

While the far right in Southeast Europe is still seen as a marginal phenomenon, its ideological closeness to pervasive authoritarian patterns and ideologies in the region is very worrying. The COVID-19

pandemic and the socioeconomic crisis that is already hitting the region will increase fears in societies and create favorable conditions for a rise the popularity of radical ideologies and the far right.

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## UNDERSTANDING THE ORBÁN-VUČIĆ RELATIONSHIP

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The Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, have developed a close working relationship, which has seemingly intensified in recent months. This article discusses the relationship between the two leaders in the context of Hungary-Serbia relations as well as discussing their shared approaches to politics, both in a domestic and European context.

Orbán and Vučić have met with surprising regularity, especially in the past 18 months. The duo met in April 2019 in Subotica to discuss the treatment of ethnic Hungarians in Vojvodina, Hungarian investments in Serbia, and the construction of the TurkStream gas pipeline. This was followed by a meeting in Budapest in September 2019, which covered Serbia's path to European Union membership, economic cooperation, and issues relating to Kosovo. The first meeting of Orbán and Vučić in 2020 took place on March 15 in Belgrade, with the stated aims of discussing the migrant crisis, Serbia's path to European integration and the coordination of measures to deal with the Coronavirus pandemic, followed by a meeting in Budapest one week later to discuss the same issues. They then met again in Belgrade in May, once again discussing the same topics, though with the issue of Serbia's European Union membership seemingly being the priority for the two leaders. Finally, the two leaders met virtually at the Europe Uncensored conference in July alongside Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša.

Besides meetings between the two leaders, economic ties between the two states have also intensified in recent years. The Hungarian government has invested heavily in Vojvodina, with 46 billion HUF (around 139 million Euros) spent on the Vojvodina Economic Development program, which has brought in around twice that amount in investments. It is likely that this incursion into the region, which was annexed by Hungary dur-



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ing the Second World war, is only seen as unproblematic only in the context of this Orbán – Vučić connection. Cross border trade has also increased in volume in recent years, and strategic projects between the two states such as the Budapest-Belgrade Rail Link and the potential expansion of the TurkStream pipeline have been also given high importance – the former with the support of Chinese investment, and the latter connecting the two states to Russian gas fields.

### Domestic Approaches

Both Orbán and Vučić are right-wing populists making nativist appeals to the importance of their respective Hungarian and Serb nations, taking authoritarian stances, and adopting the populist rhetoric of the people versus the elite.

However, both their respective parties Fidesz and the SNS have made conscious attempts not to be seen as extremist forces, instead seeking to dominate the centre ground of their respective electorates, as well as aligning themselves with the mainstream centre-right at the European level in the form of the European People's Party.

Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) first came into being when pro-European members of the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS) broke away to form a new political force. The SNS originally took a moderate stance, aiming to present itself as a traditional party of the centre-right and even showing willingness to consider the formation of a grand coalition with the main pro-European force in Serbia, the Democratic Party (DS). However, upon taking power, the SNS swiftly moved to take control of state resources, and sought to present the DS as corrupt and monopolise the centre ground of Serbian politics. Yet despite the inclination of the SNS to state capture, it has struck a balancing act when dealing with the legacy of the SRS. While remaining nationalistic, the SNS has shown enthusiasm for European integration and sought to emphasise the economy, as well as present themselves as an insurgent force, committed to fighting corruption while maintaining the law and order rhetoric of the SRS. Under the leadership of Vučić, the SNS has progressed to more overtly nationalistic positions, yet has still remained relatively restrained compared to the SRS.

On the other hand, Orbán and Fidesz have moved rightwards over time, undergoing a transformation from liberals to national conservatives, and later into right-wing populists. Starting out as a student movement opposing the communist regime, Orbán took advantage of the weakness of the Hungarian right in the 1990s and transformed Fidesz to dominate that political space. Originally, this took the form of appeals to social conservatism combined with an interventionist approach to the economy, but since the return of Orbán to power in 2010 Fidesz have concentrated on building what could be termed as an "il-

liberal democracy", similar to how the SNS have sought to bring state institutions under party control. The use of nativist rhetoric by Fidesz has become more pronounced, and early enthusiasm for European integration has given way to a form of soft Euroscepticism, characterised by repeated clashes with European institutions, particularly during the migrant crisis of 2015. At the same time, Fidesz has doubled down on the populist rhetoric of the elite versus the people, with Orbán presenting himself as unlike the opposition, who are portrayed as corrupt and self-serving.

