



Global Influence Operations Report

An Intelligence Digest Tracking Influence Operations Worldwide

The National Conservatism Alliance: An Opportunity for Russian Influence?

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Finding

A new and developing alliance between US conservatives and European nationalists is a potential means for Russia to exert covert influence in Europe and the US, using Hungary as a platform.

Synopsis

Russia is a prolific actor in the influence operations arena, both in the US and Europe. Russian President PUTIN has expressed an interest in Russia becoming the ideological center of a new global conservative alliance, and European far-right leaders have taken pro-Russian positions based on a similar ideology. Hungary is at the center of a developing alliance between European far-right nationalists and American conservatives that Russia could potentially exploit for use in information warfare. This alliance operates under the rubric of “National Conservatism,” centered on national sovereignty, cultural identity, and opposition to global institutions and representing a potentially radical change for the US conservative movement away from long-held Reagan-era philosophies. In the US, the National Conservatism alliance is being spearheaded by the EDMUND BURKE FOUNDATION, headed by an Israeli academic who had his origins in a little-known Israeli-American conservative nexus. This foundation has sponsored five unusual international conferences bringing together a wide variety of US conservatives and European right-wing nationalist politicians, academics, and others for the first time. The most prominent of these was Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor ORBÁN, who took the opportunity to rail against “the communist way of thinking.” Other prominent speakers have included FOX News star Tucker CARLSON and three Republican US Senators. The conferences were said to have an “apocalyptic” tone, with speakers assailing various alleged left-wing attempts to destroy nation states, families, and local cultures, and anti-immigration sentiments were also expressed. The MATHIAS CORVINUS COLLEGIUM, a Hungarian educational facility, is a key part of the ORBÁN government’s struggle to control Hungarian higher education and the center of National Conservative activity in the country. This facility, funded by a massive gift of stock from the ORBÁN government, has sponsored events and teaching positions for prominent US right-wing figures. Russia has already begun to employ National Conservative themes in its influence operations which will likely find a more receptive Western audience than in the past. Hungary is particularly fertile ground for Russian exploitation of National Conservatism given the existing close relationship between Russian and Hungarian elites and an extensive pre-existing Russian influence network.

Report

BACKGROUND

The Global Influence Operations Report (GIOR) has been extensively covering Russian influence operations in democratic countries, explaining:

Russia is a prolific actor in the influence operations space. It is particularly well known for its attempts to interfere in the elections of democratic countries, particularly in the United States. Most of its influence operations appear to be conducted via cyber activities.¹

An EU parliamentary report has identified Russia, along with China, as the prime foreign influence actors in the EU and points to Russian support of “far-right and other radical-minded forces and actors across Europe.”² The European Liberal Party concurs and emphasizes the view of Russian strategists on how information weapons are increasingly becoming more important relative to military means, warning:

[Russian influence efforts] are critical for Russia’s strategy against the West. Russia is unlikely to overpower the West through its military strength, but its information operations hold an almost unlimited promise of increasing polarization and undermining Western unity.³

The German Marshall Fund of the United States further explains how Russia uses such influence operations in Europe:

In the United States, much of the focus on Russia’s role in the 2016 presidential election has been on information operations. In fact, the Kremlin has been deploying information operations throughout Europe for years, with a consistent pattern of either highlighting themes that are already of concern to a population or amplifying extremist points of view, exacerbating divisions in a particular society. For example, Russian media have targeted NATO missions in the Baltics in an attempt to turn the local population against the Alliance by fabricating stories claiming that a Canadian mission consisted exclusively of homosexuals and that a German mission harbored rapists. The Kremlin has used propaganda to sow discord in Macedonia since 2008 as part of Moscow’s ongoing effort to pull former Yugoslav republics away from NATO and European integration. The Russian media’s stoking of immigration fears may have helped the far-right Alternative for Deutschland cross the threshold into the Bundestag. Additionally, last year’s “Renzi” referendum on Italian constitutional reform was marred by a flood of disinformation.⁴

At the time of this writing, Russian influence operations regarding Ukraine have reached what independent Russian media have described as “epic” proportions as Russia further invades the country.⁵

In January, the Global Influence Operations Report (GIOR) covered a somewhat overlooked speech by Russian President Vladimir PUTIN last October, described by a Russian academic as the “first major and strong call for reinventing Russian ideology for Russia and the world.”⁶ ⁷ An Israeli NGO that translates foreign media described PUTIN’s speech as “an ideological manifesto that tries to put Russia back in the center of the world’s political map”:

Putin has smartly introduced himself into the debate that already exists in the Western world about liberalism, and more specifically progressive liberalism. If Putin manages to outline a new conservative ideology, then Russia would become a political and ideological pole for conservatives also in the US and Europe. This is already partly happening in some European countries. Ironically, we could witness a new Cold War, but with reversed roles: the West would be a pole for progressive-liberal-communist ideology while Russia would represent the conservative pole. Even more ironically, Eastern European countries that rebelled against the Soviet Union, mainly Hungary and Poland, now have conservative elected governments that in the future may look at Moscow as an ideological point of reference. Of course, when Putin talks about “healthy conservatism,” he is not referring to Ronald Reagan’s liberal-conservatism, since the main nature of the Russian regime remains authoritarian.⁸

European far-right leaders have also taken pro-Russian positions based on an ideology similar to PUTIN’s. A Russian academic refers to pro-Russian sentiments of European nationalists Matteo SALVINI, Viktor ORBÁN, and the LE PEN family:

The pro-Russian sentiments expressed by Salvini, Orbán and the Le Pen family (mostly concerning the lifting of the sanctions) seem to be a consequence of their anti-systemic attempts to distance themselves from traditional Western mainstream values and the Western vision of the global order. The fact that Russian actors use traditional values (family and religious values as part of the national identity) as an instrument to strengthen their positions domestically, in the context of the global hemorrhaging of values, creates the necessary conditions for broadcasting this “message” to external audiences.⁹

Perhaps most notorious for his sympathetic position towards PUTIN is Viktor ORBÁN, Hungary’s prime minister. In 2016, the German Council on Foreign Relations

characterized ORBÁN’s pro-Russian rhetoric as rooted in a shared worldview and also consistent with PUTIN’s recent speech:

Orbán’s pro-Russian rhetoric has its roots in the “national freedom fight against the EU.” He is outspoken in his admiration for Putin as a strong national leader who stands up to “corrupt” liberal rules and advocates “traditional” social values. Orbán expounded the value system he shares with the Russian elite in his Baile Tusnad speech. Here he described what he called a crisis of “liberal democracy” and praised the “illiberal state” as a new and successful form of political organization to point the way out of crisis. He spoke admiringly of “systems that are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, maybe not even democracies, and yet making nations successful,” specifically mentioning Singapore, China, India, Turkey, and Russia. He went on to say: “We are searching for (and we are doing our best to find ways of parting with Western European dogmas, making ourselves independent from them) the form of organizing a community, that is capable of making us competitive in this great world-race.”¹⁰

Under ORBÁN, Hungary has become notorious for the emergence of an illiberal regime within the European Union, the first and only EU member state to be considered just “partly free” by the Freedom House.¹¹ As the FH reports:

After taking power in 2010 elections, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Alliance of Young Democrats–Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) party pushed through constitutional and legal changes that have allowed it to consolidate control over the country’s independent institutions. More recently, the Fidesz-led government has moved to institute policies that hamper the operations of opposition groups, journalists, universities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) whose perspectives it finds unfavorable.¹²

