



Hungary's Viktor Orbán explores his options for new allies

May 10, 2023 **Sydney Duckor** *The Hill*

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; NATO; Turkey; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

As Russia's war in Ukraine drags on, and Vladimir Putin's strategic position erodes, his few remaining European allies are exploring their options. Take Viktor Orbán, Hungary's notoriously Putin-friendly prime minister, who is now contemplating what new alliances to form once Putin is gone from power. Orbán's international politicking — and affinity for autocrats — will likely shape Europe's security landscape far more than most realize.

Hungary has cast a long shadow over Europe in recent years. Pursuing his self-described "illiberal democracy," Orbán has alienated the European Union by enacting policies that have downgraded Hungary from free to only "partly free." Despite European Union (EU) threats of legal action and revoked aid, he has pushed through laws that weakened the constitutional court, eroded media freedom, repressed the opposition and removed democratic checks and balances. Moreover, he has repeatedly shown contempt for the transatlantic alliance by pursuing partnerships with adversarial regimes.

Since 2010, Orbán has cultivated particularly close ties with Russia. Under his leadership, Hungary has become known as Moscow's window into the European Union: Budapest has blocked European sanctions against Russia, stayed silent as Russia annexed sovereign land and willfully spread Russian disinformation and propaganda both domestically and abroad.

Orbán's deviation from NATO and EU consensus has been especially conspicuous since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Although he has tried to play both sides on the international stage for over a decade, Orbán's domestic messaging and foreign policy approach avow his status as a saboteur of Western democratic interests.

Last December, Budapest blocked nearly \$20 billion in aid to Kyiv — the most substantial EU aid package to date — to the enormous frustration of other European leaders. Orbán's government also wavered on accepting Sweden and Finland into NATO, stalling the issue for months. Although Orbán finally gave a verbal commitment to the two countries' accession, Budapest took over nine months to officially vote Finland in and has yet to confirm Sweden.

Meanwhile, at home, Orbán's allies in Hungary's not-so-independent media consistently push Russian disinformation and propaganda, including the Kremlin narrative that "the United States is trying to start a new war."

Orbán's pro-Moscow policy decisions have come at a high price, with his government effectively rendered pariah in Europe against the backdrop of Western unity on Ukraine.

Many countries in the region, given their national experiences with Russian subjugation, view the current conflict — and the threat posed by Putin's Russia — as an existential one. Orbán's response to the war has created a serious rift in Hungary's relations with neighbors like Czechia, Slovakia and Poland. Tensions became so severe that the 2022 Visegrád summit on defense was cancelled, with a scathing remark from the Czech defense minister that she is "very sorry that for Hungary cheap Russian oil is more important than the blood of the Ukrainians." With Poland, too, the rupture has been significant. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki recently confirmed that "the paths of Poland and Hungary have diverged."

It is possible that once the war is over, rightwing values shared between Budapest and other governments, particularly in Eastern Europe, will help to revive the relationships. However, the longer that Orbán doubles down on his pro-Kremlin and anti-Ukraine posture, the more likely it becomes that the damage will prove irreparable.

This begs the question: Where else might Orbán turn for allies?

To be sure, alliances within the EU are the most preferable. Budapest remains dependent on the Union, or, as Orbán himself has acknowledged, Hungary's economic prosperity "depends on" EU membership. As such, his most logical recourse would be to seek alliances with other rightwing leaders in the EU — provided his unpopular stance on Ukraine doesn't become a deal-breaker. Alternatively, however, Hungary's leader could look beyond the EU, toward partners in the Middle East and Asia, and the resulting lash-ups would create new challenges for the West.

Should Budapest pursue such a peripheral strategy, its most likely partners would be Turkey and China.

Like Orbán, Turkey's larger-than-life president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has shifted his country toward authoritarianism. This makes Turkey a natural ally, and, according to the Hungarian leader, a "strategic partner every Hungarian should respect." Orbán has expressed clearly that he wishes to strengthen Budapest's ties to Ankara. Named a "dear friend" by the Turkish leader, Orbán has gone to bat for Turkey and fought to water down an EU statement criticizing Turkey's incursion into Syria. Additionally, Turkey is the only other NATO country complicating Sweden's accession to the alliance.

Nevertheless, despite its internal authoritarian turn, Turkey remains a strategic partner and NATO ally. China (PRC), by contrast, is a U.S. and Western rival — making Orbán's dalliance with the PRC in recent years particularly troubling.

Hungary's open-door policy toward China makes it a relative outlier in the emerging European consensus about the dangers of partnership with the PRC. Orbán's government takes loans for projects financed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has expressed goals of erecting a multibillion-dollar Chinese university in Budapest, allowed Huawei to establish its European logistics center in Hungary and even accepted a bid from China to build Hungary a cross-country railroad as a part of the CCP's Belt and Road Initiative.

Despite domestic protests, Orbán's government is moving forward with the plans, and the overall trajectory of Orbán's relationship with Beijing is clear: Budapest is a Trojan horse for European security.

It's not for nothing that Chinese officials stated that their country "has always regarded Hungary as a good brother." The CCP no doubt plans to exploit Orbán's lack of loyalty to NATO, just as Putin did. As with Russia, Orbán bucks the European consensus, publicly stating that Hungary will not stand for "any restriction" on cooperation between China and Central Europe.

Orbán's opportunistic alignment with Western adversaries is already creating significant friction within the EU and NATO. Orbán himself said recently that Hungary needs to "think hard about what sort of relations [it] can establish and maintain with Russia in the next 10 to 15 years." If Budapest entrenches this policy beyond its current privileged relationship with Moscow, its potential partners are likely to present new worries for transatlantic security efforts.

Sydney Duckor is a research fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council in Washington, D.C.