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THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

# Orbán's Hungary: A Launching Pad for the 21st-Century Reconquista



Ellen Rivera

*IERES Occasional Papers, no. 25, July 2024*  
*"Transnational History of the Far Right" Series*

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# TransHistFarRight

TRANS HIST FAR RIGHT

Transnational History of the Far Right

*A Collective Research Project led by Marlene Laruelle*

At a time when global political dynamics seem to be moving in favor of illiberal regimes around the world, this research project seeks to fill in some of the blank pages in the contemporary history of the far right, with a particular focus on the transnational dimensions of far-right movements in the broader Europe/Eurasia region.

[www.historyofthefarright.org/](http://www.historyofthefarright.org/)

With Viktor Orbán being Hungary's Prime Minister for 14 years in a row, the country has experienced a sharp democratic decline, and has become arguably the most autocratic in Europe.<sup>1</sup> This transformation from a semi-consolidated democracy to an electoral autocracy has been lauded as a viable model by Western reactionaries, where many of their political goals have become reality: the pushback of migrants; an ethno-nationalist family policy; the curtailment of critical media; the purging of libraries; and the establishment of right-wing curricula in universities.

Orbán's nationalist strongman politics have been so appealing to some like-minded Westerners, particularly Americans, that they have moved to Hungary, where they find a welcoming environment among the Hungarian right. They form an unholy alliance of reactionary movers and shakers that include right-wing ideologues, Catholic fundamentalists, monarchists, and anti-Communist relics. With the active support and funding of the Fidesz government they are working on internationalizing and exporting the successes achieved in the country, which is serving as a test tube for all kinds of reactionary dreams.

At the behest of the Fidesz-controlled Prime Minister's Office (Miniszterelnökség) and the Prime Minister's Cabinet Office (Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda), massive governmental grants are doled out to a select set of organizations, think tanks, and publications that provide support for the newcomers. Some of the most important ones will be subjects of this article. The main infrastructure to distribute these funds is the Batthyány Lajos Foundation (BLF), which notably bankrolls the Center for Fundamental Rights, the organizer of the Hungarian iteration of the American Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)—a primary get-together of the American and international right.

The BLF also set up one of the vanguard organizations that brought Western reactionaries to Budapest, the Danube Institute (DI), directed by John O'Sullivan, a former speechwriter for the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who crossed the Atlantic and became editor of the Heritage Foundation's journal, *Policy Review*, and then longtime editor-at-large of William Buckley's *National Review*. He has developed an extensive network among the American, and particularly the Catholic, right. He also has editorial roles in several English-language journals funded by the BLF, which provide a platform and mouthpiece for new arrivals. Among them are the *Hungarian Review*, the *Hungarian Conservative*, and *The European Conservative* (TEC).

Another entity that hosts the foreign newcomers is the Fidesz-funded private university Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), which receives billions of dollars for teaching an arch-reactionary curriculum, and whose visiting fellows include several American right-wingers.

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<sup>1</sup> "MEPs: Hungary Can No Longer Be Considered a Full Democracy," European Parliament, September 15, 2022, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>; Mike Smeltzer and Alexandra Karppi, "A Region Reordered by Autocracy and Democracy," Freedom House, April 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2024/region-reordered-autocracy-and-democracy>.

This apparent collaboration of the Hungarian with friendly elements of the Anglo-American right has longstanding roots that reach back to the Cold War, which had propped up the Hungarian anti-Communist milieu in the context of the failed 1956 Hungarian uprising. Those who had wholeheartedly supported the coup attempt, including many American officials, were furious over Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower's decision not to take any more drastic measures, and they built a lasting ecosystem in support of Hungary's reactionary turn. And, as will be shown, Viktor Orbán himself was propped up and nurtured by Anglo-American networks already before the end of Communism in Hungary.

## Viktor Orbán

According to Paul Lendvai, Orbán's biographer, his rabid anti-Communism developed during his military service, and it was during his university years that he got involved in Western-backed anti-Communist regime-change efforts.<sup>2</sup> In 1983, the 20-year-old Orbán started his law studies at the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. He joined an English-model residential college for law students from outside the capital: the still-existing István Bibó College of Social Sciences (IBC), today called István Bibó Vocational College, institutionally connected to but largely independent of the ELTE law faculty—the birthplace of the Fidesz party.

The IBC, which opened doors in October 1983, was named after István Bibó, the former Minister of State under Imre Nagy (1896–1958), who was executed as a leader of the failed 1956 uprising. The college was directed by István Stumpf (b. 1957) and was under the protection of his father-in-law, István Horváth, the Hungarian Interior Minister (1980–1985, 1987–1990). Stumpf would later become a close political associate of Orbán's, among other things as Minister of the Prime Minister's Office (comparable to a Deputy Prime Minister) in the first Orbán cabinet (1998–2002).

IBC students were permitted to study social sciences outside of the socialist canon, including Western political science, and they were able to travel to the West. The college became a rallying point for students opposed to the ruling Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, which eventually turned into a movement. While at the IBC, Orbán co-edited an opposition journal called *End of the Century* (*Századvég*), published by István Stumpf from 1985 onward.<sup>3</sup> The journal still exists, alongside a think tank of the same name, which is reportedly close to Fidesz. The latter was “established in 1993 as an intellectual workshop of the young generation that played an active role in the political changes of 1989–1990 in Hungary,” according to its website.<sup>4</sup> András Láncki, who formerly chaired *Századvég*'s board, is today the major shareholder of the *European Conservative* journal.<sup>5</sup>

In August 1986, a secret police source reported that Orbán belonged to an organization whose members were lecturing in the US and West Germany as “the country's expected future leaders,” and that they received Western support, while also being privy to top-level government decisions through

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Lendvai, *Orbán: Hungary's Strongman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 16–17.