At the same, Hungary has become what US public radio has described as a “magnet” for European far-right nationalists and American conservatives.” In December 2021, the station

cited examples of travel to and praise of Hungary by some of the leading lights of American conservatism:

Fox News host Tucker Carlson took his show to Hungary for a week this August, treating Orbán to a glowing interview. Former Vice President Mike Pence followed with September visit at which he said he hoped the US would overturn abortion rights. Pence also praised the Hungarian government's promotion of "traditional family values" at the Budapest Demographics Summit, an annual paean to increasing population through more childbirth instead of immigration. And next year, the American Conservative Union is planning to hold a version of its Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Budapest.¹³

In January 2022, US media reported that the above-referenced Budapest CPAC meeting was scheduled for 25-26 March and was expected to feature Orbán as a keynote speaker.¹⁴ Also expected to attend are the leader of Spain's far-right Vox party and Eduardo Bolsonaro, son of Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro, along with several unidentified US senators and representatives.^a

This report will explore the political ideology at the heart of this growing alliance between US conservatives and European far-right nationalists to determine if it has the potential to be exploited by Russia in its influence war against the West.

NATIONAL CONSERVATISM

The budding alliance of European nationalists and American conservatives has been dubbed "National Conservatism," explained by an Italian newspaper editor as an effort to redefine older versions of conservatism in the US:

The movement aims to redefine an older brand of conservatism that was ostensibly corrupted by the rules-based liberal order in the 1970s and steered away from its original purpose of preserving a traditional version of national sovereignty. That change in direction produced, among other things,

a US expansionist foreign policy, increasing reliance on international organizations, cultural homogeneity, misplaced faith in the free market ideology, and an aggressively individualistic outlook captured in Margaret Thatcher's famous adage "There is no such thing as society." National conservatives, in contrast, want to return to a world order in which nation-states are the primary actors and based on the belief that human beings are mutually dependent on national communities that are ultimately bound by shared values, culture, and history.¹⁵

In the US, National Conservatism represents a potentially radical change for the conservative movement away from the free market, free trading, and internationalist philosophies, which have defined American conservatism since the Reagan era began in the 1970s.^b ¹⁶ As one analyst wrote, National Conservatism is:

...an attempt to superimpose an intellectual framework onto the brute force of Trumpism and, to a certain extent, the populist rebellions that have swept countries from Italy to Poland to the United Kingdom. But at a deeper level, this event was about the future of conservatism at a time of deep fracture within the movement.¹⁷

National Conservatism in the US is being spearheaded by the EDMUND BURKE FOUNDATION (EBF), founded in 2019 and located at a prestigious address in Washington DC.^c ^d ¹⁸ ¹⁹ The EBF describes itself as a public affairs institute with the aim of strengthening the principles of national conservatism in Western and other democratic countries. The EBF says it organizes conferences and pursues research, educational, and publishing ventures directed toward this end.²⁰ The EBF explains its version of National Conservatism as follows:

b Of course, "Trumpism" could also be said such a radical departure but, unlike National Conservatism, does not represent a coherent political philosophy as much as a "far-right ideological frame of reference." See <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/trumpism-ideology-extreme-far-right-globally/>

c Edmund Burke Foundation 600 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE Suite 220 Washington, DC 20003 (202) 430-6622 info@burke.foundation

d No information regarding the funding of EBF was found.

a Some reports indicate that Donald TRUMP has been invited to Budapest in connection with the meeting. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/11/donald-trump-hungary-prime-minister-viktor-orban-reelection>

“National Conservatism” is a movement of public figures, journalists, scholars, and students who understand that the past and future of conservatism are inextricably tied to the idea of the nation, to the principle of national independence, and to the revival of the unique national traditions that alone have the power to bind a people together and bring about their flourishing. We envision a protracted effort to recover and reconsolidate the rich tradition of national conservative thought as an intellectually serious alternative to the excesses of purist libertarianism, and in stark opposition to political theories grounded in race. Our aim is to solidify and energize national conservatives, offering them a much-needed institutional base, substantial ideas in the areas of public policy, political theory, and economics, and an extensive support network across the country.²¹

The EBF website lists the following foundation personnel:

- ◆ Yoram HAZONY, Chairman (see below)
- ◆ Christopher DEMUTH, Chairman, National Conservatism Conference (Distinguished fellow at the HUDSON INSTITUTE, former President of the AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY)
- ◆ David BROG, President (former Executive Director of CHRISTIANS UNITED FOR ISRAEL, cousin of former Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Barak)^{22 23}
- ◆ Anna WELLISZ, VP for External Affairs (Senior Director at the White House Writers Group, an umbrella firm of former ghostwriters for Republican presidents and bureaucrats)^{24 25}
- ◆ Ofir HAIURY, Distinguished Senior Fellow (Vice President for Academic Affairs of the HERZL INSTITUTE, headed by Yoram Hazony)^{26 27}
- ◆ Brad LITTLEJOHN, Senior Fellow (Evangelical Christian scholar/activist)²⁸

The most significant of the above figures is EBF Chairman Yoram HAZONY, an Israeli-born philosopher who had lived in the US since he was one year old and was educated at Princeton University.²⁹ In the early 1990s, HAZONY worked as an aide to former Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and he is said to have emerged from “an increasingly influential yet little-known Israeli-American

conservative nexus.”^{a 30} HAZONY’s vision for the global right been called:

...a universalization of the Israeli settler’s mindset: a religious nationalism that has some key points of agreement with Trumpists and the European far right.³¹

HAZONY’s vision of National Conservatism has been described as “enormously attractive” among segments of the American conservative movement, and one of Trump’s senior advisers reportedly drew on his views in formulating “the Trump Doctrine” in foreign affairs.³² In 2018 HAZONY, now head of the HERZL INSTITUTE in Jerusalem, published a book titled “The Virtue of Nationalism” characterized as “omnipresent in the conservative press following its 2018 release.”^{33 34} A review of the book in a US conservative magazine outlines HAZONY’s view of the central conflict in the 21st century as a “fault-line” between national sovereignty and global governance:

If the great struggle of the 20th century was between Western liberal democracy and totalitarianism, the major fault line of the 21st century is within the democratic family, pitting those who believe nations should be self-governing and sovereign against powerful forces advancing “global governance” by supranational authorities. In a new book that will become a classic, Israeli political philosopher Yoram Hazony identifies this conflict as one “between nationalism and imperialism,” which he describes as “two irreconcilably opposed ways of thinking about political order.” Further, “the debate between nationalism and imperialism is upon us.” This “fault line” at “the heart of Western public life is not going away,” and one must “choose.”³⁵

HAZONY is also known for what has been called “Cultural Christianity,” the notion that Christianity should be “publicly honored and respected” even where church attendance itself may be low.³⁶

NATIONAL CONSERVATISM CONFERENCES

The primary activity of the EBF has been sponsoring a series of five unusual conferences held in the US and Europe

a Including such organizations as the TIKVAH FUND and the KOHELET POLICY FORUM

from 2016-2021.³⁷ The following are judged to be the most important of these conferences:

1. WASHINGTON, DC (JULY 14-16, 2019)

An EBF conference titled “A Conference in Washington, DC” was held from July 14-16, 2019.³⁸ Confirmed speakers included a mix of rightwing/conservative academics, media figures, and former government officials, including the following notable individuals:

