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Mos, M.; Macedo Piovezan, I.

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Leadership in international populism: How Viktor Orbán's Hungary shows the way

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Martijn Mos 

Leiden University, Netherlands

Igor Macedo Piovezan

University of Groningen, Netherlands

Abstract

Although a burgeoning literature explores the international dimensions of populism, we still know little about how populist leaders gain international popularity. This paper describes how Viktor Orbán, the Prime Minister of Hungary, has emerged as the role model of international right-wing populism. It demonstrates that Orbán actively supplied himself as an example that like-minded politicians should follow. We draw on the concept of legitimization strategies to illustrate why Orbán markets himself as the leader of an international movement against liberal ideologues (Wajner, 2022). At the same time, populists in many countries have searched abroad for a successful model to follow. Orbán's anti-migration policies and his defense of conservative family values constitute chapters of an illiberal playbook that right-wing populists are eager to implement. We use the concept of authoritarian learning to develop this demand-side perspective (Hall and Ambrosio, 2017). Empirically, we demonstrate our argument through an analysis of speeches delivered at a leading gathering of right-wing populists and moral conservatives: the Hungarian editions of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) that took place in Budapest in 2022 and 2023.

Keywords

Family values, Hungary, international populism, migration, right-wing populism, Viktor Orbán

‘Viktor Orbán of Hungary truly loves his Country and wants safety for his people. He has done a powerful and wonderful job in protecting Hungary, stopping illegal immigration, creating jobs, trade, and should be allowed to continue to do so in the upcoming Election. He is a strong leader and respected by all’ — Donald Trump (Wagner, 2022)

Corresponding author:

Martijn Mos, Leiden University, Turfmarkt 99, The Hague 2511DP, Netherlands.

Email: m.mos@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

‘We have seen what kind of future the globalist, ruling class has to offer. But we have a different future in mind. The globalists can all go to hell, I have come to Texas’ — Orbán (2022a)

Ahead of the Hungarian parliamentary election of April, 2022 (Hall and Ambrosio, 2017, Wajner, 2022), former American President Donald Trump took the unusual step of endorsing the reelection of Viktor Orbán. Shortly after his electoral victory, the Hungarian Prime Minister delivered the opening speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Dallas, Texas. There, Orbán cemented his status as the darling of the US — and global — right. At the same time, he recognized that the organizers ‘managed to confuse a lot of people by inviting me’ (Orbán, 2022a). Indeed, how did the head of government of a small Central European country become the hero of a global right-wing populist movement?

In recent years, a burgeoning literature on international populism has emerged. Although some scholars have looked at how left-wing populists have struck up cross-border ties (e.g., De Cleen et al., 2020; De la Torre, 2017), we restrict our focus to the international dimensions of right-wing populism.¹ A common refrain within extant studies is the leading role that the United States and Russia have played in inspiring and cultivating right-wing populists abroad. Observers describe the surge of illiberal regimes and populist rhetoric as an age of ‘global Trumpism’ (Beinart, 2019; Blyth, 2016; Hozic and True, 2017). Trump inspired copycats around the world. Media accounts have branded a slew of populist leaders as their nation’s version of the American firebrand. Rodrigo Duterte thus poses as ‘the Filipino Trump’ and Jair Bolsonaro as the ‘Brazilian Trump’ (Apostol, 2016; Manz, 2018). When Trump won the 2016 election, the Czech President, Miloš Zeman, wrote a letter of congratulations in which he bragged: ‘in my country, they call me the Czech Trump’ (Zielonka and Rupnik, 2020: 1080). Steve Bannon, the former chairman of *Breitbart News* and adviser to Trump, unsuccessfully attempted to export his ideas by founding an international alliance of right-wing populists known as The Movement (Nossiter and Horowitz, 2019). The US Christian Right, which ‘has been intertwined with American conservatism for decades’ (Dias and Graham, 2022), has long attempted to globalize its agenda of ‘traditional family values’ in order to vanquish the specter of ‘gender ideology’ (Buss and Herman, 2003; Butler, 2006). For many, the United States is thus the main reference point for making sense of right-wing populism as a global phenomenon.

Vladimir Putin has also widely been seen as a trailblazer of this movement. Although scholars debate whether the Russian President himself is a populist (Fish, 2017; March, 2017), there is no doubt that he has propped up populists abroad. Putin has tried to destabilize Western societies by financially supporting populist and far-right parties (Shekhovtsov, 2018). Populist leaders, including Trump, have frequently sung Putin’s praises. They have attended Russian-organized conferences, many of which concerned anti-globalism and conservative values related to the family, gender, and sexuality (Futak-Campbell, 2020). Indeed, Russian leadership has been essential to the ‘Moralist International’ (Stoeckl and Uzlaner, 2022). The Kremlin, in short, established itself as an ‘international conservative cultural beacon for illiberal parties and movements’ (Cooley and Nexon, 2020: 139).