<sup>3</sup> Padraic Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution: Central Europe 1989* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 138; “Századvég 1985–2023,” Arcanum Újságok, accessed April 19, 2024, <https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/collection/Szazadvég/?decade=1980#collection-contents>.

<sup>4</sup> “About Us,” Századvég, accessed April 19, 2024, <https://szazadvég.hu/en/about-us/>.

<sup>5</sup> Márton Sarkadi Nagy, “Több mint 1,6 milliárdba került a magyar adófizetőknek egy brüsszeli, angol nyelvű jobboldali hírportál,” Szabad Európa, July 25, 2023, <https://www.szabadeuropa.hu/a/tobb-mint-1-6-milliardba-kerult-a-magyar-adofizetoknek-egy-brusszeli-angol-nyelvu-jobboldali-hirportal/32507210.html>.

Interior Minister Horváth and enjoying full protection of the Budapest police.<sup>6</sup> Sedition charges were looming, but never filed, presumably due to Horváth's intervention.<sup>7</sup>

During his studies, Orbán went on a series of trips to Poland with his IBC classmates, including the 1987 visit by Pope John Paul II, as their IBC instructors wanted them to learn from the protest movements that had formed there. Their local contacts were members of the Polish anti-Communist student group Freedom and Peace (Wolność i Pokój), which belonged to the larger Solidarność movement aimed at toppling the Soviet-aligned government in Poland. In 1986, Orbán submitted his master's thesis on Solidarność, based on interviews with its leaders.<sup>8</sup>

After obtaining the higher degree of juris doctor from the ELTE Law School in 1987, Orbán remained involved in the activities at the István Bibó College. In November 1987, Orbán welcomed a group of 150 European and US delegates from 17 countries at the IBC to a two-day seminar on Perestroika and the prospects of forming a pan-European anti-Communist movement. The event was backed by the European Network for East–West Dialogue (ENEWD), a US-sponsored regime-change outfit.<sup>9</sup> The ENEWD had emerged in July 1984, during the third annual convention on European Nuclear Disarmament in Perugia, Italy.<sup>10</sup> Among the founders of ENEWD was the Hungarian historian Ferenc Mészlivetz (born 1954), who left Hungary at the beginning of the 1980s to receive training at elite universities in the UK and the US, while undermining the Communist governments of Eastern Europe by way of the ENEWD network.<sup>11</sup>

## Fidesz

It was at the Western-oriented István Bibó College that Fidesz was formed on March 30, 1988, by 37 co-founders, including Viktor Orbán, who took a leading role in the party from the very outset.<sup>12</sup> The foundation took place less than two months before János Kádár was replaced as General Secretary of the Communist Party, which rang in the end of Communism in Hungary (May 22, 1988–May 2, 1990).

In April 1988, Orbán started working part-time for George Soros' Open Society Foundations (OSF), known for having promoted anti-Communist regime-change activity in Hungary on a massive scale.<sup>13</sup> According to *Politico*, "Soros sent hundreds of Hungarian academics, business [sic] and students ... to

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<sup>6</sup> "Amit Orbán Viktor nem tett ki a honlapjára állambiztonsági múltjáról," Kuruc.info, February 17, 2012, <https://kuruc.info/r/9/94946>.

<sup>7</sup> C. Ionana, "Viktor Orbán—a 'Petrov' of Hungary: The Prime Minister's Collaboration with Hungarian Security," LARICS, April 1, 2022, <https://larics.ro/viktor-orban-a-petrov-of-hungary-the-prime-ministers-collaboration-with-hungarian-security/?lang=en>.

<sup>8</sup> Kenney, *A Carnival of Revolution*, 138–139.

<sup>9</sup> Viktor Orbán, "Recapturing Life," *Across Frontiers* 4, nos. 2 & 3, (Spring–Summer 1988), 34–35, <https://www.connexions.org/CxLibrary/Docs/AcrossFrontiers-V4N2-3.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Nicolas Badalassi and Sarah B. Snyder, *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War: Diplomacy, Societies and Human Rights, 1972-1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2019), 163–164.

<sup>11</sup> "Curriculum Vitae: Ferenc Mészlivetz," 2012, [http://www.kx.hu/kepek/ises/anyagok/CV\\_2012\\_\\_EnglishFM.pdf](http://www.kx.hu/kepek/ises/anyagok/CV_2012__EnglishFM.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> "Mi lett a 37 Fidesz-alapítóból?," Index.hu, March 29, 2018, [https://index.hu/belfold/2018/03/29/fidesz\\_alapitas\\_bibo\\_rajk\\_szakkolegium\\_alapitok\\_alapito\\_nyilatkozat\\_alairok/](https://index.hu/belfold/2018/03/29/fidesz_alapitas_bibo_rajk_szakkolegium_alapitok_alapito_nyilatkozat_alairok/).

<sup>13</sup> Lendvai, *Orbán*, 23.

the West for study,” financed “independent trade unions and opposition parties,” and bankrolled a mass rally on May Day in 1989 that drew an estimated 100,000 people.<sup>14</sup>

Through his Western connections, Orbán was primed to become a political functionary in the post-Communist period. On June 16, 1989, at age 26, he was chosen to give a speech at Hero Square at one of the most important events during the transition period: the reburial of Imre Nagy, the executed leader of the 1956 failed uprising, which had rallied the anti-Communist substrate of the population.

