

2022 Hungarian Elections in Serbia

Orbán and Vučić in the 2022 electoral campaign: A mutually beneficial partnership

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Report By:

Context

Since they came to power in 2010 and 2012 respectively, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and President Aleksandar Vučić have developed a strong political partnership. Both leaders have been classified as illiberal, populist, and authoritarian by international organizations, such as Freedom House and V-Dem Institute. These characteristics can partially explain their inclination to cooperate, especially in the context of criticism coming from the European Union. Orbán and Vučić provide each other with international legitimization and support, which they have partially lost over the years due to the way they have governed their respective countries.

Cooperation between the two leaders has significantly intensified in recent years. Since the start of 2020, there have been eight official bilateral meetings, often coming at crucial political moments, such as the introduction of states of emergency in Hungary and Serbia at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Cooperation between Orbán and Vučić has taken multiple forms and has been especially relevant in the context of Serbia's EU accession process. European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement since 2019, Olivér Várhelyi, who is widely seen as being influenced by the government in Budapest, has been accused of influencing reporting on the candidate countries, Serbia in particular, with the aim of removing or toning down critical assessments.¹ Members of the European Parliament from the ruling Fidesz party have likewise spoken and voted against critical assessments of Serbia in the annual reports on the country. Until 2021, both Fidesz and Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) were also members of the European People's Party (EPP) until the former withdrew to avoid expulsion. SNS remains an associated member of EPP, but it has kept a low profile within the organization in recent years.

In June 2021, the Government of Hungary [published](#) several full-page advertisements in high-profile European newspapers, outlining Orbán's priorities for the future of the European Union. The final, seventh point, urged for the immediate accession of Serbia to the EU. No other candidate countries were mentioned. This position of the Hungarian government was not new, and Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó had already stressed it on several occasions, including in his speech at a pro-government rally organized by the SNS in April 2019 as a reaction to the large-scale anti-government protests in Serbia.

¹ Allegations of this practice have been made by several high-profile media, including Der Standard, Politico and Deutsche Welle.

An important mediating role in the relationship is played by the dominant Hungarian minority party in Serbia, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ). Its leader István Pásztor often points out that he had first introduced Vučić and Orbán to each other. The VMSZ has been for some time a dominant party representing the Hungarian national minority in Serbia, and the only Hungarian national minority party to win seats in the national and provincial assembly of Vojvodina in 2020. It strongly supported both leaders, urging its voters with Hungarian citizenship to vote for Fidesz in the 2022 Hungarian parliamentary election, as well as for Aleksandar Vučić in the 2022 presidential election.

The political partnership between Vučić and Orbán was also in evidence during the 2022 election campaign, which took place simultaneously in Hungary and Serbia, as elections were held on the exact same day, 3 April. One of the high points of the campaign in Serbia was the opening of the new high-speed railway between Novi Sad and Belgrade, in which Orbán also participated. In addition, the coverage of the Hungarian election campaign in the pro-government Serbian media was very biased towards Fidesz and Orbán, creating a positive image of the Hungarian prime minister. In fact, according to the [June poll](#) by Demostat, Orbán is by far the most popular leader of a neighboring country among Serbian citizens.

Case study (1): Opening of the high-speed railway between Novi Sad and Belgrade, March 2022

On 19 March 2022, in the final weeks of the election campaign in both Hungary and Serbia, Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić ceremoniously opened a high-speed railway between the two largest Serbian cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad. It is a part of a future Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway, which is expected to be completed later in the decade. The construction began in 2017 and has been largely financed by Chinese loans, while parts of the railway in Serbia have been [built by construction companies from China and Russia](#). This fact, as well as the [lack of transparency](#) of the project, has been a subject of criticism.

Nevertheless, the inaugural ride of the high-speed railway train “Soko” (Falcon) from Belgrade to Novi Sad on 19 March was a major campaign event of the ruling SNS. It also clearly highlighted the cooperation between Vučić and Orbán. Following the 35-minute ride from Belgrade to Novi Sad, the two leaders were greeted by hundreds of SNS supporters in front of Novi Sad railway station, where they made speeches.

The event was widely reported on in Serbia, with all major pro-government media outlets focusing on it intensively and providing positive or neutral coverage. Given the media imbalance in the country, this reporting reached the majority of Serbian citizens. The leading Hungarian-language media in Serbia, including *Magyar Szó* (which also published a [gallery of photos](#)) and Vajma.info, also reported on the event. Both leaders also promoted the ceremony on their social media accounts.