Yet, many populists no longer look to Moscow and Washington for guidance. Putin’s clout among US conservatives and European right-wing populists has evaporated almost entirely since the invasion of Ukraine (Caputo and Nicholas, 2022; De la Baume, 2022). Trump, meanwhile, saw his international popularity dwindle after his interference with the 2020 Presidential election and the violent attack on the US Capitol (Erlanger, 2021; Serhan, 2021). As Putin and Trump’s stocks plummeted, populists around the world directed their attention to Budapest instead. This article argues that Viktor Orbán has emerged as the role model of international populism.

We suggest that a dialogic relationship between Orbán and rightwing populists from other countries has established Hungary as the paragon of global populism.² On the one hand, Orbán actively presents himself as an example that like-minded politicians should follow. For instance, at the CPAC conference in Dallas, he informed his audience that ‘we Hungarians know how to defeat the enemies of freedom on the political battlefield’ (Orbán, 2022a). Populists should therefore take their cue from Hungary. Orbán can then leverage the respect that he enjoys internationally to raise his profile domestically. We draw on the concept of legitimization strategies to explain why Orbán markets himself as the leader of an international movement against liberal and cosmopolitan values (Wajner, 2022). On the other hand, populists in many countries have searched abroad for a successful model to follow. This search for a blueprint led them to Budapest. Orbán’s dismantling of democracy and the rule of law, his anti-migration policies, and his defense of conservative values all constitute chapters of an ‘illiberal playbook’ that right-wing populists are eager to implement (Pirro and Stanley, 2022).

Empirically, we draw on speeches delivered at international gatherings of right-wing populists, as well as news articles on these events. We expect speeches by Orbán and other Hungarian representatives to show that Orbán’s regime portrays Hungary as the vanguard of international populism. We also examine how non-Hungarian participants describe Hungary, and Orbán in particular, in their own speeches, in interviews, and in news articles. This should show that they see Hungary as an example to follow.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on international right-wing populism and outlines our theoretical framework. We then discuss our research methods and data collection. The empirical analysis is divided into two subsections. We first show how Orbán styles himself as the leader of an international right-wing populist movement. Next, we demonstrate that foreign populists indeed hail Orbán’s Hungary as a model that their own countries should replicate. The conclusion summarizes our main findings and offers some suggestions for future research.

International populism: The importance of legitimization and learning

Populism, in Mudde’s (2004: 544) seminal definition, is a ‘thin-centred ideology’ that ‘considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the ‘pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* [...] of the people.’ This lack of an ideological core — indeed, Moffitt (2016) describes populism as a political style rather than an ideology — means that populism relies on ‘thick’ ideologies for its programmatic content. Right-wing populism, which is the focus of our article, is bound up with exclusionary ideologies such as nationalism, nativism, and traditionalism. Right-wing populists are particularly known for their anti-immigration views (Shehaj et al., 2021). But resistance to cosmopolitan notions of gender and sexuality plays an increasingly important role as well (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2015; Sanders and Jenkins, 2023). We thus subscribe to Jenne and LaRoche’s (2023: 5) understanding of right-wing, nationalist populism as an ideology that restricts the “ideal sovereign community to a core ethnonationalist ingroup, protected from liberal elites and their global backers and from hostile or culturally different nonnationals.”

Because of its association with nationalism, right-wing populism was traditionally thought to be contained within the nation-state. Increasingly, however, scholars have removed their national blinders. ‘For all their emphasis on nationalist identity, there is an unmistakable international dimension to contemporary nationalist, populist movements’ (Abrahamsen et al., 2020: 95). We can distinguish three different strands within extant scholarship.

The first strand has theorized the rise of international populism of the right and charted its intellectual history (De Orellana and Michelsen, 2019; Michelsen et al., 2023). Many scholars argue that the French *Nouvelle Droite*, which Alain de Benoist helped found in the 1960s, provides the philosophical roots for populism's development into an international phenomenon (Abrahamsen et al., 2018; Varga and Buzogány, 2022). Echoes of earlier reactionary cross-border politics, including Nazism, fascism and antisemitism, also resound in today's international populism (MacKay and LaRoche, 2018; Steffek, 2015; Subotić, 2022). Last, scholars have argued that today's right-wing populists no longer define their projects in exclusively national terms; they also claim to be defending entire civilizations (Hale and Laruelle, 2021; Stewart, 2020). While 'talk of 'the nation' is not disappearing,' national identity is 're-characterized in civilizational terms' (Brubaker, 2017: 1211). This is a popular theme for Viktor Orbán (Mos, 2023), which we will return to in the empirical analysis.