In October 1989, Orbán received a scholarship from Soros’ OSF to study political science at Pembroke College, Oxford, “to complete a nine-month research project on the idea of civil society in European political philosophy.”<sup>15</sup> His personal tutor was the Polish-born anti-Communist Oxford professor emeritus, Zbigniew Pełczyński. In January 1990, Orbán left Oxford prematurely and returned to Hungary to run successfully for a seat in the country’s first post-Communist parliament. In this capacity, he was appointed leader of Fidesz’s parliamentary group until May 1993, and then leader of the party (1993–2000, 2003–present).

In the early and mid-1990s, Orbán’s Anglo-American contacts continued. In September 1992, he was elected vice chairman of the Oxford-based Liberal International.<sup>16</sup> And in May 1996, he was made chairman of the Hungarian National Committee of the New Atlantic Initiative (NAI), a US-based neoliberal and Atlanticist think tank launched at the Congress of Prague by President Václav Havel and Margaret Thatcher. The NAI was co-chaired by John O’Sullivan, who presumably knows Viktor Orbán from back then. According to the Danube Institute website, the NAI “played a major role in bringing the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into NATO.”<sup>17</sup>

Two years later, in 1998, Orbán went on to become the second-youngest prime minister of Hungary, at age 35. During his first term, he pushed through extensive economic and governmental reforms, including the “rapid expansion of the Prime Minister’s Office as the assertive centre of decision-making, and the weakening of the parliamentary control mechanisms.”<sup>18</sup> Right at the outset, his party was implicated in a lobbying scandal involving American business interests. Prior to submitting proposals for a significant fighter jet contract, two state secretaries, in addition to 32 other members of Orbán’s party, had written a letter to two US senators advocating for the selection of a Lockheed manager based in Budapest to serve as the US ambassador to Hungary.<sup>19</sup>

Orbán’s march through the institutions continued in his successive tenures as prime minister from 2010 onwards. With Fidesz’s hold on power growing, the Orbán leadership increasingly used its leverage to go against any sort of progressivism in EU politics, and fortified and extended strategic alliances with right-wing forces in Europe, Russia, and the United States.

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<sup>14</sup> William Echikson, “In His Hungarian Homeland, Soros’ Gains Are Slipping Away,” Politico, May 21, 2018, <https://www.politico.eu/article/george-soros-open-society-foundation-hungary-gains-slipping-away/>.

<sup>15</sup> Nick Thorpe, “The Man Who Thinks Europe Has Been Invaded,” BBC, April 6, 2018, [<sup>16</sup> Lendvai, \*Orbán\*, 26.](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-sh/Viktor_Orban; Lendvai, <i>Orbán</i>, 23.</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>17</sup> “John O’Sullivan,” Danube Institute, accessed August 18, 2023, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/authors/o-sullivan-john>.

<sup>18</sup> Lendvai, *Orbán*, 44.

<sup>19</sup> “Orbán nem gyanít korrupciót a Lockheed-botrány mögött,” Origo, May 21, 1999, <https://www.origo.hu/itthon/1899/12/19990526orban>.



## Batthyány Lajos Foundation

While Orbán was still cutting his teeth in politics, some of the patrons of the democratic transition in Hungary set up a multi-pronged infrastructure that today provides major support to Western newcomers in Budapest, the Batthyány Lajos Foundation. The BLF was founded in 1991 on the initiative of Pál Tar, former Hungarian Ambassador to the US and the Holy See and a Knight of Malta; the first Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall; and former French Prime Minister Michel Rocard.<sup>20</sup> Pál Tar, who took over the management of the Foundation in 1994, said later in an interview that the BLF “aimed to support right-wing public life from the very beginning.”<sup>21</sup> Over time the BLF, “has grown to become an instrument for channeling donations from the Hungarian [Fidesz] government,” according to Euronews, and today, the BLF receives massive government funds, more than \$25 million in 2023 alone.<sup>22</sup> The BLF “distributes a significant part of the grants to apparently civil, non-profit organizations that are actually affiliated with the government,” according to the Hungarian government watchdog K-Monitor.<sup>23</sup>

## Center for Fundamental Rights and CPAC Hungary

One of the recipients of BLF funds is the Fidesz-affiliated think tank, the Center for Fundamental Rights (CFR). Founded in 2013, it is the official organizer for the American-based Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary and a central organization promoting the networking of the Fidesz government with the international right.<sup>24</sup> In the recent years, the CFR has been receiving millions in government funds through the BLF—\$5.5 million dollars in 2022 alone, according to the news portal Telex.<sup>25</sup>

The first iteration of CPAC Hungary took place from May 19 to 20, 2022, in Budapest, the only place where CPAC organizes conferences in Europe.<sup>26</sup> The speakers included Spain’s Vox party leader Santiago Abascal; Congressman Eduardo Bolsonaro from Brazil, the son of the former president; former US White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows; and far-right US media figure Jack Posobiec. Donald Trump appeared in a video message lauding the successes of the Orbán government. In his speech, Orbán brought up the great replacement conspiracy theory, and appeared on stage with the

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<sup>20</sup> “Erős Bástya a Nemzeti Oldalon,” Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány, August 19, 2021, <https://bla.hu/2021/08/19/eros-bastya-a-nemzeti-oldalon/>.

<sup>21</sup> Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány, “Erős Bástya a Nemzeti Oldalon.”

<sup>22</sup> Lili Rutai, “Hungary Is Funding European Publications. But Have They Had an Impact?,” Euronews, September 17, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/09/16/hungarys-government-is-funding-european-publications-to-little-success>; Nagy, “Több mint 1,6 milliárdba került a magyar adófizetőknek egy brüsszeli.”

<sup>23</sup> “Adatbázis: Batthyány Lajos Alapítvány,” K-Monitor sajtóadatbázis, accessed April 5, 2024, <https://adatbazis.k-monitor.hu/adatbazis/cimkek/batthyany-lajos-alapitvany>.