- ◆ John BOLTON (Assistant to former President Trump for National Security Affairs)
- ◆ Tucker CARLSON (FOX NEWS host)
- ◆ Josh HAWLEY (US Senator from Missouri)
- ◆ Peter THIEL (technology entrepreneur and investor)
- ◆ Clifford MAY (President, FOUNDATION FOR DEFENSE OF DEMOCRACIES)
- ◆ Daniel PIPES (President, MIDDLE EAST FORUM)
- ◆ Ryszard LEGUTKO (head, POLISH LAW AND JUSTICE Delegation to the European Parliament)
- ◆ Yoram HAZONY (EBF)

US media reports say that President Trump was rarely mentioned at the conference, noting that “very few people at the conference wanted to talk about President Trump.”³⁹ ⁴⁰ One report described the conference as an attempt to build “a new version of conservatism”:

...at a conference this week in Washington, attended by some of the most important figures on the American right, participants argued for a new, non-racist “conservative nationalism” that could bring together a divided nation.... The inaugural National Conservatism conference, hosted by the Edmund Burke Foundation, is an attempt to build a new vision of conservatism less wary of state power and more focused on addressing American social ills like fraying family ties and the hollowing out of small towns.... Speakers took great pains to draw distinctions between the conference’s ideals and those of the alt-right.⁴¹

HAZONY was said to have tried to distinguish between nationalism and white nationalism by barring the participation of a well-known white supremacist and several of his associates.⁴² Despite these attempts, the anti-immigrant remarks of law professor Amy WAX attracted media attention:

In a panel on immigration, University of Pennsylvania law professor Amy Wax claimed that immigrants are too loud and responsible for an increase in “litter.” She explicitly advocated an immigration policy that would favor immigrants from Western countries over non-Western ones; “the position,” as she put it, “that our country will be better off with more whites and fewer nonwhites.” (She claims this is not racist because her problem with nonwhite immigrants is cultural rather than biological.)⁴³

Tucker CARLSON also reportedly dismissed what he described as the progressive obsession with supposed racism: “It’s such a boring subject,” he said. “It’s such a dead end. It can’t be fixed; it can’t be changed.”⁴⁴

2. ROME, ITALY (FEBRUARY 3-4, 2020)

A second National Conservative conference was held in Rome, Italy, from February 3-4, 2020, and co-sponsored by an Italian group called NAZIONE FUTURA.^a ⁴⁵ ⁴⁶ The official title of the conference was “God, Honor, Country: President Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and the Freedom of Nations.”⁴⁷ In contrast to the 2019 Washington DC event, the 2020 National Conservatism conference featured a large number of European speakers, most with nationalist backgrounds. As one report described:

The event seemed designed not to explore the intellectual content of conservatism, but to strengthen bridges between new nationalist forces in Europe and the US.⁴⁸

The 2020 Rome conference program identified the following confirmed speakers:⁴⁹

- ◆ Yoram HAZONY (EBF)
- ◆ Rod DREHER (Christian conservative, senior editor American Conservative)⁵⁰
- ◆ Marion MARECHAL (former MP for the French National Front party, granddaughter of National Front founder Jean-Marie Le Pen)⁵¹ ⁵²
- ◆ Mattias KARLSSON (MP, a leader of the Sweden Democrats)⁵³

a NAZIONE FUTURA describes itself as “movement of ideas born in the spring of 2017 with the aim of encouraging the political-cultural debate and the aggregation of various souls of civil society united by common values and ideals to improve Italy through ideas and concrete proposals. See <https://www.nazionefutura.it/about/>

- ◆ Ryszard LEGUTKO (head of the Polish Law and Justice Delegation to the European Parliament)⁵⁴
- ◆ Antonio MARTINO (founding member of Forza Italia political party, associated with Silvia Berlusconi)⁵⁵
- ◆ Giorgia MELONI (MP, leader Brothers of Italy political party)^{a 56}
- ◆ Douglas MURRAY (British conservative author and political commentator, associate editor of *The Spectator*, author)⁵⁷
- ◆ Daniel KAWCZYNSKI (British Conservative MP)⁵⁸
- ◆ Viktor ORBÁN (Hungarian Prime Minister)

Other sources identified Dutch anti-immigration politician Thierry BAUDET and Matteo SALVINI, the far-right former Italian interior minister, as scheduled speakers.^{b 59} Also in attendance was Rachele MUSSOLINI, an Italian politician and a councilor in Rome for the far-right BROTHERS OF ITALY party.^{c 60} The most prominent of the European conference speakers was Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor ORBÁN, whose appearance was described as follows:

The marquee guest was Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, widely seen as the most effective right-wing nationalist leader in Europe. During his appearance, Orbán — who invited Hazony to his office to discuss his book in 2019 — identified himself and similar leaders in Central Europe (like Poland’s ruling Law and Justice party) as exemplars of the kind of “national conservatism” the conference was promoting. “What I represent here is not just a success story of a country, but a success story of a region. And everywhere in this region the governments are based on national sovereignty. They’re all national conservatives,” Orbán said. “You can have great hopes and expectations that the renovation and a new current, a new

a The Brothers of Italy has been described as post- or neo-fascist. The party’s policies are focused on a grand strategy to increase birth rates and protect the traditional family, with generous benefits for both parents and children, alongside investment in social housing. See <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/countering-radical-right/next-election-italians-have-two-options-right-or-further-right/>

b SALVINI failed to show at the conference.

c She is the daughter of Romano Mussolini, granddaughter of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini but reportedly disavows her surname. See <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/rachele-mussolini-granddaughter-rome-election-b1933952.html>

blood to national conservatism could come from Central Europe.”⁶¹

According to another report, ORBÁN insisted the anti-communist struggle was not over and said the “communist way of thinking” persists in liberal media and academia by those who “use different words” but say “the same thing as the Marxists”.⁶² The same report notes that comparisons between the post-1945 anti-communist resistance and today’s fight against “Cultural Marxism” were frequent.^d The report also says that in his speech on the “Pink Police State,” Rod Dreher said that his Czech friends tell him they “can feel the left’s resurgent totalitarian spirit “in their bones.”

Other controversial speakers at the conference included British Conservative MP Daniel KAWCZYNSKI, whose appearance was objected to by his fellow MP’s:

Kawczynski’s ten-minute address focused on Britain’s waning ties to the EU before the 2016 referendum, culminating in David Cameron’s doomed renegotiation.... Kawczynski’s presence at NatCon was controversial and he faced calls for him to lose the party whip, as well as criticism from fellow Tory MPs. The Conservative Party later issued a statement saying his attendance was “not acceptable”, and that he had apologised.⁶³

Marion MARÉCHAL, the niece of Marine LE PEN and granddaughter of Jean-Marie LE PEN, was said to have portrayed conservatives as defenders of the national community – the “new humanism of this century” – who must take “drastic measures” to stop “ethnic Europeans” from being overwhelmed by outsiders from Africa and the Arab world.⁶⁴