Orbán and Vučić have consolidated their positions by limiting media freedom, ensuring that the public are able only to see them how they choose to be seen. Government friendly businessmen have gradually taken over the media market in Hungary over the last decade, while the media regulator has been stacked with Orbán loyalists and state advertising has grown exponentially. Vučić has taken a leaf out of Orbán's playbook in his approach to controlling the media in Serbia, adopting many of the same strategies. Privatization processes have handed control of many large media outlets to those friendly to the regime, and SNS politicians have sought to undermine the remaining independent outlets by launching costly defamation lawsuits. State advertising and co-financing projects have been used as tools to

fund pro-government media, while Vučić has taken advantage of friendly media coverage to benefit his political position. In this frame it is therefore understandable why Vučić and Orbán have built a close relationship – neither is used to challenge or criticism, and as a result they are able to emphasize closely with each other's respective positions.

### KEY TAKEAWAY

The close ties between the leaders of Hungary and Serbia have flourished in recent years, on the basis of economic cooperation, similarities in nativist and populist rhetoric, autocratic ruling styles, and mutual gain in Serbia's accession to the European Union. Hungary's support for secessionist Serb leadership in Bosnia threatens stability in the region, and the illiberal model championed by Orbán imperils the normative power of the European Union, given that autocracy has taken roots within its own borders. In addition, both Serbia and Hungary's economic and political ties to non-EU actors such as Russia and China threaten to destabilize the primacy of the EU's influence over Southeast Europe.

## European Issues

A key aspect of understanding the importance of the relationship between the two leaders is their respective attitude towards the European Union (EU). For the two leaders, there is a mutual benefit to working together closely on Euro-

pean issues – Serbian membership in the European Union would give Orbán an additional ally at the negotiating table, while Vučić has staked a great deal of domestic capital on being the Serbian leader who brings his country into the EU.

A large part of Orbán's domestic appeal has been based upon championing Hungarian nationalism. However, instead of seeking to redraw the map, Orbán's approach is best understood by the concept of Transsovereign Nationalism. Accepting that border changes – be they peaceful or otherwise – are not a realistic prospect in the contemporary age, he has instead sought to tether Hungarian communities in neighbouring states to the Hungarian state through transnational institutions, such as an assortment of various cultural and heritage associations. Orbán has used European Union membership as a tool to build stronger connections with Hungarian minority communities – as seen already in the cases of Slovakia and Romania. That leaves only Serbia and Ukraine as neighbouring states with large Hungarian minorities, and considering the challenges to be overcome for Ukraine to even be considered for EU membership, it is unsurprising that Orbán has focused his energies on supporting Serbia's accession.

While Orbán's government has eased the path to citizenship for Hungarians living outside of Hungary's borders, there remains a rationale for wanting to bring Serbia, and therefore by extension the Vojvodina Hungarians, into the EU. In the short term, Serbia joining the Common Market would make doing business easier for those Hungarian companies already present in Serbia, as well as enabling others to easily expand their operations over the border. Similarly, the free movement of persons between Serbia and the EU would aid those Vojvodina Hungarians who are yet to acquire citizenship, and enable stronger cross border links between Hungarian communities, which in the long term would be augmented by Serbia joining the Schengen Area.

### Leadership Styles

Finally, Vučić and Orbán have also likely found common ground in their respective leadership styles and approaches to party management. They share many common character traits in leadership terms, with both leaders exhibiting high degrees of self-confidence and competence, as

well as presenting themselves as men of integrity. Orbán has held a position of almost unquestioned power within Fidesz since the early 1990s and has in that time taken personal command of the direction of his party. In Orbán's view, success in politics requires controlling events through demonstrations of power, resulting in a naturally confrontational style rooted in his high degree of self-confidence. His appetite for confrontation also plays into the construction of his image as a charismatic leader willing to fight for Hungary, which he combines with strongly moralizing language and the perception of integrity he holds with the public due to his role as a prominent anti-communist for political gain. For Orbán, flexibility means adapting to the changing public mood in order to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves, which also serves a dual purpose by showing that he is in command of events. However, he avoids getting caught up in complex policy debates, instead preferring to focus his energies on strategic thinking and delegating policy decisions.