<sup>24</sup> Center for Fundamental Rights, <https://alapjogokert.hu/en/>.

<sup>25</sup> Marianna Tóth-Biró, “Újabb kétmilliárd forint közpénzből működhet idén az Alapjogokért Központ,” telex, May 19, 2022, <https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/05/19/ujabb-ketmilliard-forint-kozpenzbol-mukodhet-iden-az-alapjogokert-kozpont>.

<sup>26</sup> Flora Garamvolgyi and Shaun Walker, “Viktor Orbán Invites Trump to Hungary to Boost Re-Election Campaign,” Guardian, February 11, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/11/donald-trump-hungary-prime-minister-viktor-orban-reelection>.

journalist Zsolt Bayer, who previously had “called Jews ‘stinking excrement,’ referred to Roma as ‘animals’ and used racial epithets to describe Black people,” as the *Guardian* reported.<sup>27</sup>

In early May 2023, in his speech at the second CPAC Hungary conference, Orbán made reference to the Reconquista, the over 700-year period in which Christians fought against Muslims over the Iberian Peninsula, which is used today as a metaphor for ridding Europe of foreigners and the reestablishment of Catholic rule. Two emissaries from the Spanish far-right party Vox, who likely are aware of the Reconquista’s gruesome aspects, such as the expulsion and forced conversion of Jews and Muslims, made the reference as well.<sup>28</sup> In late May, on Twitter, Orbán congratulated Vox President Santiago Abascal for his latest electoral successes, stating “The right-wing reconquista continues in Spain.”<sup>29</sup>

Thus, it should not come as a surprise that the CFR has branched out to Madrid as of March 2024. CFR’s director, Miklós Szánthó, stated that “Budapest is already a strong bastion, so let Madrid be the next bastion of the right.”<sup>30</sup> A key propagandist of the Orbán government, Szánthó doubles as the chairman of the Central European Press and Media Foundation (CEPMF), dubbed the propaganda ministry by progressive Hungarians. Founded in August 2018, CEPMF’s assets consist of more than 400 outlets, including cable news channels, radio stations, internet news portals, newspapers, and magazines, known for their favorable reporting about the Orbán government.<sup>31</sup> Through their affiliation with the foundation, these outlets benefit from tax breaks and can conduct coordinated press campaigns.

## Danube Institute

Besides the CFR, a second organization that the BLF funds is the Danube Institute (DI), directed by John O’Sullivan, whom Orbán knew in all likelihood from his time at the New Atlantic Initiative.<sup>32</sup> The DI was established by the BLF in 2013 to facilitate the exchange of American and European right-wingers, for example by bringing them as lecturers and visiting fellows to Hungary.<sup>33</sup> Among the

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<sup>27</sup> Flora Garamvolgyi and Julian Borger, “Trump Shares CPAC Hungary Platform with Notorious Racist and Antisemite,” *Observer*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/21/trump-shares-cpac-hungary-platform-racist-antisemite>.

<sup>28</sup> Jorge González-Gallarza, “Orbán’s Reconquista,” *The Critic*, June 8, 2023, <https://thecritic.co.uk/orbans-reconquista/>.

<sup>29</sup> Viktor Orbán, X (formerly Twitter), May 29, 2023, [https://x.com/PM\\_ViktorOrban/status/1663174320808505345](https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1663174320808505345).

<sup>30</sup> “Center for Fundamental Rights Opens Its First Office Abroad in Madrid,” *Magyar Nemzet*, March 21, 2024, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/english/2024/03/center-for-fundamental-rights-opens-its-first-office-abroad-in-madrid>.

<sup>31</sup> “Hungary: New Pro-Government Media Conglomerate Threatens Pluralism,” *European Federation of Journalists*, November 29, 2018, <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2018/11/29/hungary-new-pro-government-media-conglomerate-threatens-pluralism/>; Gergely Szakacs and Marton Dunai, “Hungary’s Orban Exempts Pro-Government Media Group from Scrutiny,” *Reuters*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN1O51DV/>.

<sup>32</sup> “Mission Statement,” *Danube Institute*, accessed August 18, 2023, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/content/mission-statement>.

<sup>33</sup> Eva S. Balogh, “The Government-Financed Danube Institute and Its Director, John O’Sullivan,” *Hungarian Spectrum*, August 16, 2020, <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2020/08/16/the-government-financed-danube-institute-and-its-director-john-osullivan/>; “Mission Statement,” *Danube Institute*, accessed August 18, 2023, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/content/mission-statement>; “Visiting Fellows,” *Danube Institute*, accessed May 14, 2024, <https://danubeinstitute.hu/en/about-us/visiting-fellows>.

American DI fellows is notably the Catholic convert Rod Dreher (born 1967), who moved to Hungary around 2021, and currently serves as the Director of DI's Network Project. According to FBI documents, Dreher's father, Ray Dreher, was a leader in the Ku Klux Klan.<sup>34</sup> Dreher was formerly attached to the *National Review* and until 2023 served as editor-at-large of *The American Conservative*, when he was laid off after his personal donor deemed his column too extreme.<sup>35</sup>

The Danube Institute has also appeared as cosponsor of various events promoting the transnational exchange of like-minded right-wingers, for example the National Conservatism Conference (NCC), in which Orbán has participated in April 2024. The NCC is organized by the Zionist Edmund Burke Foundation, whose distinguished senior fellow, Ofir Haivry, has also received a DI fellowship. DI and NCC staffers have notably attended meetings of the so-called Working Group on Conservatism in Europe, organized by New Direction, the think tank of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group in the European Parliament.<sup>36</sup>

## John O'Sullivan

The founder and president of the Danube Institute is John O'Sullivan. Born in 1942, O'Sullivan is a prominent British right-wing journalist, editor, and political networker with an international reach. Throughout his extensive career, he has been affiliated with numerous right-wing newspapers and organizations. He is known among the right for coining O'Sullivan's Law, which states that "All organizations that are not truly right-wing will eventually become left-wing."<sup>37</sup>

Coming from an Irish Catholic background, O'Sullivan was involved in the British Conservative Party since his youth, which paved his way in right-wing journalism, including *The Daily Telegraph* from the early 1970s onwards. Following his stint as Director of Studies at the American Heritage Foundation from 1979 to 1983, he emerged as a key figure bridging American and British reactionary circles.