Second, and relatedly, scholars have analyzed how right-wing populists increasingly cooperate across borders. This is especially evident in the European Parliament, where populists formed their own supranational groupings (McDonnell and Werner, 2019). Steve Bannon's 'The Movement' constitutes a failed attempt that also falls under this header. Orbán, as the empirical section shows, has also created platforms where right-wing populists can congregate.

A third, and dominant, approach asks how populism affects foreign policy (Wajner, 2022). This strand of research finds that a populist foreign policy tends to be more confrontational, personalized, and unpredictable, but that factors such as 'thick' ideologies and resilient bureaucracies can dampen this effect (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). Wojczewski (2020: 401) uses the example of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to show how populists can use foreign policy strategically to 'assert their role as 'rightful' representative of the people.' This links to the importance of legitimization which we discuss in the next subsection. Finally, scholars working within this vein have complicated the assumption that right-wing populists' nationalism equals isolationism. While some do indeed turn their back on international cooperation, others pursue an active foreign policy (Destradi and Plagemann, 2019). Söderbaum et al. (2021: 3, original emphasis) argue that 'many populist leaders are *not* anti-internationalist' but instead prefer to cooperate through 'mechanisms that are malleable to populist ideas and preferences.' This explains the preference of many populists to set up new institutions, such as the Union of South American Nations, instead of cooperating within the liberal international order (Agostinis and Closa, 2022).

Together, these three strands form a sophisticated literature on international populism. What remains underexplored, however, is how right-wing populists gain international popularity. Our two-part framework suggests, first, that populist leaders seek international legitimization by portraying themselves as an inspirational figure or exemplar for like-minded souls; and second, that many national right-wing populists look abroad for success stories to emulate. We develop these points below. Importantly, as we discuss in more detail in the conclusion, our argument remains at the surface level: we do not explain *why* populists seek affirmation abroad or *how* they converge on a specific role model. We intend for our article to be a starting point for such further theorization.

International populist leadership as a legitimization strategy

Political theorists have long proffered that legitimacy facilitates effective rule. As Max Weber famously argued, 'so far as it is not derived merely from fear or from motives of expedience, a willingness to submit to an order [...] always in some sense implies a belief in the legitimate authority of the source' (Stillman, 1974: 33). Legitimacy, in other words, fosters obedience. It is therefore unsurprising that many leaders seek to boost their legitimacy through the use of

legitimation strategies. Such strategies range from the personalistic to the performance-based, and from the ideological to the procedural (Tannenbergh et al., 2021). Within International Relations, scholars have primarily looked at the legitimation strategies of international organizations (Gronau and Schmidtke, 2016; Lenz and Söderbaum, 2023; Zürn, 2008). But political leaders may also use the international stage to legitimate themselves.

This process, which Hoffmann (2015) calls this ‘legitimation from abroad,’ often entails leaders committing themselves to international norms. Autocrats, for example, have ratified human rights treaties to strengthen their reputation (Hafner-Burton et al., 2008). Women’s rights reforms, which allow authoritarian leaders to boost their legitimacy with domestic and international audiences at a low cost, exemplify this dynamic (Bjarnegård and Zetterberg, 2022; Tripp, 2019).

Importantly, however, leaders who object to the liberal international order may also look abroad for legitimation. Wajner (2022: 417), in a seminal contribution, argues that many right-wing populist leaders try to project the ‘struggle between people and elites into the regional and global spheres, with the aim of legitimizing their power both locally and externally.’ Populist leaders, in other words, can bolster their authority by taking their message to the international stage. In doing so, they will inevitably encounter criticism. But many right-wing populists will feel empowered when the political mainstream accuses them of violating standards of appropriateness. Indeed, they may practice ‘counter-stigmatization’ to turn ‘the public mark of deviance [...] into an emblem of pride’ (Adler-Nissen, 2014: 153). Such actors swim against the liberal tide by promoting an ‘alternative conception of normality’ (Rogstad, 2022).

Extending this line of reasoning, we argue that right-wing populists may actively market themselves as leaders of an international movement. They present themselves as pioneers in the fight for principles that unite populists across borders, such as European values (Coman and Leconte, 2019; Mos, 2020) or Western civilization (Brubaker, 2017; Mos, 2023). The objective behind this legitimation strategy is not simply to gain international popularity; instead, the respect of her peers boosts the populist’s authority at home. As such, the international realm enables right-wing populists to ‘demonstrate the sincerity of their ideas’ and to ‘justify the continuation, deepening and expansion of the ‘revolution’ that they have set into motion domestically (Wajner, 2022: 428). Whether this bid to become a lodestar is successful, however, depends on its reception by a foreign audience. We turn to this factor next.

The right-wing populist search for an international role model

When right-wing populists struggle to obtain power domestically, they may look abroad for inspiration. Foreign success stories bring encouragement by demonstrating that change is possible. What is more, they inform populists around the world precisely how to be successful. Learning is thus central to international populism.