3. ORLANDO, FLORIDA (OCTOBER 31 - NOVEMBER 2, 2021)

A third conference titled simply “National Conservatism Conference” was held from October 31–November 2, 2021, at a hotel in Orlando, Florida.⁶⁵ The conference program

d “Cultural Marxism” is an antisemitic conspiracy theory. According to the theory, the Jewish Marxists of the Frankfurt School implemented a slow takeover of “culture,” seeking to undermine Christianity, family, and nation in favor of a new worldview and system of control, involving mass immigration, sexual liberation, and moral and aesthetic decline. See *Who’s Afraid of the Frankfurt School? “Cultural Marxism” as an Antisemitic Conspiracy Theory.* <https://tinyurl.com/bdfk8chh>

listed 72 confirmed speakers, including a mix of right-wing US Senators, journalists, academics, bloggers, and members of right-wing think tanks such as the MANHATTAN, CLAREMONT, and HUDSON Institutes. Also represented was PRAGER U, a YouTube channel that regularly produces approximately five-minute-long videos on various educational topics from a right-wing perspective. Notable confirmed speakers included:⁶⁶

- ◆ Sen. Ted CRUZ (keynote speaker)
- ◆ Sen. Josh HAWLEY (keynote speaker)
- ◆ Sen. Marco RUBIO (keynote speaker)
- ◆ Peter THIEL (keynote speaker, technology entrepreneur and investor)
- ◆ Tucker CARLSON (keynote speaker, FOX NEWS host)⁶⁷
- ◆ Rod DREHER (Christian conservative, senior editor American Conservative)⁶⁸
- ◆ Yoram HAZONY (EBF)
- ◆ Ayaan HIRSI ALI (Somali-born Dutch American anti-Islam scholar/activist)
- ◆ Rich LOWRY (Editor National Review)
- ◆ Douglas MURRAY (British author and political commentator, associate editor of The Spectator, author)⁶⁹
- ◆ Balázs ORBÁN (Political Director for Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor ORBÁN, profiled below)
- ◆ Dave RUBIN (American conservative political commentator, YouTube personality, talk show host, and author)
- ◆ Christopher RUFO (MANHATTAN INSTITUTE, anti- “Critical Race Theory” activist)

Atlantic Magazine called the tone of the conference “apocalyptic:”

The idea that the left controls absolutely everything—from your smartphone to the money supply to your third grader’s curriculum—explains the apocalyptic tone that was the dominating emotional register of this conference. The politicians’ speeches were like entries in the catastrophism Olympics: “The left’s ambition is to create a world beyond belonging,” said Hawley. “Their grand ambition is to deconstruct the United States of America.” “The left’s attack is on America. The left hates America,” said Cruz. “It is the left that is trying to use culture as a tool to destroy America.” “We are confronted now by a systematic effort to dismantle our society, our traditions, our economy, and our way of life,” said Rubio. The first great

project of the national conservatives is to man the barricades in the culture war.⁷⁰

Senator Josh HAWLEY warned about what he called “the cosmopolitan consensus,” which he said was loyal to “globalist” values, not those of the American middle-class:

On the final night of this past week’s National Conservatism Conference, Senator Josh Hawley—a graduate of Stanford and Yale and a former instructor at an English private school—warned the attendees gathered in the ballroom of the Ritz-Carlton in downtown Washington, D. C., about the threat of elite cosmopolitanism. “The politics of those left and right have been informed by a political consensus that reflects the interests not of the American middle but of a powerful upper class and their cosmopolitan priorities,” he intoned. “This class lives in the United States, but they identify as citizens of the world. They run businesses or oversee universities here, but their primary loyalty is to the global community, and they subscribe to a set of values held by similar elites in other places.” He went on to name those values: “The importance of global integration and the danger of national loyalties; the priority of social change over tradition, career over community and achievement and merit and progress. Call it the cosmopolitan consensus.”⁷¹

FOX NEWS host Tucker CARLSON gave a speech titled “Big Business Hates Your Family” in which he falsely claimed that all new Oreos available for sale in the United States would be printed with trans-inclusive language:

“I would need reading glasses to read it, but apparently all new Oreos have the question, you know, ‘What’s your pronoun?’” he said. “Take three steps back—what’s actually happening? A large American company is committing a pretty brazen act of propaganda aimed at your kids. And the message is that the binary-gender scheme, which we were taught in biology class in seventh grade, is no longer operative.”

As she did at the 2019 conference, law professor Amy WAX delivered controversial remarks on immigration:

In her talk at the panel, Wax stated that “many, indeed most, inhabitants of the third world don’t necessarily share our ideas and beliefs. Others pay lip service but don’t really comprehend them. There are exceptions, of course, but most people are not exceptional.” “These are toxic topics,” she continued, “that lie outside the Overton window in polite society, as evidenced by outraged reaction to Trump’s profane and grating question, ‘Why are we having all these people from shithole countries coming here?’”

The audience laughed.

“That needs to be regarded as a serious question and not just a rhetorical one.”

Other speakers were said to have referred to “the stance of hostility” taken by US progressives towards the family.

NATIONAL CONSERVATISM & HUNGARY

As discussed above, Hungarian Prime Minister ORBÁN was a star performer at the 2020 National Conservatism conference, and one observer has pointed out that Hungarians were a strong presence at the 2021 conference.⁷² A fourth EBF National Conservatism is planned for March 2022, featuring some of the same figures, including Balázs ORBÁN, the Political Director for ORBÁN and Chairman of The Board at the MATHIAS CORVINUS COLLEGIUM (MCC).^a
^{73 74} The MCC is a private residential college described by the New York Times (NYT):

MCC was established in 1996 with private money from a Fidesz backer, with the goal of training a post-Communist elite. It was known as more conservative than other residential colleges but was respected for providing high-caliber independent programs. While many lecturers’ views hew closely to the Fidesz line, some are independent or apolitical.... MCC is not a university in its own right, but a residential college. It provides special seminars and a dormitory to students, selected after a battery of IQ and other tests, who then receive stipends, networking opportunities and exclusive fellowships. Orbán critics have labeled the

foundation as an institution designed to breed rightwing intellectuals.⁷⁵

The MCC is at the center of a struggle for control of Hungarian universities, viewed by the ORBÁN government as a key battleground in a fight against “left liberals.”⁷⁶ The NYT reported that the MCC was part of one of the most sweeping systemic changes in Hungarian education, with all but five public universities placed under the control of privately managed foundations. This change involved 32 foundations and primarily conservative, government-affiliated think tanks, which received about \$3.5 billion in public money in the past year. According to the NYT:

....the biggest beneficiary was the MCC foundation, which received government-owned shares worth \$1.3 billion in two companies, cash injections worth \$462 million and \$9 million of property, including a luxury estate and a marina on Lake Balaton in western Hungary⁷⁷

A political risk website reported that the donation to the MCC was higher at \$1.7 billion, effectively equal to 1 percent of Hungary’s GDP and that the fund that MCC now manages exceeds the state’s entire higher education budget.⁷⁸ The donation has also made the MCC one of the largest shareholders of MOL Plc., a Hungarian multinational oil and gas company headquartered in Budapest.^{b 79} The Hungarian government under ORBÁN had had earlier purchased the MOL shares from Russia in a deal discussed later in this report.