In 1988, O'Sullivan assumed the role of senior editor at the right-wing *National Review*, succeeding William F. Buckley Jr., and remained in that position until 1997.<sup>38</sup> He has maintained a close association with the journal ever since, having served as editor-at-large until 2023, and is still listed as a contributing editor.<sup>39</sup>

O'Sullivan's unwavering support of the Conservative cause caught the attention of former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1925–2013), who appointed him as her adviser and speechwriter. A devoted Thatcherite ever since, he played a significant role in various institutions launched during

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<sup>34</sup> Rod Dreher, "A Darkness Revealed," *The American Conservative*, December 27, 2022, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/a-darkness-revealed/>.

<sup>35</sup> Caleb Ecarma, "How Rod Dreher's Blog Got a Little 'Too Weird' for The American Conservative," *Vanity Fair*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/03/rod-dreher-blog-weird-american-conservative>.

<sup>36</sup> Danube Institute, X (formerly Twitter), March 9, 2023, <https://x.com/InstituteDanube/status/1633922103152898048>; Ofir Haivry, X (formerly Twitter), June 9, 2023, <https://x.com/haivry/status/1667172770055168000>.

<sup>37</sup> John O'Sullivan, "John O'Sullivan on O'Sullivan's First Law," *National Review*, June 26, 2003, <https://web.archive.org/web/20110218065208/http://old.nationalreview.com/flashback/flashback-jos062603.asp>.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Trueheart, "The Magazine Reader," *Washington Post*, January 31, 1989, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/01/31/the-magazine-reader/bf16729c-4d53-480d-b386-dc123ce1d04c/>.

<sup>39</sup> "The Masthead," *National Review*, accessed May 15, 2024, <https://www.nationalreview.com/the-masthead/>.

her tenure, such as the Bruges Group and the New Atlantic Initiative. Through his longstanding ties to Thatcher, he also appears in the orbit of the right-wing to far-right European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament, particularly its think tank, New Direction, whose founding patroness in 2010 was Thatcher.<sup>40</sup>

A notable highlight in his career was his time as vice president and executive editor at Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty in Prague from 2008 to 2012, which had played a vital role in the 1956 failed Hungarian uprising in its early years as a US-sponsored Cold War propaganda and intelligence outfit.<sup>41</sup>

In 2013, following the call to head the BLF-funded Danube Institute, O’Sullivan relocated to Budapest with his wife Melissa. There, he also has editorial and advisory roles in three English-language journals funded by the BLF, whose publishing arm, BL Nonprofit Kft,<sup>42</sup> issues a range of right-wing journals.<sup>43</sup> O’Sullivan is one of the two associate editors of the *Hungarian Review*, founded in 2010, and also one of two editors-at-large of the *Hungarian Conservative*, founded in 2021.<sup>44</sup>

## The European Conservative

Furthermore, O’Sullivan sits on the advisory council of the influential right-wing journal *The European Conservative* (TEC), which, since 2021, has been issued from the Hungarian capital, with an additional bureau in Brussels.<sup>45</sup> From 2008 until its re-establishment in Budapest, TEC was published as a newsletter by the still existing Center for European Renewal (CER), founded in 2007 and based in the Netherlands. The CER was built on the model of Buckley’s Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI), established in 1953 to spread conservative ideology on US college campuses, particularly by way of sponsoring student newspapers.<sup>46</sup>

Around 2021, TEC separated from CER and transformed into a glossy print journal issued as a quarterly from Budapest. TEC, which runs at a huge loss, has received funds to the tune of millions from the Fidesz government by way of the Batthyány Lajos Foundation.<sup>47</sup> As per the information provided on its “impressum” page, TEC is published in partnership with the Berlin-based Library of

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<sup>40</sup> “Thoughtful Response to Thatcher’s Critics,” *The Conservative*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.theconservative.online/thoughtful-response-to-thatchers-critics>.

<sup>41</sup> “John O’Sullivan, CBE,” Mathias Corvinus Collegium, accessed August 19, 2023, <https://mcc.hu/en/person/john-osullivan-cbe>; “Rare Coverage of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising Now Available to Researchers,” Hoover Institution, November 2, 2016, <https://www.hoover.org/news/rare-coverage-1956-hungarian-uprising-now-available-researchers>.

<sup>42</sup> A Kft in Hungary is a limited liability company, or LLC.

<sup>43</sup> “Lapkiadás,” Batthyány Lajos Foundation, archived copy from October 21, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211021215023/https://bla.hu/lapkiadas/>.

<sup>44</sup> *Hungarian Review*, <https://hungarianreview.com/>; *Hungarian Conservative*, <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/>.

<sup>45</sup> “About,” *The European Conservative*, accessed May 20, 2024, <https://europeanconservative.com/about/>; Orbán Tamás, “Az oroszlán barlangjában – megnyílt a European Conservative brüsszeli irodája,” *mandiner.hu*, February 13, 2023, [https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20230213\\_european\\_conservative\\_brusszel/](https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20230213_european_conservative_brusszel/);

<sup>46</sup> “Towards the Restoration of the Western Tradition in Europe: Possibilities and Strategies,” Center for European Renewal, archived copy from May 17, 2008, [https://web.archive.org/web/20080517190145/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page\\_id=19](https://web.archive.org/web/20080517190145/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page_id=19).