Scholars have, of course, long recognized the importance of learning in International Relations. Levy (1994: 283) defined experiential learning as ‘a change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one’s beliefs) or the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience.’ This experience is often that of the actor herself or that of her country. But the concept of ‘vicarious learning’ informs us that individuals try to make sense of their own situation by drawing lessons from the experiences of others (Goldsmith, 2003). This is evident in the nascent literature on authoritarian cooperation and learning. As Hall and Ambrosio (2017: 143) discuss, ‘authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon the prior successes and failures of other governments.’

These studies inform our expectation that populists learn from their foreign peers. Although scholars have found that the rise of populism has triggered adaptative and emulative processes among other party families, we are unaware of extant work analyzing cross-national learning among populists (Adams et al., 2022). Preliminary evidence, however, suggests that such learning does take place. For instance, William Randolph Hearst, the media mogul, thought the United States ought to learn from Europe's experience with fascism. He consequently ran articles by Hitler and gave Mussolini his own newspaper column (Ben-Ghiat, 2021: 99). Orbán's Hungary, we suggest, showcases a more contemporary version of this dynamic. News articles describe how this regime serves as a role model for populists in Bulgaria, Poland, and Slovakia (Buckley and Foy, 2016; Chastand, 2023). More generally, Orbán is said to have authored an 'illiberal playbook' that other politicians are hoping to enact in their own countries (Pirro and Stanley, 2022). The empirical analysis examines in more detail both Orbán's self-presentation as an inspirational figure and the reception he enjoys from foreign populists.

Research methods

Our empirical analysis consists of two parts. We first analyze how Orbán and other representatives of the governing party, Fidesz, present themselves to an international audience of right-wing populists. We then look at how non-Hungarian populists talk about Hungary. Speeches are therefore our main source material.

The analysis focuses on two events: the 2022 and 2023 iterations of CPAC Hungary. CPAC was launched in 1974 as a platform to unite American conservatives. Over time, however, it claims to have developed into 'the largest and most influential gathering of conservatives in the world' (CPAC Hungary, 2023). Many of the contributors are politicians. Religious leaders, media personalities, and activists are among the other participants. CPAC held its first European conference in Budapest in 2022. Viktor Orbán delivered the keynote address when the event returned to the Hungarian capital a year later. A handful of other countries have also hosted foreign conferences in recent years.³ As Sanders and Jenkins (2023) argue, 'this intentional transnationalization of CPAC represents the convergence of global strains of far-right politics.' CPAC's decision to host two events in Budapest speaks to the respect that Hungary enjoys among right-wing populists. At the same time, the Hungarian government's willingness to sponsor the conferences suggests that Orbán accords himself a leadership role within an international movement of right-wing populists (Nagy, 2022). CPAC Hungary, in short, is an appropriate setting within which to examine our argument.⁴

The data collection consisted of four steps. First, we collected all the speeches and roundtable contributions delivered at the two conferences. We included moderators when they introduced panel discussions with a speech of their own. This resulted in 156 speeches. Second, because our argument concerns international populism, we narrowed down the corpus to speeches given by political actors. Here we relied on the short biographies in the conference programs. The study only covers actors that are explicitly identified by their political office or affiliation. The reduced sample of 83 speeches includes current and former heads of government, cabinet members, and national and European members of parliament. Third, for practical reasons, we excluded speeches in Hungarian for which we could not find an official translation.⁵ This step left us with 65 speeches by non-Hungarian politicians and 10 by Hungarian politicians. Last, to correct the imbalance between Hungarian and non-Hungarian speakers, we supplemented our analysis with written and audio-visual news reports on CPAC Hungary; promotional materials; documents on the Hungarian government's official portal (AboutHungary.hu); and speeches by Hungarian representatives at other CPAC events.

Empirical analysis

This section analyzes the speeches delivered at [CPAC Hungary \(2022, 2023\)](#). We first examine how Orbán and other Hungarian officials present Hungary as a role model for like-minded populists in other countries. The second subsection explores how international populists perceive Orbán's leadership.

Viktor Orbán as a self-styled leader of international right-wing populism

Orbán and fellow Hungarian officials supply leadership to an international audience by promoting Hungarian successes in general terms and by particularly depicting Hungary as a role model in two issue areas: family and migration policies. Collectively, these construct a powerful narrative that characterizes Orbán as the *primus inter pares* among international populists.