The NYT goes on to explain what it calls the “incestuous nature” of the MCC structure in its relationship to the ORBÁN government:

The incestuous nature of the foundation’s structure is evident in its advisory boards. Members are appointed for life, and only they can elect new members. Not a single woman sits on any of them. The leader of MCC’s main board is Balazs Orbán (no relation to the prime minister), who has a dual role. As a state secretary in the prime minister’s office, he helped mastermind the property transfer to the foundation. And as its chairman, he oversees the recently privatized assets. Another board member is

a No relation to Viktor ORBÁN

b The three other large shareholders are all Orbán-tied foundations

Zoltan Szalai, who also runs a glossy, pro-government weekly called *Mandiner*. A cafe he owns recently received a \$2 million donation of once-public money for use as an event space. The cafe, *Scruton*, is named after the conservative English philosopher Roger Scruton.⁸⁰

The NYT further explains that despite denials by Balázs ORBÁN, evidence suggests that the MCC is a vehicle for promoting the ideology of National Conservatism:

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Balazs Orbán said that the MCC project was critical for a small country like Hungary, with its history of occupation by foreign powers. “It’s very important for us to have our own agenda, have our own mind-set, have our own independence, culture,” he said. “We always have to fight for it.” He was adamant that fomenting “patriotism” among the next generation of Hungary’s leaders was the priority. “Ideology is not important. Patriotism is,” he said. But recent articles and podcasts produced by MCC have discussed reading lists or pushed intellectual lines supportive of the government’s antiglobalist message, discussing topics such as patriotism at a time of globalism, or whether political correctness is tolerance or oppression.⁸¹

Also housed at the MCC is the DEUTSCH-UNGARISCHE INSTITUT FÜR EUROPÄISCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT (Deutsch-Hungarian Institute for European Cooperation), founded in 2020 and describing itself as having the same mission as the MCC:

With the same mission [as the MCC], the German-Hungarian Institute for European Cooperation began its work in December 2020. It is intended to provide a forum for academic, scientific and political dialogue between Germany and Hungary and to acquaint decision-makers as well as interested specialist audiences from both countries with topics, debates, processes, thought patterns and ideas of the other country.⁸²

The GERMAN-HUNGARIAN INSTITUTE is headed by Bence BAUER, formerly part of the FIDESZ Youth and associated with the KONRAD ADENAUER FOUNDATION in Budapest for many years.^{a 83 84} Based on media interviews with BAUER in which he vigorously defends both ORBÁN and FIDESZ, it appears that the GERMAN-HUNGARIAN INSTITUTE functions as a lobbying group for National Conservatism in Germany.^{85 86}

In addition to lobbying work, the NYT reported on plans to expand MCC educational programs into 35 additional European cities:

Balazs Orbán plans to use the MCC’s wealth to expand programs for high school and elementary school students, aiming in the next three years to enroll 10,000 students in 35 European cities that have large Hungarian populations, mostly in neighboring countries.⁸⁷

US FIGURES & THE MCC

In January of his year, US independent media described Hungarian efforts to cultivate the support of US conservatives, noting the role of the MCC in the effort:⁸⁸

Both countries, and especially Hungary, have gone to some lengths to cultivate American conservatives’ support. The Budapest-based private college Mathias Corvinus Collegium has spent the last two years hosting American thinkers alienated by liberal mores at home. In October, a new Polish counterpart, the Collegium Intermarium, invited several US “political Catholics”—including Vermeule, Ahmari, and *Journal of American Greatness* co-founder (and current Mathias Corvinus Collegium visiting fellow) Gladden Pappin—for a conference on “cancel culture.” In June 2021, when all three men spoke at a youth integralist conference outside Washington, Hungary sent two ambassadors to join them (one a Habsburg descended from Franz Joseph I, a revered figure among today’s monarchist right). Eastern European cities are now key

a The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (German: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, KAS) is a German political party foundation associated with but independent of the centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

book-tour stops for postliberal writers, and Orbán himself encouraged conservative American writers like Rod Dreher to consider Hungary their “intellectual home.”⁸⁹

The following are among the US individuals being promoted by the MCC:

1. TUCKER CARLSON

Tucker CARLSON is a star of the US conservative cable news network FOX NEWS and is said to be “the face of Fox News primetime”:

Carlson has become the face of Fox News primetime, where he’s been since his program, “Tucker Carlson Tonight,” first launched in the network’s weekday evening schedule in 2017. While his show is routinely characterized as nothing more than an alternative option from liberal-dominated mainstream media, many critics regularly blast it as a source of misinformation and propaganda. Carlson’s comments on immigration and vaccines draw frequent concern as the program encounters trouble lining up a robust slate of national advertisers, given the frequent headlines that overshadow its continuing ratings success and devoted audience. In the third quarter of 2021, his show averaged 3.2 million viewers, maintaining the largest audience for any cable-news program and easily beating out competitors on CNN and MSNBC.⁹⁰

In August 2021, the first annual MCC Feszt featured an appearance by CARLSON, an enthusiastic promoter of Hungary and Prime Minister Viktor ORBÁN.⁹¹ Carlson’s remarks were characterized by the MCC as follows:

The square in front of the MOL Main Stage in Széchenyi Square was filled with performances of star presenter Tucker Carlson’s “The World According to Tucker Carlson”. Hundreds of people listened to the world-famous media personality who arrived in Hungary at the invitation of the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC). McC Fesztén gave a talk entitled “The World According to Tucker Carlson” by Tucker Carlson, one of the world’s most influential media

personalities. At the beginning of his speech, Tucker Carlson said about the negative news reports published in the Western media about Hungary: in his opinion, all the accusations made against the Hungarian present are in fact true to the American reality. “If humor is banned, you already know we’re not going in the right direction,” he said. Carlson said the current policy shift in the United States and the constantly whispered messages simply make people unhappy. “If Hungarians who have lived under oppression for centuries can be happy, why can’t we Americans do it?” he asked. In his presentation, he spoke about his visit to the southern border fence and his Hungary post-2015 migration crisis. Carlson said, “If you love something, you keep it clean. [...] Order and purity are not fascist things, they are virtues.”⁹²

During his visit, CARLSON hosted his show from Budapest and met with ORBÁN personally, giving what was described as a “fawning TV interview” with the Hungarian PM.⁹³

In late January 2022, CARLSON released a new documentary about Orbán’s battle against George SOROS, described by a Hungarian journalist as “baseless propaganda.”⁹⁴ The article notes that the anti-SOROS campaign:

.....often used anti-semitic stereotypes to cast Soros as a boogeyman attempting to force a liberal, globalist, open-borders agenda onto Hungarian society.

2. ROD DREHER

Rod DREHER is a blogger and senior editor at the American Conservative.⁹⁵ He has served as editor and writer for the New York Post, National Review, the Dallas Morning News, and other publications, and his writing focuses on religion in the public square and conservatism. He is best known for his 2017 book “The Benedict Option” which warned that that conservative Christians have lost the culture war and that a new dark age is approaching.⁹⁶ According to a review, the book says that the “Waterloo” of Christian conservatism was the legalization of same-sex marriage. In the book, DREHER calls on Christians to respond by withdrawing strategically and forming communities modeled after the sixth-century monastic Saint Benedict.