<sup>47</sup> Nagy, “Több mint 1,6 milliárdba került a magyar adófizetőknek egy brüsszeli.”

Conservatism (Bibliothek des Konservatismus: BdK), a far-right think tank and library; the Italian think tank and journal *Nazione Futura*, close to the Fratelli d'Italia party; and an unidentified organization called CEDI/EDIC (Vienna).<sup>48</sup>

TEC's editor-in-chief since 2012 and managing director of the aforementioned CEDI/EDIC, Alvino-Mario Fantini (born 1968), is another of the Americans hovering around Budapest.<sup>49</sup> Fantini, whose parents have roots in Italy and Bolivia, had gained recognition for his contributions to several right-wing publications and websites in the early 2000s, including the *Dartmouth Review*, which has received support from the ISI. His career took a significant step forward when he attended the first Vanenburg Conference in 2006, which kickstarted the creation of the CER. Subsequently, Fantini became actively involved with CER and served on its board from 2011 until at least 2017.

TEC and CER included several Hungarians from early on: András Láncki and his son, Tamás Láncki, had taken part in the first Vanenburg Conference.<sup>50</sup> From 2008 onward, Láncki was member of CER's board, first as chairman of the International Advisory Board, and then as chairman, from 2011 until at least 2017.<sup>51</sup> At the time, he was professor of political science at the Corvinus University of Budapest and director of the Institute for Political Science, as well as adviser to the Hungarian president.<sup>52</sup> Today Láncki is the majority shareholder of TEC.

Currently, there are several Hungarians on TEC's staff, including the journal's managing editor, Kristóf Máté Nagy. Gergely Szilvay, a far-right scholar of political theory at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, sits on the editorial board, and writes pseudo-academic texts pitted against gender theory and in support of Donald Trump.<sup>53</sup> On TEC's advisory council is Boris Kálnoky (born 1961, Munich), whose family left Hungary in 1947 and who grew up in Germany, the United States, the Netherlands, and France. Since joining *Die Welt* as a Balkans correspondent in 1995, he has lived for extensive periods in Budapest and writes for a number of other German-speaking media.

A meeting point for TEC staffers and the right-wing diaspora in Budapest is the Scruton Café, named after a key figure of the CER and TEC, the British right-wing ideologue Roger Scruton (1944–2020),

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<sup>48</sup> "Impressum," *The European Conservative*, accessed May 20, 2024, <https://europeanconservative.com/impressum/>.

<sup>49</sup> The identity of the CEDI/EDIC organization in Vienna could not be established. The Italian journalist Andrea Palladino claimed that it is Otto von Habsburg's European Documentation and Information Centre, but TEC promptly refuted this statement on Twitter. However, it is undeniable that TEC has made positive references to Otto von Habsburg on multiple occasions, and Fantini has maintained close ties with the Otto von Habsburg Foundation in Budapest. See *The European Conservative*, X (formerly Twitter), May 12, 2023, <https://x.com/EuroConOfficial/status/1657000651635716097>; "Visit by Alvino-Mario Fantini, Editor-in-Chief of *The European Conservative*," Otto von Habsburg Foundation, February 23, 2022, <https://habsburgottoalapitvany.hu/en/visit-by-alvino-mario-fantini-editor-in-chief-of-the-european-conservative/>.

<sup>50</sup> Center for European Renewal, "Towards the Restoration of the Western Tradition in Europe."

<sup>51</sup> "About Us," Center for European Renewal, archived copy from July 26, 2011, [https://web.archive.org/web/20110726042041/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page\\_id=1](https://web.archive.org/web/20110726042041/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page_id=1); "About Us," Center for European Renewal, archived copy from March 3, 2017, [https://web.archive.org/web/20170303232333/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page\\_id=1](https://web.archive.org/web/20170303232333/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page_id=1).

<sup>52</sup> "About Us," Center for European Renewal, archived copy from May 17, 2008, [https://web.archive.org/web/20080517163627/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page\\_id=1](https://web.archive.org/web/20080517163627/http://www.europeanrenewal.org/main/page.php?page_id=1).

<sup>53</sup> "Gergely Szilvay," academia.edu, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://ppke.academia.edu/GergelySzilvay>.

in whose honor the café was founded in September 2020—as reported in the *National Review* by then editor-at-large John O’Sullivan.<sup>54</sup>

## Mathias Corvinus Collegium

Another Fidesz-backed structure that provides support to sympathizing Westerners in the form of academic opportunities is the Mathias Corvinas Collegium, founded in 1996, which has the status of a university. The MCC is Hungary’s largest private educational institution with an arch-reactionary curriculum, aimed at supplanting the public education system. The university’s current chairman is Balázs Orbán, who since 2021 has been the Political Director of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (no relation) and a member of the National Assembly since 2022.

