

# Viktor Orbán brings culture war to Brussels

Hungary backs media outlets that wage war on woke and bring a Euroskeptic take to the EU capital.



Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán, center, during a summit in Brussels | Nicolas Maeterlinck/Belga via AFP/Getty Images

November 15, 2023 4:01 am CET

By [Sarah Wheaton](#) and [Eddy Wax](#)

BRUSSELS — Viktor Orbán is turning into the Rupert Murdoch of Brussels, bringing his own version of “fair and balanced” journalism into the bubble.

Known for attacking civil society and suppressing the media in Hungary, Orbán is backing journalists and think tankers to spread his message in the EU capital. Ahead of the Hungarian Council presidency next year, and with a heavy assist from Brexit campaign alumni, they’re waging the war against wokism, highlighting malfeasance, and bringing an unabashedly conservative, often Euroskeptic take to the Brussels gab circuit.

Much like Fox News sought to counter the mainstream media in the United States, Orbán’s allies aim to create an alternative echo chamber.

“Very often you only hear one reading of things, one analysis, and the mainstream likes to hear itself,” said Balázs Hidvéghi, Orbán’s top lieutenant in the Fidesz party in the European Parliament.

Following last year’s launch of a Brussels satellite of the Budapest think tank MCC, Orbán’s allies now have separate news organizations scrutinizing and skewering the institutions: The European Conservative and the Brussels Signal.

Orbán is also taking pages from Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s playbook, producing slick [reality TV-style videos](#) to bash the Brussels bureaucracy, and opening a mansion on Rue de la Loi to bring a bit of Hungarian *hygge* to the European Quarter.

Since a bitter rupture with the center-right European People’s Party in 2021, Orbán has been isolated in Brussels. Yet he’s counting on the new influence infrastructure to raise his profile both here and among conservative movements overseas.

“It’s important to make sure that we explain what we do, and why we do what we do, and we build alliances,” said Hidvéghi. “We’re building partnerships to represent those millions of Europeans who rightly feel that ... nobody really talks about their issues.”

The new media outlets are out to change all that. With its motto “shaking up the status quo,” the Brussels Signal officially launched with a reception on Place Jourdan last month. Its goal is to bring “fresh air” to debates around migration, Ukraine, the 2024 elections, and “the defense of freedom of speech in the EU,” publisher Patrick Egan told guests.

## Spreading the good news

Orbán sees himself as a “figurehead” in a “global culture war,” said a former Hungarian diplomat. Orbán believes that the reason why Hungary is not heard in Brussels is “because they haven’t yet discovered the truth,” said the diplomat, granted anonymity to speak candidly about their ex-boss. With the ever-growing think tank Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) at the center, the new media outlets are part of a “well-thought network of soft power,” the diplomat added.

MCC Brussels makes no bones about its ties to Budapest. The Canadian-Hungarian sociologist who leads it, Frank Furedi, declared his arrival in Belgium with a November 2022 op-ed in POLITICO titled “Brussels needs a Hungarian think tank.” The government funds MCC Brussels’ salvos in the culture war, including conferences on the politicization of museums, and corruption of the Eurocracy [as revealed by Qatargate](#). On Thursday, MCC Brussels [will formally unveil a report](#) exploring “How did the LGBTQ lobby take over the EU?”

After inking a formal agreement in 2021, The European Conservative is now registered at the MCC’s headquarters in Budapest. Originally a quirky periodical featuring right-wing Catholic philosophers, The European Conservative aims to be the “leading platform of the right, not only in Europe but worldwide,” its editor Alvino-Mario Fantini [told a gathering of political conservatives](#) in Florida two years ago.



The MCC Budapest Summit on Migration in 2019, titled “The Biggest Challenge of Our Time?” | Lajos Soos/EFE via EPA

A government-linked foundation is pouring millions into The European Conservative, according to [Hungarian investigative reports](#), with €651,000 earmarked for setting up the Brussels office. Like any good Brussels outlet, they also have a newsletter: “Into the Lion’s Den.”

The newest of the alternative players, the Brussels Signal has murkier origins. Its publisher, Egan, is a longtime American strategist for Orbán’s Fidesz party. This isn’t his first foray into media: his consultancy publishes [Remix News](#), an English-language site focused on Central and Eastern Europe that pushes an Orbán-friendly worldview with backing from the government, [according to Hungarian investigative journalists](#).

Egan registered Remedia Europe, which publishes Brussels Signal, in Belgium last year with startup funds of €275,000. Egan refused to reveal the source of Remedia Europe’s funds.

To run Brussels Signal, Egan hired a seasoned British conservative with a track record of standing up high-end contrarian publications: Michael Mosbacher, founder of Standpoint magazine and The Critic.

Mosbacher said in an email, “I am very emphatically not working for the Hungarian government or pushing an Hungarian government agenda.”