DREHER also gave a talk at the August 2021 first annual MCC Feszt titled “Culture War and the Attack on Truth: Science, Media, Academia and other Battlefronts.”⁹⁷ DREHER had been living in Hungary for months and blogging effusively for *The American Conservative* about the ORBÁN government.⁹⁸ Referring to the MCC, the *New Republic* reported:

The courtship has paid dividends. Dreher’s association with MCC and his residence at another conservative Budapest think tank resulted in a stream of dispatches last spring and summer articulating an increasingly vigorous defense of Hungary’s most authoritarian measures. Orbán’s “illiberal rightwing initiatives,” like banning university gender studies curricula, Dreher concluded, were the regrettable necessity of resisting “left-wing illiberalism.”⁹⁹

The NYT alleged that it was text messages from DREHER that in part prompted Tucker CARLSON’s 2021 trip to Budapest.¹⁰⁰ However, the NYT also asserted that DREHER’s motivations differed somewhat from CARLSON’s, characterizing him as primarily opposing “Wokeness”:

In his daily blog posts, Dreher writes mainly against what he refers to as “wokeness” — ideas about racial justice and gender identity that he believes lead Americans to hate America and children to reject their parents. After Carlson’s visit, Dreher wrote that he admires Orbán because he “is willing to take the hard stances necessary to keep his country from losing its collective mind under assault by woke loonies.”¹⁰¹

3. DENNIS PRAGER

Dennis PRAGER is a rightwing talk radio host characterized by the *Washington Post*:

Prager, an outspoken Trump supporter, is the founder of Prager University, a non-profit that produces short videos aimed at popularizing conservative ideas. During the pandemic, he has falsely compared the coronavirus to the flu and to snakebites.^{a 102}

^a The *Post* report also said that PRAGER had successfully contracted COVID-19 after repeatedly trying to get himself infected.

PRAGER also gave a talk at the August MCC Feszt titled “Media and Free Speech.”¹⁰³ The Southern Poverty Law Center reported that MCC had paid PRAGER \$30,000 in public funds for two appearances at the festival where he “touted the country’s far-right stances on the media, immigration, and LGBTQ issues.”¹⁰⁴

4. NIALL FERGUSON

Niall FERGUSON is a British historian and right-wing thinker who is known for his defense of British colonialism.^{105 106 107} He is a Senior Research Fellow of Jesus College, University of Oxford, and a Senior Fellow of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. In 2018, FERGUSON was involved in a scandal concerning a program he ran at Stanford University called Cardinal Conversations:

Ferguson was one of the faculty leaders of Cardinal Conversations, a Stanford program run by the conservative Hoover Institution that aims to bring speakers to the university who would “air contested issues on our campus.” The program’s speaker slate leaned right; recent events featured race-and-IQ theorist Charles Murray, tech mogul Peter Thiel, and Christina Hoff Sommers, prominent critic of modern feminism.¹⁰⁸

FERGUSON had engaged with students at Stanford to try and develop incriminating information on other students opposing the Cardinal Conversations program. According to the Stanford student newspaper, FERGUSON acknowledged his role in the affair:

Ferguson resigned from his leadership role in the Cardinal Conversations program on April 16, after Provost Persis Drell became aware of the email chain. “I very much regret the publication of these emails. I also regret having written them,” Ferguson wrote in a statement to *The Daily*.¹⁰⁹

FERGUSON has also drawn recent media attention in connection with his role as a founding trustee of the UNIVERSITY OF AUSTIN, a proposed new university that aims at “reclaiming a place in higher education for freedom of inquiry and civil discourse.”^{110 111} Other UNIVERSITY OF AUSTIN figures include at least two individuals who have been associated with the MCC and/or National Conservatism conferences, including Ayaan HIRSI ALI and Peter BOGHOSSIAN, discussed below.^{112 113} Another trustee of

the UNIVERSITY OF AUSTIN is Heather HEYING, a prominent figure in the US anti-vaccination movement.¹¹⁴

In September 2021, Ferguson was present at an MCC event celebrating the beginning of the year at the MCC.¹¹⁵ A Hungarian academic notes that Ferguson is greatly admired by Viktor ORBÁN, whose own speech at the MCC event centered on the “tremendous impression” that Niall Ferguson’s *Civilization: The West and the Rest*, published in 2011, made on him.¹¹⁶

4. PETER BOGHOSSIAN

US academic Peter BOGHOSSIAN is best known as a “radical atheist” and for his 2018 role in the so-called “Grievance Studies” or “Sokal Squared” hoax. As part of the hoax, BOGHOSSIAN and two colleagues submitted fake papers to various specialized academic journals to discredit gender and critical race studies.¹¹⁷ The hoax gained international attention, and BOGHOSSIAN became known as a vociferous critic of “Wokeness.”^a ¹¹⁸ In May 2021, BOGHOSSIAN referenced Douglas MURRAY in his attack on “the enemies of western civilization,” which he has identified as the “Woke”:

Let’s be clear about something. I’m done playing. I think @douglasmurray is done playing. I’m waging full scale ideological warfare on the enemies of western civilization.¹¹⁹

BOGHOSSIAN again attracted international attention in September 2021 after resigning as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Portland State University. In a publicly posted letter, BOGHOSSIAN claimed he had resigned from the university in response to an alleged hostile climate directed at him in connection with his “free speech” activities, despite unsuccessfully attempting to obtain tenure at the university just weeks earlier.¹²⁰ ¹²¹ In the same month, Rod DREHER reposted BOGHOSSIAN’s resignation letter along with effusive praise for BOGHOSSIAN in an article titled “The Courage of Peter Boghossian,” published in the *American Conservative*.¹²²

In April 2021, BOGHOSSIAN appeared on the far-right EPOCH TV YouTube show where he defended Viktor ORBÁN’s decision to defund university gender studies

program.”^b ¹²³ In October 2021, a Hungarian news outlet tied to the FIDESZ youth party published an interview with BOGHOSSIAN in which he said that ORBÁN had no choice but to defund university programs related to what he called “fake sciences.” In the interview, BOGHOSSIAN likened ORBÁN’s action to a situation where Mormons controlled the university system:

Mormons completely control the entire university system. All of it. Everywhere is Mormon faculty, they teach students to be Mormons, they institutionalize the Book of Mormon, they have rules about blaspheming the Book of Mormon... Do you think that would be a problem? It’s a huge freaking problem. And it’s an even bigger problem if those people have jobs for life. So what other alternatives would Orbán have? There is no alternative. You have to defund these ideologically driven programs. The people who run and teach in them are ideologues—they’re attempting to indoctrinate people, and he did exactly what he should’ve done. And that’s the thing: you don’t even have to be a conservative to see that. Everybody should be able to see that. It’s a problem when an institution has been ideologically captured. Nobody benefits. I would even argue that the people who have been captured by the ideology don’t benefit.¹²⁴

He went on to make a recommendation for Orbán:

I think Orbán has one totally reasonable solution. If I were him, the moment I saw that, I’d defund the whole program. And if they don’t like it, I’d tell them to piss off. You have to have a hard stance with this ideology.¹²⁵

^a Wokeness refers to a state of being aware, especially of social problems such as racism and inequality. It is generally a pejorative when used by the rightwing.