The *New York Times* reported in 2021 that “The privately managed foundation, Mathias Corvinus Collegium ... was recently granted more than \$1.7 billion in government money and assets from ... Hungary’s prime minister,” equal to about 1% of the country’s GDP and more “than the annual budget of the country’s entire higher education system.”<sup>55</sup> Another measure to strangle public universities was introduced in 2021: 11 state universities were placed under the control of foundations, “Installing political allies at the helm of these foundations.”<sup>56</sup>

Among the numerous Americans who lecture at MCC are Gladden Pappin and Rod Dreher. John O’Sullivan was a guest lecturer, and TEC’s Boris Kálnoky has worked there as head of the Media School since September 2020.<sup>57</sup>

## Gladden Pappin

Gladden Pappin is another American right-winger who relocated to Budapest in 2023, and since then has headed the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs (Magyar Külügyi Intézet)—the official foreign policy think tank of the Hungarian government.<sup>58</sup> A devout Catholic and a Knight of Malta, he was made a Hungarian citizen upon arrival.<sup>59</sup> In the past, Pappin had received numerous fellowships from major right-wing funders, such as the Charles Koch Foundation (2016–2017), the Earhart Foundation (2010–2011), and the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (2009–2010).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> John O’Sullivan, “Roger Scruton-Themed Coffee Shops Open in Budapest,” *National Review*, November 27, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/a-moveable-feast/>.

<sup>55</sup> Valerie Hopkins, “Campus in Hungary Is Flagship of Orban’s Bid to Create a Conservative Elite,” *New York Times*, June 28, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/28/world/europe/hungary-orban-university.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Benjamin Novak, “Hungary Transfers 11 Universities to Foundations Led by Orban Allies,” *New York Times*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/27/world/europe/hungary-universities-orban.html>.

<sup>57</sup> “Boris Kálnoky,” *Hungarian Review*, accessed March 26, 2024, <https://hungarianreview.com/article/author/boris-kalnoky/>.

<sup>58</sup> Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, <https://kki.hu/en/about-the-institute/>.

<sup>59</sup> “Gladden J. Pappin,” *Scholars at Harvard*, last updated September 2022, <https://scholar.harvard.edu/pappin/home>; “Politics Professor Invested as Knight of Malta,” *University of Dallas*, accessed August 11, 2023, <https://udallas.edu/news/2018/politics-professor-invested-as-knight-of-malta>.

<sup>60</sup> “Gladden Pappin, Ph.D.,” *University of Dallas*, archived copy from October 26, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20201026072613/https://udallas.edu/constantin/academics/programs/politics/faculty/pappin-gladden.php>.

Since 2017, Pappin has taught at the University of Dallas, and was promoted to the rank of associate professor with tenure in 2021; however, he is currently on leave.<sup>61</sup> The University of Dallas has a special connection to Hungarian Catholics, since a group of Cistercian monks who fled Hungary in 1956 made up a large part of the initial teaching staff when it opened its doors that year.<sup>62</sup> The monks who would help found and staff the university saw their task as a continuation of their work at the defunct monastery.<sup>63</sup> Pappin also teaches at the Catholic fundamentalist school Pro Civitate Dei, whose professors have included Alvino-Mario Fantini.<sup>64</sup> In 2022, Pappin and his family appeared in photographs with Eduard von Habsburg, who since 2015 has served as Hungary’s ambassador to the Holy See and the Sovereign Order of Malta, and who is the author of the staunchly Catholic and pro-monarchist *The Habsburg Way*, who also received Hungarian citizenship.<sup>65</sup>

## Otto von Habsburg Foundation

Such preferential treatment towards staunch Catholics and monarchists by the Orbán government, which glorifies Hungary’s Habsburgian legacy, is not an exception. In 2011, Orbán reinstated the thousand-year-old Crown of Saint Stephen, worn by the kings of Hungary, as symbol of the Hungarian state. When Pope Francis visited Hungary during the International Eucharistic Congress (IEC) in 2021, the papal mass was held in Latin, and during the congress, the Crown of Saint Stephen was “brought from St. Stephen’s Basilica to the Parliament Building,” as Gladden Pappin reported.<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, the Orbán government bankrolls the Otto von Habsburg Foundation (OHF) in Budapest, which opened its doors in 2017 at the city’s top address, the Buda Castle, with millions in funds from the Prime Minister’s Office and the Bethlen Gábor Fund.<sup>67</sup> The OHF houses the archive of the restless last Crown Prince Otto von Habsburg (1912–2011) who had smithed contacts across Europe and the Atlantic after his empire fell, with the long goal of re-establishing aristocratic rule. There has been some interchange between the OHF and some of the American newcomers. For example, Alvino-

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<sup>61</sup> University of Dallas, “Gladden Pappin, Ph.D.”

<sup>62</sup> David E. Stewart, “Generation Gap,” *Continuum*, Winter 2009, [https://www.cistercian.org/abbey/history/PDF/Continuum%202009%20\(Winter\)%20-%20Generation%20Gap.pdf](https://www.cistercian.org/abbey/history/PDF/Continuum%202009%20(Winter)%20-%20Generation%20Gap.pdf).

<sup>63</sup> “Little Known Facts: Cistercians at UD,” *The University News*, November 11, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230201193912/https://thecorchronicle.com/2018/11/11/little-known-facts-cistercians-at-ud/>.

<sup>64</sup> “PCD Faculty,” *Pro Civitate Dei*, accessed August 16, 2023, <https://www.procivitadedei.org/pcd-faculty>.

<sup>65</sup> Jeanette Pappin, X (formerly Twitter), October 16, 2022, [https://x.com/Jeanette\\_Pappin/status/1581469769559314432](https://x.com/Jeanette_Pappin/status/1581469769559314432); Eduard von Habsburg-Lothringen, *The Habsburg Way: Seven Rules for Turbulent Times* (Manchester, New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 2023).

<sup>66</sup> Gladden Pappin, “Signs of Hope in Budapest,” *First Things*, September 15, 2021, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2021/09/signs-of-hope-in-budapest>.

<sup>67</sup> “Data of Public Interest,” Otto von Habsburg Foundation, August 11, 2019, <https://habsburgottoalapitvany.hu/en/data-of-public-interest/>; Otto von Habsburg Foundation, <https://habsburgottoalapitvany.hu/en/>; Antónia Rádi, “Orban’s Enigmatic Swiss Friend Becomes President of Habsburg Otto Foundation,” *Atlatszo*, August 9, 2017, <https://english.atlatszo.hu/2017/08/09/orbans-enigmatic-swiss-friend-becomes-president-of-habsburg-otto-foundation/>.

