

The US Election and Prospects for a Changing US-Hungarian Relationship

By Scott Cullinane

The 2020 US election campaign between Democratic candidate and former Vice President Joe Biden and Republican incumbent Donald Trump has been nearly devoid of any serious foreign policy discussion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, domestic issues such as the economy, healthcare, and the pandemic response have dominated the public discourse. Yet, the contest's outcome holds significant ramifications for the future course of US foreign policy and how the US is viewed on the international stage. While the campaign rhetoric has largely left foreign policy to vague slogans and speculation, much can be gleaned about the future direction of the US, especially vis-a-vis Hungary.

Since President Trump's inauguration in 2017, few leaders have enjoyed as close a relationship with the White House as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Both leaders share a world outlook that is generally opposed to immigration, skeptical of the European Union, and more open to cooperation with Vladimir Putin's Russian than mainstream experts in either Budapest or Washington would advise. Orbán took the highly unusual step of endorsing Donald Trump as a candidate and did so again this year during his reelection bid. Subsequently, Orbán has enjoyed a formal visit to Washington, including an Oval Office meeting in May 2019, where Trump praised him for his "tremendous job."ⁱ

Beyond the two leaders' complimentary rhetoric, President Trump dispatched a fellow New Yorker, David Cornstein, to be Ambassador in Budapest. At a time when pressure from civil society activists and leaders in the European Parliament was mounting to impose some cost on the Hungarian government for a wide range of activities broadly seen as damaging to the rule of law, Ambassador Cornstein and other political appointees in the US State Department downplayed such concerns. During an event hosted by the US Embassy in Budapest, Ambassador

Cornstein famously arranged for American singer Paul Anka to serenade the Prime Minister.

While Orbán dramatically improved his political standing in the American capital during the Trump administration, especially compared to the sometimes frosty relations with the Barack Obama administration, there have been limits to what the Hungarian government has achieved. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the US committed to allocating resources to reinvest in Europe's collective defense – including in Hungary. Unfortunately, the funding which had been earmarked was redirected by President Trump for the expansion of a wall along the US-Mexico border.ⁱⁱ Additionally, the close Trump-Orbán relationship also did not alter the plans of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* to recreate its Hungarian language service, which was reconstituted in the face of wide spread media consolidation at the hands of those loyal to the Prime Minister.ⁱⁱⁱ

If there is a change in the US government following this year's election, a Biden administration would again dramatically change Orbán's relationship with Washington. A newly minted President Biden would be faced with a large number of urgent and competing demands. Under other circumstances, the US-Hungarian relationship would not warrant excess attention. However, Orbán has so associated himself with Trump and an illiberal policy agenda; he has lost the broader bipartisan support he would otherwise enjoy as the elected leader of a NATO ally.

In an issue of *Foreign Affairs* published earlier this year, Biden outlined a vision for his foreign policy which would emphasize shoring up democracy at home and abroad.^{iv} In fact, that article especially calls out the need for the US to address backsliding democracies, a category which includes Hungary according to the rankings compiled by the US NGO Freedom House.

As a Biden administration settles into its new role, it's likely that the US-Hungarian bilateral relationship might receive even more attention than under President

Trump, but of a very different variety. As Biden seeks to restore faith in alliances and rebuilds American credibility with European leaders in Brussels, it is possible Hungary may be a point of transatlantic convergence. The US could increase support for civil society and local media outlets, step up diplomatic support for academic intuitions such as CEU, and engage in more public-facing investigations into public corruption, which creates an uneven playing field for US companies seeking to do business in Europe.

While the US-Hungarian relationship is poised for dramatic changes, some of the broad themes of US policy in the region may remain consistent. While the Trump Administration has sometimes failed to align its words and actions, it's an overall shift to limit, contain, and counter Russian and Chinese influence in Central Europe is more likely to be enhanced rather than dismantled by a new Democratic administration.

For the Hungarian government, productive, meaningful, and mutually beneficial cooperation isn't precluded by a Biden victory, but it will necessitate change. For the past four years, the Prime Minister has drawn credibility from his relationship with the White House, which has provided him political leverage both within Hungary and at a European level. As Washington shifts away from a Trumpian outlook, leaders in the Executive Branch and a legislative branch, potentially controlled by Democrats, will see the political and economic consolidation around Orbán and his clique as a problem demanding US attention. Not only as a problem for the rule of law and European solidarity but as dangerous to NATO and the underlying alliance.

ⁱ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-orban-hungary-bilateral-meeting/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2019-09-13/trumps-wall-fund-diversion-risks-military-facilities-security-report-suggests>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/world/europe/hungary-orban-media.html>

^{iv} <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>