^b POCH TV is part the EPOCH MEDIA group, a far-right media company affiliated with the Falun Gong new religious movement. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/technology/epoch-times-influence-falun-gong.html>

^c In October 2018, ORBÁN banned gender studies programs at universities, with his deputy arguing the area of study is an ideology rather than a science. See Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán bans gender studies programmes | The Independent | The Independent <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/hungary-bans-gender-studies-programmes-viktor-orban-central-european-university-budapest-a8599796.html>

In February 2022, the MCC reported that BOGHOSSIAN was a guest instructor at the MCC:

The author of numerous internationally significant publications and bestselling books, the American philosopher Peter Boghossian, can be found among his guest instructors at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium. The former Portland State University employee will continue to strengthen MCC's international team of outstanding faculty for a month.¹²⁶

On 9 February 2022, BOGHOSSIAN tweeted that he would be delivering a public lecture on “What are the Fake Sciences” in Szeged, Hungary¹²⁷ He had earlier tweeted a series of comments effusively praising Budapest and Hungary for their safety and cleanliness, unlike Portland in the US.¹²⁸ BOGHOSSIAN is also billed by MCC as a headliner at the upcoming 2nd annual MCC Feszt. Scheduled for 16-17 February 2022.¹²⁹ The conference program indicates that BOGHOSSIAN was to be featured in two appearances:

- ◆ A “fireside chat” together with Rod DREHER and Orbán BALÁZS
- ◆ A panel titled “What We Mean by Critical Thinking,” along with two MCC officials and Anthony Malcolm DANIELS (aka Theodore DALRYMPLE), once described as “Britain’s fiercest conservative essayist” and known for his attack on leftist intellectuals.^{130 131}



When asked in February 2022 if he was worried about “snuggling up with an illiberal democrat at an institution funded, critics say, to promote ultranationalism through stolen public funds?” BOGHOSSIAN replied:

I think as long as your North Star is the truth you're fine. I don't really give a shit about perceptions, I give a shit about what's true. Even if it's true that this is a horrible regime, isn't that all the more reason to teach people how to think critically.¹³²

RUSSIA & NATIONAL CONSERVATISM- AN OPPORTUNITY?

Beyond the political threats of transatlantic extremist cooperation, the National Conservatism alliance presents an opportunity for Russia to exploit for use in its influence operations. In his recent speech, referred to earlier in this report, Russian President PUTIN was closely mirroring right-wing themes that dominate the culture wars in the US, and all raised at the various National Conservatism conferences. For example, in this passage, PUTIN asserts that “social progress” advocates are adopting Marxist ideas in their fight against racial discrimination, a notion championed by Hungarian PM ORBÁN at the 2020 NC conference:

The advocates of so-called ‘social progress’ believe they are introducing humanity to some kind of a new and better consciousness. Godspeed, hoist the flags, as we say, go right ahead. The only thing that I want to say now is that their prescriptions are not new at all. It may come as a surprise to some people, but Russia has been there already. After the 1917 revolution, the Bolsheviks, relying on the dogmas of Marx and Engels, also said that they would change existing ways and customs, and not just political and economic ones, but the very notion of human morality and the foundations of a healthy society. The destruction of age-old values, religion, and relations between people, up to and including the total rejection of family (we had that, too), encouragement to inform on loved ones – all this was proclaimed progress and, by the way, was widely supported around the world back then and was quite fashionable, same as today. By the way, the Bolsheviks were absolutely intolerant of opinions other than theirs. “This, I believe, should call to mind some of what we are witnessing now. Looking at what is happening in a number of Western countries, we are amazed to see the domestic practices — which we, fortunately, have left, I hope — in the distant past. The fight for equality and against discrimination has turned into aggressive dogmatism bordering on absurdity, when the works of the great authors of the past – such as Shakespeare – are no longer taught at schools or universities, because their ideas are believed to be backward. The classics

are declared backward and ignorant of the importance of gender or race. In Hollywood, memos are distributed about proper storytelling and how many characters of what color or gender should be in a movie. This is even worse than the agitprop department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Any attempt by Russia to use such culture war themes will likely encounter a more receptive Western audience than in the past. Dutch media, for example, has reported that 20% of the Dutch electorate are sympathetic toward PUTIN's views, partly based on National Conservative themes:

What is certain is that Putin also strikes a chord with some of the Dutch electorate. A recent survey by the Clingendael Institute showed that about 20 percent of the electorate can muster sympathy for Putin's ideas. Support is found mainly on the right. Of voters of FVD, PVV and SGP, more than half agree with the statement, "I think it is a good thing that in Russia traditional-conservative values and national pride are propagated. More than 40 percent of voters on JA21 and BBB agree with that statement [Translated with DeepL]¹³³

This report earlier identified the pro-Russian positions of European far-right leaders Matteo SALVINI, Viktor ORBÁN, and the LE PEN family. More recently, in early February of this year, Dutch anti-immigration politician Thierry BAUDET, an adherent of the anti-Semitic "Cultural Marxism" conspiracy theory, tweeted:¹³⁴

Putin is increasingly showing himself as the leader of conservative Europe. Beautiful guy. And he is so right about the NATO aggression and the absurd belligerence of EU, WEF, etc. So go, MarkieMark, to Moscow and make a deal with that man. Befriend Russia!^{a 135}

Later in the same month, BAUDET responded on Twitter to a thread titled "Why is Russia a threat to the West anyway?" replied referencing multiple National Conservative themes:

a MarkieMark is most likely a reference to Mark Rutte, the Netherlands Prime Minister.

Because Russia is not a postmodern #GreatReset country, is not captivated by wokism, Sustainable Development nonsense and supranationalism, protects Christianity and the European identity of its population, strives for stability in the Middle East and is proud of its own culture.^{b 136}

Receptivity to Russian influence is also growing in the US. Under former President Trump, there had already been a significant increase in the number of Republicans viewing Russia as either friendly or an ally.¹³⁷ In a historic first for the conservative movement, prominent US conservatives have lately begun to express support for Russian political position. For example, in December 2021, amidst the Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border, Tucker CARLSON defended Russian President Vladimir PUTIN:

Vladimir Putin does not want Belgium. He just wants to keep his western borders secure. That's why he doesn't want Ukraine to join NATO, and that makes sense."¹³⁸

This was not the first time; CARLSON made pro-Russian remarks. In November 2019, he said during his FOX News show:

"Why do I care ... what is going on in the conflict between Ukraine and Russia?" "And I'm serious. Why do I care? Why shouldn't I root for Russia, which I am?"^{c 139 140}

In late February 2022, as Russia was in the process of invading Ukraine, CARLSON defended Russian President PUTIN on FOX NEWS, in part by invoking the National Conservative issue of "Critical Race Theory" in US schools:^d

Why do Democrats want you to hate Putin? Has Putin shipped every middle class job in your town to Russia? Did he manufacture a worldwide pandemic that wrecked your business? Is he teaching your kids to

b Twitter translation from Dutch

c Following a social media backlash, CARLSON said he was "joking." See <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/nov/26/tucker-carlson-rooting-for-russia-fox-news>

d National Conservatives and others from the US right-wing have alleged that Critical Race Theory is used in schools to teach students discriminate against white people. See <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>

embrace racial discrimination? Is he making fentanyl? Does he eat dogs?¹⁴¹



This FOX NEWS segment was rebroadcast shortly later with Russian subtitles by the Kremlin-backed RT news outlet.¹⁴²

In February 2022, Josh HAWLEY became the first US senator to publicly support Russia's demand that Ukraine be denied entry to the NATO military alliance.¹⁴³ HAWLEY had sent a letter to the US Secretary of State suggesting the support of Ukraine's NATO eligibility is not in the United States' best interest. As noted above, both CARLSON and HAWLEY were prominently featured at National Conservatism conferences.

All of the above individuals were also either confirmed or invited speakers at the National Conservatism conferences.