Despite a common disdain for the mainstream media and so-called woke mafia, the Orbán orbit of contrarians don’t always get along. Over the course of an extended email exchange with POLITICO, Mosbacher offered an animated denial of coordination between Brussels Signal and MCC Brussels.



Orbán is also taking pages from Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s playbook, producing slick reality TV-style videos | John Thys/AFP via Getty Images

Noting [Furedi’s ideological evolution](#), Mosbacher wrote: “Quite a journey from founding one of Britain’s most hardline Trot[skyite] groups and being an unambiguous cheerleader for the IRA to being an advocate of Orbanism. But there we are.”

Zsófia Tóth-Bíró, head of The European Conservative’s Brussels office, offered to answer questions in writing but did not reply to them. A spokesman for the Hungarian permanent representation to the EU did not reply to a request for comment.

## Accountability — and culture wars

In many ways, the new outlets are bringing a conventional civil society mission of accountability to the EU institutions.

MCC, for example, mined a [technical European Parliament report](#) for tidbits on spotty ethics enforcement in the EU earlier this year, and sent reporters an explainer last month on the Court of Auditors, along with a roundup of the EU budget watchdog’s most damning findings from a recent report — as the Brussels Signal [made a headline out of the auditors’ findings on growing EU debt](#). (The Brussels Signal also [seizes on scoops](#) from more [established](#) Brussels media, on occasion.)

The European Conservative, for its part, is covering Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s brother’s ties to a Romanian gambling operation, a topic that’s gotten little traction in the mainstream press.

Orbán has long sought to build ties with conservative Christian movements beyond his backyard. He's [wooded conservative British and American academics](#) — including former Margaret Thatcher speechwriter John O'Sullivan and author Rod Dreher — with posts at Hungarian think tanks. Tucker Carlson [told attendees](#) of the second annual Hungarian edition of the Conservative Political Action Conference that he'd be “right there with you” if he were ever fired from Fox News. (Carlson did not reply to a request for comment about the status of any potential contract negotiations.)



Orbán, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen | John Thys/AFP via Getty Images

Now, Orbán is helping British and American conservatives make inroads in Brussels.

“Conservatives were never good at international coalitions,” said Mike Gonzalez, a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation, an arch-right Washington think tank.

But now that right-wing movements across the world face a “common enemy,” he added, “we’re starting to compare and contrast to share best practices.”

Gonzalez was in Brussels in June at MCC’s event on “education not indoctrination,” where critical race theory and gender studies came under attack from American and U.K. academics. It echoes one of the EU’s biggest bones to pick with Budapest: The European Commission has taken Hungary to court over its law banning the portrayal of homosexuality to minors.

“The European Commission is more than happy to put its big boot on anyone who does not conform to the narrative on LBGTQ issues,” wrote Justin Stares, Brussels Signal’s news editor, in the outlet’s [daily email column](#) on October 30. “Unelected bureaucrats today have their fingers in almost every pie. Isn’t it time we said ‘enough’?” he concluded.

Two days later, The European Conservative [published](#) a piece about “pro-family groups,” warning that a proposed EU certificate of parenthood would “force member states to recognize same-sex marriages, and diminish protections for children.”

## **Isolated in Brussels**

Yet it may be that Orbán needs to bring his political allies to Brussels because he has fewer of them here.

“I think it’s a compensation channel for the lost influence that they had before,” said Péter Krekó, director of the Budapest-based Political Capital Institute, who is critical of the Orbán government. “When Fidesz was part of the European People’s Party, it did not find it that important to invest a lot in soft power, because they were just around important tables.”

[Orbán’s isolation](#) is on track to get worse before it gets better: He will likely need to settle for a shaky alliance with Slovakia’s Robert Fico as Law and Justice (PiS) lost power in Poland in October’s election. Yet Orbán this past summer expressed hope that next year’s European Parliament elections will result in a “redistribution of power.”

In building new networks and alliances, Orbán and his team see themselves as making strategic investments for a time when those “on the margins today will be the leaders tomorrow,” Krekó said. He expressed skepticism, however, that the culture war message would resonate in the Brussels bubble.

John O’Brien, MCC Brussels’ communications chief, said their target audience is people with “genuine questions” about the future of Europe: “a large and growing group of people.”



Orbán sees himself as a “figurehead” in a “global culture war” | Pool photo by Olivier Matthys via AFP/Getty Images

“Our role is not to change the minds of those whose minds are already made up or whose jobs and self-importance are entwined and dependent on the bubble consensus,” O’Brien said.

Hidvéghi, the Fidesz MEP, believes the mainstream should take note.

“I think the Brussels journalistic world could very well see some more conservative and Christian-Democratic publications,” he said. “It’s an advice for POLITICO also.”

*Lili Bayer contributed reporting.*

<https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-hungary-culture-war-woke-brussels/?reg-wall=true>