Official Instagram account of Aleksandar Vučić and Facebook account of Viktor Orbán on 19 March 2022



In his speech, Orbán praised Vučić and the cooperation they have achieved.² "Your President and I have put a lot of effort in the past years to build the friendship between the two countries, it is a completely new approach. We have convinced the majority of Serbs and Hungarians how to move forward and towards the future. I've got a good partner. I met many people who only talk and don't do anything - Vučić is determined and precise and I am grateful to your President", he said.

Orbán also stressed to the gathered citizens of Serbia that this was a "big day for you, and we Hungarians are offering our sincere congratulations". He stated that, as a result of cooperation with the President of Serbia, the two nations are very close today and the friendship between Serbs and Hungarians has never been as close as it is now. "And this day is proof that the two of us will do many fantastic things", said Orbán.

² Quotes from the speech [were taken](#) from the coverage of Radio Television of Vojvodina, provincial public broadcaster.

The Prime Minister of Hungary did not address the Hungarian 2022 parliamentary election directly, though he underlined the need to maintain peace following the outbreak of war in Ukraine, which was one of his main campaign messages. During the course of the election campaign, VMSZ and, occasionally, visiting Fidesz politicians, directly urged the Hungarian voters in Serbia to support the ruling coalition on 3 April.

Meanwhile, Aleksandar Vučić was also eager to praise Hungarian-Serbian relations. He said that he had agreed with Orbán that whatever happens in the coming period in this difficult crisis (the war in Ukraine and its consequences), Serbia will be the first to offer Hungary whatever it lacks, and vice versa. "That's how friendships are built and I'm very proud of that", he said.

Even though Orbán did not openly endorse Vučić, the context of the speech made his visit de facto offered support in the election campaign. During previous election campaigns, Vučić used to visit world leaders in the closing weeks, wanting to demonstrate international support for his rule. Most notably, he visited former German Chancellor Angela Merkel on several occasions and Russian President Vladimir Putin before the 2017 presidential election. This year, Orbán seems to have served as the main figure with this role in Vučić's campaign.

Case study (2): Support for Orbán in the pro-government Serbian media during the elections

Another example of the Vučić-Orbán political partnership was the reporting of the pro-government media in Serbia, especially tabloids, which are among the most influential outlets in the country. There is little dispute that their editorial policy is heavily influenced by the ruling SNS. An examination of their reporting on the Hungarian election, which was significantly biased towards Fidesz, is another indicator of the cooperation between the two leaders.

The website of the most influential tabloid in the country, Informer, on 15 March 2022 [published an article](#) titled “BUDAPEST SUPPORTS ORBÁN: A magnificent election rally of Orbán’s party today!”, stressing that one could see no end of the queue of people that have gathered to support the Hungarian prime minister on the occasion of the national holiday. A number of photographs were also published to accompany the article.

Informer headline on the pro-government rally, 15 March 2022



The image shows a screenshot of a news article from the Serbian tabloid 'Informer'. At the top, there is a red banner with the text 'NEZAVISNE DNEVNE NOVINE' and 'INFORMER' in large white letters. To the right of 'INFORMER' are smaller logos for 'VESTI SPORT RIJALITI', 'DŽET SET', and 'HRONIKA PLANETA MAGAZIN'. Below the banner, the text 'VESTI BALKAN' is visible. The main image is a photograph of a large crowd of people gathered on a city street, many holding Hungarian flags. Below the image, there is a timestamp '16:26 BALKAN' and a date 'Informer.rs | 15. 03. 2022.' with social media icons for Facebook and Twitter. The headline of the article is in bold black text: 'BUDIMPEŠTA UZ ORBANA! Veličanstven predizborni skup Orbánove partije danas! (Foto)'. The word 'BUDIMPEŠTA' is misspelled as 'BUDIMPEŠTA' in the original image.

One of the longer articles on the elections in Hungary was published by *Večernje novosti* on 27 March. [The piece, titled](#) “VUČIĆ AND ORBÁN ARE MAKING HISTORY WITH THEIR JOINT VISION: Serbia and Hungary are living through the brightest moments of mutual relations,” analyzed the parallel electoral processes in the two countries, claiming that the further improvement of the Serbian-Hungarian relationship, as well as the positions of Serbs in Hungary and vice versa, depends on the election day on 3 April, and the victory of the incumbents.