In both his appearances at CPAC Hungary, Viktor Orbán recounted how his country has repeatedly overcome its enemies and remained true to its national identity. For him, 'Hungary is the place where we not only talked about defeating progressive liberals [...] but the place where we have actually done it' ([Orbán, 2022b](#)). Consequently, Hungary has emerged as 'a bastion of conservative and Christian values' ([Orbán, 2022b](#)). In 2022, the Hungarian leader claimed that out of this success emerged a formula, an 'antidote to dominance by progressives' ([Orbán, 2022b](#)). According to him, this 'open-source, free of charge' medication consists of twelve practices, which include having your own media, exposing your opponents' intentions, and building communities and institutions ([Orbán, 2022b](#)). Orbán thus used his domestic achievements to draft an elaborate playbook that his audience could implement in their own countries.

To depict Hungary as a role model for right-wing populists, Hungarian officials promote specific policy areas where their country has succeeded. One that received particular attention at CPAC Hungary was immigration. In his speech, Ernő Schaller-Baross, a Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for Fidesz, expressed his belief that conservatives must combat illegal migration by securing the nation. According to him, Hungary's decision to construct a border barrier in response to the 2015 migrant crisis proved effective: 'It stopped migration at our Southern border, protecting not only the Hungarian people but other European peoples as well' ([CPAC, 2022: 05:30:20](#)). The Minister of Justice, Judit Varga, made a similar point about the success of these policies when she said, 'Hungary has shown on land, with strong protection, that illegal immigration can be stopped' ([Peñas, 2023](#)). As [Merabishvili \(2023: 2075\)](#) argues, 'Orbán's crisis storyline defined Hungary as 'Christian Europe's bastion.' [Orbán \(2022a\)](#) portrays himself and his domestic allies as 'the first ones in Europe who said no to illegal migration, and stopped the invasion of illegal migrants.' He reminds his audience that 'the border protection system works!' ([Orbán, 2022a](#)). Therefore, Hungarian politicians use their migration policies to promote this narrative that sees Hungary as triumphant in the face of rising challenges.

Family policy is another area where Hungarian officials claim to lead the way. Katalin Novák, Hungary's President, has presented her country as 'today's Mecca of family-focused thinking' ([Losonczi, 2023](#)). Referring to the Demographic Summit conferences held in Budapest, Novák explained that this focus on families is why so many politicians come to Budapest to share their ideas at the event ([Losonczi, 2023](#)). For her, Hungary's success in increasing its birth rate and supporting families has made it 'an example for many to follow' ([Hungary Today, 2023](#)). Viktor Orbán underscored Hungary's leading role in pro-natalist policies at the summit in 2021, where he gave a detailed explanation of how Hungary has succeeded in this area:

Ten years ago, we Hungarians identified five areas, and built Hungary's family policy on those five pillars. The first one is that the decision to raise children should be an advantage for families also financially, not a disadvantage. The second one is that families must be helped with housing, and more importantly, with housing that they own themselves. Thirdly, our family policy must be based on the mother. Fourthly, we must not only pursue a family policy, but must make the functioning of the entire country family-friendly. And finally the fifth pillar is that the institution of the family and children must be protected also by means of the law (Orbán, 2021).

In offering a detailed, step-by-step description of Hungary's family policies, Orbán thus informs international right-wing populists how they can duplicate Hungarian pro-natalist successes. At the 2023 summit, Orbán called Hungary 'the most vocal and steadfast advocate in international politics on the issue of families and demography. This has been the case in recent years, it remains the case, and it will not change' (Orbán, 2023). Most importantly, he stressed that promoting conservative family policies leads to electoral success: 'It is working. We have won four times in a row' (Orbán, 2021). In so doing, Orbán signals that replicating his policies is a strategy bound to succeed.

Civilizational language ties together the efforts of Hungarian representatives to inspire right-wing populists abroad in areas such as migration and family policy. The objective behind this discourse is to show that Hungary is not the only country 'under the siege of progressive liberals' (Orbán, 2022a). Indeed, Orbán stressed in his speeches that progressives endanger not just Hungary but 'the whole of Western civilization' (Orbán, 2022b). Whereas Hungary has taken important steps to fight back, Orbán argues that other countries are not doing enough in response to the liberal threat:

The West is not doing well in the competition among civilizations. And the worst thing is that we only have ourselves to blame. None of our competitors could have wreaked such havoc. When the left unleashed its virus on the world, many well-meaning conservatives said that this anti-national virus was just an accidental laboratory leak. Surely, they said, the left does not want—or cannot—unleash its radicals on the world; they will rein them in themselves. But that did not happen. Let us not be naive! Today, we can see that this virus has not simply escaped: it has been bred, it is being propagated and spread all over the world. Migration, gender, and woke: these are all just variants—variants of the same virus (Orbán, 2022b).

Orbán, therefore, implores his audience to learn from Hungary. His government's experience can provide the foundation for a collective and collaborative response to the liberal threat. Indeed, as Orbán (2022b) notes, 'In this fight we can only succeed if we are together and organized [...] We must find friends and allies in one another. We must coordinate the movement of our troops because we face a great challenge.' European and American conservatives must unite forces to wage 'the battle for Western civilization' against liberal progressives (Orbán, 2022a). After all, Orbán (2022a) asks rhetorically, 'Who is going to stop them if we don't?'

