standing of the United States in the world. In particular, Trump repeatedly claimed that Orbán had said Russia and China were "afraid of Trump," implying that his presidency alone commanded the respect necessary to maintain global order.⁷¹ In contrast, Biden's administration was portrayed as a national humiliation, with alleged quotes from Orbán used to support the sentiment that the United States had become "a laughingstock all over the world" and to call for Biden's resignation.⁷²

Trump repeatedly praised Orbán for validating him, calling him a "powerful prime minister,"⁷³ a "very strong man,"⁷⁴ and "somebody that a lot of people respect".⁷⁵ These statements served a dual function of elevating Orbán as an authoritative arbiter of leadership and positioning Trump as the globally respected leader whose stature was recognised by other strongmen. In this context, Orbán functioned rhetorically as a proxy of international respectability through which Trump sought to rehabilitate his own damaged image. The legitimacy theme thus illustrates a key mechanism of explicit influence as Orbán's approval of Trump was utilised by Trump to reclaim moral and political validation

Hungary Model – While less frequent than the other themes, Trump's references to Hungary as a model of success carried significant ideological weight. He praised Hungary as a "strong"⁷⁶ country, that "took no illegal aliens",⁷⁷ "doesn't let terrorists into his country,"⁷⁸ and "didn't allow millions of people to invade his country."⁷⁹ He contrasted this imagine of Hungary with the US, deriding American immigration policy through what he presented as Hungary's stance: "I don't want people blowing up our shopping centers. I don't want people killing our people."⁸⁰ This symbolic Hungary served as illustrative evidence that strict border control and uncompromising enforcement were both possible and desirable.

By invoking Hungary as a real-world example, Trump was not merely flattering an ally but constructing a legitimising precedent for his own agenda. The narrative of Hungary as stable, moral, and sovereign stood in deliberate contrast to the US, which he portrayed as chaotic, weak, and imperilled by uncontrolled migration. Hungary thus became a symbolic shorthand for the political ideal Trump promised to restore.

Taken together, these three themes – peace, legitimacy, and the Hungarian model -- reveal how the Trump-Orbán alliance functioned as a channel for explicit illiberal influence. Through selective quotation, repetition, and exaggeration, Trump transformed Orbán into both a symbol of validation and a model of governance. Orbán's praise, both real and alleged, provided Trump with external legitimacy at a time when his domestic credibility was weakened, while Trump's platform elevated Orbán as the exemplar of effective conservative leadership.

Conclusion

The dynamics examined in this essay reveal two interconnected stages in the translation of Orbánism to the American political context. First, Orbán's emphasis and conception of the "enemy" and resulting strategies of autocratic legalism and civilisationalism were absorbed through policy frameworks such as Project 2025 with concrete proposals for centralising authority and reshaping state institutions. Second, these ideas were taken up explicitly through personal and rhetorical alliance, most visibly in the incorporation of Orbán into Trump's campaign narrative. By these steps, Hungary's illiberal model advanced from the European periphery into the aspirational centre of American conservative politics.

Since Trump's second inauguration in January 2025, the emulation of Orbán's model has moved from intellectual blueprint to political practice. The reinstatement of Schedule F and the subsequent civil-service purges, initially coordinated through Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, together with Attorney General Pam Bondi's targeted prosecutions of political opponents, reflect the institutionalisation of autocratic legalism in the United States. The closure of the Department of Education and the targeting of universities under the pretext of antisemitism parallel Orbán's attacks on higher education as a bastion of liberal democracy. Likewise, the administration's portrayal of liberal civil society – particularly the singling out of George Soros's Open Society Foundation as an agent of "domestic insurrection" – reproduces the Soros-centred narrative that has long underpinned Hungary's assault on civil society, underscoring the persistence of a shared illiberal script.⁸¹

Trump's continued elevation of Orbán on the global stage illustrates how this ideological alliance has deepened and how Orbán remains a useful symbolic figure for Trump, even after his return to power. Trump's invitation to Orbán to attend the Gaza Peace Summit in Sharm

el-Sheikh and his planned meeting with Putin in Budapest signal an emerging illiberal axis in which mutual validation substitutes for liberal legitimacy. In this configuration, Orbán's status within the American right has been fully sealed, an evolution captured in Trump's declaration: "we love Viktor."⁸²

Notes

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