On 2 April, the website of the tabloid *Alo* [reported on](#) brief statements by Orbán and opposition prime ministerial candidate Péter Márki-Zay on the war in Ukraine. While the article itself was generally neutral, the headline clearly supported Fidesz’s spin on the positions: “OPPOSITION LEADER TAKING HUNGARY TO WAR Viktor Orbán: This is not our war, let us protect our people!”. The same story, with a very similar headline, was published by the website of the tabloid *Objektiv* as well as by *Republika*, the website of the tabloid *Srpski telegraf*.

Finally, following the announcement of the election results on 3 April, pro-government media in Serbia reported on the victory of Fidesz in a distinctly positive tone. Many headlines emphasized that the election result will not be well received in Brussels and the West in general. The [headline](#) on the website of Informer read: “ORBÁN WON THE ELECTION IN HUNGARY, HE WILL HAVE 121 OUT OF 199 SEATS IN THE PARLIAMENT?! Brussels won’t like this, but... CITIZENS HAVE MADE THEIR WILL KNOWN!

Večernje novosti, meanwhile, [reported](#) on 4 April that “ORBÁN REMAINS A THORN IN BRUSSELS’ SIDE: Hungary chose to continue on the same path“. *Alo*, on 6 April, [reported](#) that Orbán’s victory represents “the defeat of globalism” and that it is known “how the revenge of the powerful will look like”. The article quoted the Tucker Carlson Show which airs on Fox News in the United States, in which a guest assessed that “the campaign of hatred” against the prime minister of Hungary will continue.

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ORBAN JE I DALJE TRN U OKU BRISELA: Mađarska izabrala da ide istim putem

I. STANOJEVIĆ
04.04.2022. u 22:05

DOSADAŠNJI premijer Mađarske Viktor Orban (58) osvojio je i četvrti mandat na parlamentarnim izborima minulog vikenda, inkasiravši više od 53 odsto glasova. Ovo je u ponedjeljak potvrđeno u Budimpešti, pošto je obrađeno 98 odsto listića. Njegova desničarska partija Fides bila je nadmoćna nad Savezom šest opozicionih stranaka, koji je predvodio konzervativac Peter Marki Zaj, dobivši 35 odsto glasova.

NAJNOVIJE **NAJČITANJE**

FUDBAL LUĐILO NA UTAKMICI LEVANTEA I VULVSA: Igrači u klinču, sudija

PRIJATELJSKI duel između Levantea i Vulverhemtona, odigran u španskom Benidormu, prerastao je u ratne igre.

CRNA GORA KAO DA SU RADNICI GRADSKO

BEograd RUPA DUBOKA

Večernje novosti headline, 4 April 2022

The websites of the non-tabloid pro-government RTS (public broadcaster) and *Politika* did not cover the course of the campaign. However, they released several articles in the wake of the election results, highlighting the scale of Fidesz victory. On 5 April, *Politika* released an article analyzing the victory, assessing that confrontation between Hungary and the EU would continue, but also acknowledging that the confrontation was partially caused by the Hungarian prime minister violating the rule of law and media freedom. This assessment makes the *Politika* article one of the very few exceptions in which some criticism of Orbán was present.

Conclusions

The strong political partnership between Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić continued during the 2022 election campaigns in Hungary and Serbia, which took place simultaneously since both elections were held on 3 April. Media analysis of the joint opening of Belgrade-Noví Sad high-speed railway on 19 March shows that Orbán had played a role of international legitimization and support of Vučić, while at the same contributed to his standing among Hungarians in Serbia. Meanwhile, Serbian pro-government media were, almost without exception, supportive of Orbán, who enjoys a high degree of popularity in Serbia, during the campaign.

Even though Serbian pro-government media are largely targeting the majority Serbian population with their promotion of Orbán and the partnership between him and President Vučić, there is no doubt that this reporting also has an effect on the Hungarian national minority in Serbia. This media support for Orbán in Serbia, coupled with strong links and friendly relations between the two governments, could be expected to contribute to the electoral success of both leaders among the voters in Serbia. This also strengthens the position of VMSZ, who play the role of a “bridge” between the two governments, and whose success the voters could easily link with strengthening of Serbo-Hungarian relations and therefore also improvement of Serbo-Hungarian inter-ethnic relations in Serbia.



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