Vučić has not yet been able to consolidate control over the SNS to the extent that Orbán has over Fidesz, but he has started to take steps in the same direction, creating a perception of the SNS as his personal electoral vehicle. While Vučić does not publicly project self-confidence to the same extent that Orbán does, he has shown an increasing willingness over his time in office to present himself as more secure in his beliefs, rather than seeming conflicted between his radical past and more moderate positioning. However, he projects an image of competence both within his party and with the wider electorate, and has made integrity a core part of his appeal through his commitment to tackling corruption – though unlike Orbán, his political transformation is seen as a weakness in this regard. Where the two men are most alike is undoubtedly in their need for power and approach to party management, with Vučić silencing all internal opposition within the SNS and seeking to control as much of the state apparatus as possible.

### Conclusion

While projects such as the Budapest-Belgrade rail link and the gradual intensification of economic ties require the two leaders to have a constructive relationship, the depth of the relationship that has emerged can only be explained by common

interests and a shared worldview, as evidenced by the approaches taken by Orbán and Vučić to ruling their respective states. Going forwards, the relationship should continue to be afforded a high degree of importance by the two leaders, especially as Serbia progresses down the path to European Union membership, although challenges to the warm relationship could emerge if the interests of Hungary and Serbia begin to diverge. It cannot be ruled out that tension could emerge in the future, as was seen in 2015 when Hungary decided unilaterally to build a border fence between the two states. In the event of a similar situation occurring in the future, the warm personal relationship between the two men would undoubtedly be put to the test – and it would become clear if this is simply a marriage of convenience, or a deeper political friendship.

In the wider context of the Western Balkans, the friendship between Orbán and Vučić has a number of significant implications for the politics of the region. Both leaders have sought to entrench the positions of their respective states as dominant actors within the region and working in tandem they are more likely to realize their aims. For example, the leadership of Milorad Dodik in the Republika Srpska is not only supported by Vučić but also by Orbán, who has sought to intensify relations between Hungary and the Bosnian Serb entity. This is despite the overt secessionism espoused by Dodik, and his wholesale rejection of many of the aspects of the constitutional settlement provided for in the Dayton Agreement, which has made him

a frequent target of criticism from other European leaders. Orbán's tacit support for Dodik threatens the stability not only of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also that of the region more widely, particularly as he provides cover for Vučić to seek greater influence in Bosnian affairs.

Orbán and Vučić also act as models for other Western Balkan leaders to follow, secure in the knowledge that a tendency to autocracy and authoritarian rule is not an impediment to greater European integration. Indeed, the public support of Orbán for the membership in the European Union of Serbia (as well as that of North Macedonia) has taken on greater significance with the appointment of his ally Olivér Várhelyi as the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations. The leaders of the Western Balkan states now have less reason to adapt in order to gain EU membership, knowing that they can count on Orbán's support for the accession of their regimes regardless, as he seeks to build an illiberal bloc in his image. The alliance between Orbán and Vučić also takes on additional importance when considering the tripartite relationships their regimes have formed with Russia and China respectively, acting in concert as the main conduits of their interests in a region that the European Union has long been keen to bring into its sphere of influence. Not only will the relationship between the two leaders have a significant impact on the destinies of their respective states, but it will also shape the destiny of the region as a whole.

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## THE SOUTHEAST FRONT: THE FAR RIGHT AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE WIDER BALKANS

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### Southeast Europe in Moscow's Eyes

Although Russia has for centuries involved itself in SEE, it has almost always been less for its own sake, and more as part of wider conflicts. Even today, while it has a range of economic, political, historical and cultural connections with the region, its primary motivator is a belief that Russia faces an existential struggle both for its autonomy and its self-declared great power status with a West that would constrain, marginalize, and even dismember it.

In response, Moscow seeks to divide, distract and demoralize the countries it regards as its enemies, to neutralize them such that the Kremlin can advance its own agenda.<sup>1</sup> This does not only mean direct Russian interests, but also ensuring that it has a stake in areas of general concern. After all, to the Kremlin, one of the basic attributes of great power status is a voice in all major global concerns, a counterpart to the US contention that

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Galeotti, *Russian Political War* (Routledge, 2019)