Mario Fantini visited the foundation, which was commemorated in an article.<sup>68</sup> TEC, in turn, ran several articles in reverence of the Habsburg family.<sup>69</sup>

The chairman of OHF's board is István Nagy (born 1967), former Hungarian Ambassador to Switzerland and current Minister of Agriculture in the Orbán government, who has been in meetings with Orbán in Zurich numerous times. Nagy is a longtime friend and business partner of Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza, the estranged wife of Karl von Habsburg, the current head of the Habsburg family.<sup>70</sup>

## Friends of Hungary Foundation / Hungary (Initiatives) Foundation

Orbán's government has also established lobbying organizations abroad, to cement the influence of the Fidesz government among the diaspora and to lobby foreign politicians. A central one is the Friends of Hungary Foundation (FHF), established by György Granasztói in 2011 in Hungary, before a US branch spun off a year later.<sup>71</sup> The list of founders included around a dozen people from across the globe, most of them with Hungarian roots, among them several professors and two bankers.<sup>72</sup> One of the cofounders and current chairman is E. Sylvester Vizi, former Chairman of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

A year after the FHF emerged, an eponymous organization was incorporated in Delaware in November 2012 on the direct instructions of Viktor Orbán, to "strengthen and support the bonds that unite the Hungarian diaspora's nationalist identity with the Hungarian nation."<sup>73</sup> However, the political opposition accused the organization of "plotting to buy the votes of American-Hungarians," according to the Budapest Beacon.<sup>74</sup> Not long after its inception, "Orban directed then Minister of National Economics, Gyorgy Matolcsy, to make approximately HUF 3.9 billion (USD 18 million) available to the 'Friends.'" The American FHF changed its name to Hungary Initiatives Foundation in 2015, following a Hungarian governmental decree, and is now registered in Washington, DC.<sup>75</sup> It is

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<sup>68</sup> Otto von Habsburg Foundation, "Visit by Alvino-Mario Fantini, Editor-in-Chief of The European Conservative."

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Szilárd Szendrei, "The Imperial Crown: Witness of the Occident," *The European Conservative*, January 1, 2022, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/essay/the-imperial-crown-witness-of-the-occident/>; Jan Bentz, "What Would a Habsburg Do? Seven Rules To Live By," *The European Conservative*, July 10, 2023, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/reviews/what-would-a-habsburg-do-seven-rules-to-live-by/>; Charles A. Coulombe, "Can the European Union Be Saved?," *The European Conservative*, August 23, 2023, <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/essay/can-the-european-union-be-saved/>.

<sup>70</sup> "Nagy and Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza not only party together but there are also financial ties between them. ... Nagy is a trustee in Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza's art foundation TBA21, the organization that runs the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Vienna." Rádi, "Orban's Enigmatic Swiss Friend."

<sup>71</sup> Enikő Enzsöl, "Freunde von Ungarn Preis erstmals verliehen," *Ungarn Heute*, accessed March 30, 2024, <https://ungarnheute.hu/news/freunde-von-ungarn-preis-erstmal-verliehen-90677/>.

<sup>72</sup> "Board of Trustees," Friends of Hungary Foundation, accessed March 30, 2024, <https://friendsofhungary.hu/kuratoriumi-tagok-en>.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin Novak, "Hungarian Initiatives Foundation and Friends of Hungary No Longer in a Relationship," *Budapest Beacon*, October 25, 2013, <https://budapestbeacon.com/hungarian-initiatives-foundation-and-friends-of-hungary-no-longer-in-a-relationship/>.

<sup>74</sup> Novak, "Hungarian Initiatives Foundation and Friends of Hungary No Longer in a Relationship."

<sup>75</sup> Enzsöl, "Freunde von Ungarn Preis erstmals verliehen."



currently directed by Anna Smith Lacey, the granddaughter of former Hungarian Interior Minister, István Horváth, and daughter of Viktor Orbán’s mentor István Stumpf.<sup>76</sup>

## Summary

Although far from exhaustive, the organizations and individuals presented here should exemplify how Fidesz and Viktor Orbán were not only propped up by Anglo-American forces since before the fall of Communism. Also, today the trans-Atlantic contacts of the Hungarian government are a vital ingredient in cementing Orbán’s position, particularly in an international arena. With Orbán’s continuing pre-eminence in Hungarian politics, the coterie of right-wing ideologues who have made Budapest their home in recent years has certainly contributed to the internationalization of the “Hungarian model.”

As Fidesz continues to receive major public support, having polled constantly from 40% to upwards of even 50% of the national vote in the past 10 years, it seems unlikely that fundamental changes to Hungary’s democratic decline will happen soon.<sup>77</sup> As the battle in Hungary has been won by the right for the time being, the focus is now shifting to other countries where the Hungarian model may be applied to next, such as Spain, where the Center for Fundamental Rights now has an outpost. And all eyes are set on the upcoming European elections, which are expected to take a sharp right turn, while Orbán has announced that his government and its allies are ready “to take over” Brussels.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> “Anna Smith Lacey,” Hungary Foundation, accessed March 28, 2024, <https://www.hungaryfoundation.org/executive-director/>.

<sup>77</sup> “Poll of Polls: Hungary,” Politico, accessed May 18, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/hungary/>.

<sup>78</sup> Lily Lynch, “Inside the Orbán Insurgency,” UnHerd, May 17, 2024, <https://unherd.com/2024/05/inside-the-orban-insurgency/>.