The Global Influence Operations Report (GIOR) has uncovered evidence that Russia has already begun to weaponize culture war issues in its influence efforts and centered on National Conservative themes. In June 2021, the GIOR reported on a Russian-backed media piece that defended MANHATTAN INSTITUTE scholar Christopher RUFFO, well known for his attacks on what the article called "neo-Marxist critical race theory" and who also was a featured speaker at the 2020 National Conservatism conference.^a ¹⁴⁴ Other relevant Russian influence operations covered recently by the GIOR include:

- ◆ A report on a Russian-backed media Op-ed claiming that Democratic "Elites" are equally culpable as Trump in disseminating conspiracy theories because "these elites have themselves been peddling equally irrational views about catastrophic climate change, critical race theory, and identity politics."¹⁴⁵

a Critical Race Theory is a 40-year-old academic concept that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies. See <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05>

- ◆ A report that actors linked to Russian disinformation operations were targeting American far-right audiences on alternative online platforms employing some of these same themes.¹⁴⁶
- ◆ A report on Russian-backed media alleging that US families were seeking to immigrate to Russia to escape the US school curriculum.¹⁴⁷

HUNGARY & RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

This report has examined Hungary's central role in the National Conservatism alliance, and the country is a particularly fertile opportunity for Russia exploitation of that alliance. For example, it is no secret that the ORBÁN government and Hungarian elites enjoy a uniquely close relationship with Russia within the EU.¹⁴⁸ The German Council on Foreign Relations reports that the Russian influence in Hungary is mediated mainly by "dirty business" interests:

The Russian orientation in Hungarian politics can therefore be characterized as a project explicitly led by the elite. Both parties show clear ideological proximity to the Kremlin's authoritarian value system. Fidesz, however, is mostly penetrated by "dirty business" interests that are enmeshed with Russia and at the forefront of corrupt state-led networks connecting the oligarchs of the two countries' respective political power elites.¹⁴⁹

Additionally, the German GCFR also reports the FIDESZ party of Viktor ORBÁN benefits from economic cooperation with Russia in exchange for providing "small political services and contributing to general instability within the EU," a goal of Russian influence operations as noted earlier in this report.

This economic cooperation, mediated by corrupt business interests close to Russia, may have played a role in financing the MATHIAS CORVINUS COLLEGIUM (MCC), described above as playing a key role in the Hungarian National Conservatism network.^b The ORBÁN government's massive funding of the MATHIAS CORVINUS COLLEGIUM (MCC) took the form of a stock donation to MCC, which made it the largest shareholder of MOL PLC., a Hungarian multinational oil and gas company headquartered in Budapest. The shares donated to the MCC

b For an example of corruption at MOL, see <https://www.ft.com/content/caf797ec-2af2-11ea-bc77-65e4aa615551> (paywall)

were originally purchased in 2011 from SURGUTNEFT-EGAS, a Russian oil and gas company, and represented the entire Russian stake in MOL PLC.¹⁵⁰ As a Hungarian-born academic explains:

So, to sum up the arc of this story, Orbán decided, most likely for political reasons, to buy the Russian-owned stake in MOL, which, in addition to an inflated purchase price, also entailed a huge loan from Russia to build an extension to Paks II. And nine years later, when Orbán was worried about his future, he decided to use government-owned MOL stock to create a new set of rightwing cadres loyal to him not only in Hungary but also in the neighboring countries. The country is being shamelessly looted at every turn.^{a 151}

In light of the Russian interest in National Conservatism, the sale of Russian shares to later finance the MCC is interesting, if not conclusive. Yet, there are other reasons to suspect Russian involvement in exploiting National Conservatism using Hungary as a platform. A Russian academic has singled out the National Conservatism alliance for its potential as a vehicle for building cooperation between rightwing political forces:¹⁵²

[The 2020 Rome National Conservative conference] highlighted the possibility of political cooperation among rightwing political forces. The basis for this cooperation would be the identification of a “common enemy.”¹⁵³

However, he also doubts Russia’s ability to “play ball” with such forces and join ranks around traditional values, calling such a prospect “unrealistic.”

Yet even if overt cooperation is unrealistic, more indirect means are not. Russia already employs extensive influence operations in Hungary and centered on themes in common with National Conservatism. A Georgian think-tank, for example, has identified multiple “Actors of Russian Propaganda in Hungary” and lists the following goals of such propaganda:¹⁵⁴

- ◆ Undermine the trust towards the EU
- ◆ Discredit the NATO
- ◆ Discredit the United States of America
- ◆ Represent Ukraine as a fascist, corrupt, and failed state
- ◆ Demonize Non-Governmental Organizations and liberal values

All of the above are consistent with National Conservative positions and ideology, as discussed earlier in this report.

The Georgian report goes on to identify a wide variety of local communities, civil organizations and semi-military groups, volunteer centers, non-governmental organizations, and media serving as Russian propaganda actors. A Hungarian media article identifies the ORBÁN government itself as one of such actors:

After the crisis erupted in Ukraine Russian propaganda became more prevalent, fake and forged news constitute a part of active measures used by Russian secret services. Today, several countries try to defend themselves against these practices. The Czech Republic established a new unit with 20 members who started working in January as a division within the Ministry of Interior to counter Russian propaganda. Hungary is not planning to do such a thing – which is understandable in light of the fact that the government is rather supportive of and not averse to spreading Russian propaganda. Magyar Idők (Hungarian Times) and other pro-government news sites readily use fake Russian news, but elements of Russian propaganda – including views similar to that of Alexandr Dugin – find their way into Viktor Orbán’s speeches, either willingly or unwillingly.¹⁵⁵

A 2017 Hungarian report also found an extensive network of Hungarian websites and blogs playing a role in Russian influence efforts:

A study found in last April that over ninety websites and blogs fitting into the concept of Russian information war were operating in Hungary at the time. In the majority of cases it is hard to decide whether they do it on their own or they are part of a larger disinformation network. No similar summary and investigation of Hungarian-language Facebook sites has been produced so far.¹⁵⁶

a She also concluded the price paid by the ORBÁN government was highly inflated and notes that the stock deal entailed a massive loan from Russia to build an extension to the Paks II nuclear power plant.

While evidence for direct Russian involvement in this social media network may be murky, it is not difficult to imagine that Russia, with its vast social media capability and armies of internet trolls, would be more than capable of utilizing its Hungarian counterparts for this purpose.^{157 158}

The evidence above suggests Russia has ample motive and means for exploiting the National Conservatism alliance for its influence operations and using Hungary to do so. As we have seen, Russia has:

- ◆ a shared ideology with National Conservatism based on resistance to liberalism
- ◆ an expressed interest in becoming a global leader of a new conservative movement based on this ideology

- ◆ used National Conservative themes in its influence operations
- ◆ possibly supported the financing of the Hungarian MCC, the center of Hungarian National Conservatism
- ◆ an extensive Hungarian influence network

Nevertheless, no conclusive evidence has yet been found for direct Russian involvement with the National Conservatism alliance. However, given the potential, further exploration is warranted, and the possible vehicles for such involvement already identified remain relatively unexplored. The GIOR will continue to monitor relevant developments and report further if such evidence comes to light.

Endnotes

- 1 **Russia - Global Influence Operations Report**
<https://www.global-influence-ops.com/category/network/russia/>
- 2 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/INGE-PR-695147_EN.pdf
- 3 <https://fores.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Policypaper-Jonsson-November-2021.pdf>
- 4 **The Active Measures Orchestra: An Examination of Russian Influence Operations Abroad | Strengthening Transatlantic Cooperation**
<https://www.gmfus.org/news/active-measures-orchestra-examination-russian-influence-operations-abroad>
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