In short, Hungarian politicians create an intricate narrative in their speeches that stresses the dangers to Western civilization posed by liberal ideology while simultaneously claiming that Hungary has successfully tackled these threats. Given the country's successes, Hungary offers other international populists a playbook, allowing them to duplicate Hungary's successes abroad. In explicitly supplying other politicians with a blueprint for success, Hungary pursues international legitimization for domestic purposes. Indeed, at CPAC Hungary, all Hungarian officials, including Orbán, addressed the audience in Hungarian. This supports Wajner's (2022) insight that leaders project populist struggles abroad to boost their domestic legitimacy. We now turn to the perceptions of Hungary among foreign attendees of CPAC Hungary.

The right-wing populist search for a role model

Our speech analysis shows that many foreign participants at CPAC Hungary shared both Hungary's traditional values and Orbán's problem analysis. They agree with Orbán that their societies collectively face a progressive threat. The term 'woke' was frequently used to encapsulate the liberal danger. While this word originated in the African-American culture of the 1920s and used to mean 'to be alert' or *awake* to 'the continued realities of oppression, particularly the oppression faced by Black Americans,' the term has recently been distorted by right-wing politicians and used to repress the minority communities it once protected (Jabali et al., 2021). Today, right-wing populists use 'woke' to refer to any progressive policy or ideology that goes against traditional Christian values, which for them are one of the pillars of Western civilization. Paul Gosar, a Republican Representative for Arizona, said in his speech that woke is a 'force of evil' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023a: 06:14). Roger Köppel, a member of the Swiss People's Party, argued that conservatives need to fight against woke policies that destroy national cultures and communities (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023b: 02:43). References to wokeism not only permeated speeches at CPAC Hungary; in 2023, a banner declared the entire venue to be a 'no woke zone' (Heilbrunn, 2023). The attendees at CPAC see wokeism as a danger that besets all of their countries.

This belief in a set of common challenges, in turn, convinced them of the need to unite forces. As Barry Moore, a US Republican Representative from Alabama, concluded, 'We must unite in fighting, we must come together' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023c: 06:52). For Martin Helme, chairman of Estonia's Conservative People's Party, conservatives must unite because the left has built an impressive network of collaboration for years, allowing them to threaten conservative ideals. For him, conservatives must respond in kind by building an international movement of their own (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023d: 05:44). Mark Meadows, former White House Chief of Staff, framed the need for such a union on the importance of safeguarding children and future generations from the dangers posed by progressive policies: 'It is time that we have to stand shoulder to shoulder to make sure that those family values not only do not get erased, but they are part of our culture of winning for the freedom-loving generations to come' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023e: 01:15). Foreign politicians attending CPAC Hungary believe that the only appropriate response to the left's purported threat to Western civilization is to form alliances and coordinate a global response.

To succeed in building a conservative global movement, speakers drew inspiration from Hungary. The speakers praised Hungary in general terms. Mark Meadows, for instance, said that the Hungarian people are 'a beacon of freedom' and 'a symbol of right and good as we fight for our future' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023e: 01:24). Paul Gosar expressed a similar sentiment: 'Hungary stands today as a beacon in the West, a monument of faith in itself, a testament to people and its leaders' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023a: 03:00). For former Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša, Hungary is the only country in the West that has successfully resisted the dangers posed by progressives (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023f: 15:18).

Many attribute these successes to Orbán personally. Giorgia Meloni, Italy's Prime Minister, congratulated Orbán on his reelection in 2022 and said that he is 'the best defender of his people's interests' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2022: 02:47:37). Eduardo Bolsonaro, a member of Brazil's House of Deputies, told the audience that at CPAC Brazil, he translated a speech delivered previously by Orbán into Portuguese under the title 'Hungary: an example for the world' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023g: 02:14). Kari Lake, a former news anchor and candidate for governor of Arizona, was particularly cheerful about Orbán's leadership, arguing that conservatives need strong leaders like Orbán, someone who 'is pushing an agenda that helps the people of his country, that protects the people of his country' (Boonefaes, 2023a: 07:38). Tom van Grieken, a Flemish right-wing populist,

specifically invoked Orbán's twelve lessons as the foundation for a 'conservative renaissance' (Vlaams Belang, 2022a: 0:37). These speakers evidently saw Orbán's Hungary as a role model in the transnational fight against liberal progressivism.

In addition to lauding the Hungarian government in general terms, attendees were motivated by the country's achievements in two specific issue areas: family and migration policy. Concerning the former, speakers argued that Hungary's pro-natalism and its resistance to 'gender ideology' set an important example. For André Ventura, the leader of Portugal's Chega party, the Hungarian attempt to control a declining birth rate by encouraging Hungarian families to have more babies is a great example to conservatives. Former news anchor Kari Lake was also enthusiastic about Hungary's family policy. Referring to her failed gubernatorial campaign in the state of Arizona, Lake said that had she won, she would have done 'all kinds of great things to strengthen the family much like you're doing here' (Boonefaes, 2023a: 04:08). 'Little did I know,' Lake added, that 'I would walk into Budapest and basically see all the policies that we dream for in Arizona right here in this beautiful city' (Boonefaes, 2023b: 04:52). Jorge Buxade, a Spanish MEP, echoed in his speech this belief that Hungary's conservative approach to gender and family policy is 'a reason to be hopeful' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023h: 04:52). Many attendees thus drew inspiration from Hungary's family policy.

Hungary also served as an exemplar in the transnational fight to defend 'traditional' family values against the alleged specter of 'gender ideology.' In the words of Rick Santorum, the former Republican Senator for Pennsylvania, Hungary is on the 'frontline to reestablish traditional values on the continent of Europe' (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023i: 0:16). The country 'has been first and foremost in standing up for family, and family values [...] not buying into this LGBTQ stuff, and same-sex marriage, and all these redefinitions of cultural norms, and redefinitions of truth' (Lukács, 2023). Tom van Grieken saw the need for an antidote against the wokeist agenda around pronouns and the 'artificial concept of gender.' 'And that antidote, my friends,' he told his fellow right-wing populists, 'is here in Hungary, where common sense reigns' (Vlaams Belang, 2022b: 08:15).

This reverence for Hungary is not just expressed discursively. The so-called 'Don't Say Gay' bill in Florida, which was passed by Governor Ron DeSantis in March 2022, suggests that Orbán's regime informs policy initiatives abroad. This law banned 'classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity' (Beauchamp, 2022). Rod Dreher, a policy insider and editor for the *American Conservative*, explained that the bill was directly inspired by a similar law that Orbán had adopted 9 months earlier which banned LGBTI+ topics from schools (Beauchamp, 2022). DeSantis's press secretary confirmed that they 'were watching the Hungarians' (Marantz, 2022). As one reporter concluded, DeSantis 'has steadily put together a policy agenda with strong echoes of Orbán's governing ethos — one in which an allegedly existential cultural threat from the left justifies aggressive uses of state power against the right's enemies' (Beauchamp, 2022). This example clearly shows how Hungary's right-wing populism is emulated abroad.

In addition to family policy, international populists also looked to Hungary for advice on how to tackle migration. For them, Hungary represents 'a tremendous example of border control' (Boonefaes, 2023b: 07:45), a country that stands out for prioritizing its national sovereignty (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023j: 04:02). The importance of investing in border control for right-wing populists is connected to their belief that allowing illegal migrants to come to Europe means putting national identities in jeopardy (Boonefaes, 2023b: 07:09). It is also connected to their pro-natalist family policies: if European countries manage to raise their birth rate to above replacement level, then they do not need migrants. For the speakers, Hungary's long history of defending its identity and borders inspires all and manifests itself in its hardline approach to immigration. Paul Gosar

praised Hungary for recognizing that it is not its job to appease migrants, only its people (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023a: 01:28). Consequently, he told Hungarians that, ‘you show us the way’ (Alapjogokért Központ, 2023a: 06:35). Some speakers went further than that, explicitly calling for their countries to emulate Orbán. One example is Gavin Wax, president of the New York Young Republican Club, who claimed that ‘we [American conservatives] demand nothing short of an American Orbánism’ (Marantz, 2022).

In short, many right-wing populists see Orbán as an example to follow. In their speeches at CPAC Hungary, they collectively recognize the challenge posed by progressive ideologies and point to Hungary as the answer to these challenges. Their compliments to Hungary’s leadership also intend to strengthen Orbán’s domestic legitimacy. While foreign officials mainly delivered speeches in English, most were dubbed into Hungarian and posted on CPAC Hungary’s website. Making these speeches, which are overwhelmingly optimistic about Hungary and its leadership, readily available to the Hungarian people reinforces the role the international plays in national legitimation.

Conclusion

The *Wall Street Journal* has described Viktor Orbán as ‘an improbable hero for the American Right’ (Continetti, 2023). This article has taken this argument one step further. We have demonstrated that Orbán’s Hungary is at the vanguard of a *global* movement of right-wing populists. We argued that Orbán actively promotes himself as a role model on the international stage. The empirical analysis showed how Hungarian representatives provided a playbook on how to duplicate Hungary’s successes in areas such as migration and family policy. Orbán (2022b) instructed his peers: ‘This is how they [progressive forces] can be beaten’. This attempt to garner respect abroad constitutes a legitimation strategy that is intended to boost Orbán’s standing with his domestic constituencies (Wajner, 2022). Yet, Orbán’s bid for international recognition would have been for naught if a foreign demand for leadership had not balanced it. Right-wing populists around the world believe that they are confronting the same threats to their core values. These common challenges call for a common response. The conviction that Orbán had already succeeded in suppressing liberal ideologies led them to Hungary. As a Spanish commentator concluded ahead of the second edition of CPAC Hungary, Orbán’s government is ‘the Right’s last best hope on earth’ and a ‘shining lighthouse for a global conservative movement in disarray’ (González-Gallarza, 2023).

These findings enrich the literature on international right-wing populism, which thus far has paid little attention to how populist politicians come to be seen as international role models. We hope that our study will inspire further research into the international dimensions of populist leadership. Four avenues strike us as particularly promising. First, and most importantly, our descriptive argument could form the basis for an explanatory account. Although we believe we have convincingly demonstrated *that* Orbán has become the paragon of global populism, we have not explained *why* this came to be. The global spread of right-wing populism means that foreign audiences were spoilt for choice in deciding upon an exemplar. Why did CPAC host international conferences in Budapest and not, say, Rome or Warsaw? Why did right-wing populists converge on Orbán as opposed to other leaders, such as Brazil’s Bolsonaro, who also actively promoted themselves abroad (Wajner, 2022)? Explaining the relative glorification of Orbán requires a more fine-grained theoretical analysis as well as a comparative approach. One suggestion is to compare how speakers talk about the leaders of host countries at different foreign iterations of CPAC.

Second, and in a similar vein, future studies could explain *why* Orbán seeks veneration abroad. We have described the Hungarian leader’s efforts to seek legitimation from foreign right-wing populists. But what drives this quest? A likely answer is that Orbán aims to convince his constituents

that he is not isolated internationally, but that he is in fact part — or at the helm — of a broader movement. As such, affirmation from his populist peers serves to counterbalance the flak that Orbán receives from other political leaders abroad, most notably from the European Parliament and the European Council. This reasoning dovetails with Adler-Nissen's (2014) logic of counter-stigmatization. Scholars should, in short, explain why Orbán seeks international legitimization.

Third, while our study stayed at the level of discourse, we do not know whether Orbán also influences *policymaking* in other countries. Does the lavish praise for Hungary have a measurable impact? Preliminary evidence suggests that Hungary inspired Republican proposals for family benefits in the United States and anti-migration policies in Bulgaria (Rone, 2023; Vesoulis, 2023). This study of policy diffusion within the populist right deserves more attention.

Last, while we have described how Orbán acquired international legitimacy, the introduction noted that two other paragons of right-wing populism — Putin and Trump — saw their appeal diminish. Such international *delegitimation* is a worthwhile topic of scholarly inquiry. What explains why populist leaders lose support abroad? The Hungarian case suggests a close link between an antagonistic foreign policy and international legitimization. Orbán's 'Kremlin-friendly response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine' has hurt his reputation among other populists, including Italy's Giorgia Meloni (Higgins, 2023). It remains to be seen, however, whether Budapest's days as a 'shining city on a hill' are indeed numbered (González-Gallarza 2023).

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ORCID iD

Martijn Mos  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8006-2970>

Notes

1. All mentions of populism in this text should thus be taken to refer specifically to right-wing populism.
2. We owe this observation to an anonymous reviewer.
3. These countries are Australia, Brazil, Israel, Japan, Mexico, and South Korea.
4. Hungary has hosted many other conservative gatherings in recent years, including the biannual Budapest Demographic Summit (2015—), the World Congress of Families (2017), the One of Us European Forum (2017), and the Transatlantic Summit of the Political Network for Values (2022). We selected CPAC because its organizers explicitly promote the conference as a *political* event, which dovetails with our theoretical framework, and because of data availability.
5. The organizers provided real-time translations, most of which are accessible through CPAC's Facebook profile. Because live feeds on that platform have a maximum length of 8 hours, however, the videos did not capture the full conference days. We retrieved the missing speeches on CPAC Hungary's YouTube channel, but some of these videos lacked a translation into English. In addition to speeches that were translated from Hungarian to English, our corpus includes speeches delivered in English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

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Author biographies

Martijn Mos is an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University, the Netherlands. His research explores the contestation of gender and sexuality in International Relations, with a particular focus on the institutions and member states of the European Union. His research has been published, or is forthcoming, in *East European Politics*, the

European Journal of Politics and Gender; *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, the *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, and edited volumes.

Igor Macedo Piovezan is a Research Masters student of International Relations at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His main research interests include the impact of populism on democracies and minority rights in the European Union. He holds bachelor's degrees in History and Global Studies from Temple University.