

CHAPTER 4

NAVIGATING MODERN CHALLENGES IN JOURNALISM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

THE POLITICS OF FIDESZ-KDNP OF HUNGARY UNDER V. ORBÁN IN WESTERN MEDIA, 2010-2024

Dmytro Tkach¹, Maria Burmaka²

¹Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor of the Department of International Relations and Journalism, "KROK" University, Kyiv, Ukraine, e-mail: ditkach2017@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0824-8559>

²Ph.D. in Philology, Associate Professor of the Department of International Relations and Journalism, "KROK" University, Kyiv, Ukraine, e-mail: burmakamv@krok.edu.ua, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1054-4517>

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Abstract. This article offers a comprehensive analysis of Western media coverage of the Hungarian government's political course under Viktor Orban and the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition from 2010 to 2024. The study encompasses a wide range of aspects of Hungary's domestic and foreign policy, tracing the evolution of "Orbanism" perception in international media discourse. The author examines in detail the key themes that dominated Western media regarding Hungary, namely: The transformation of the country's democratic system and discussions around the concept of "illiberal democracy". Systematic conflicts between Hungary and the European Union, especially on issues of rule of law and democratic values. Hungary's strict migration policy and its impact on European policy in this area. Economic reforms known as "Orbanomics" and their controversial perception in the international arena. Changes in Hungary's media landscape and discussions about press freedom. Hungary's foreign policy course, including its relations with Russia, China, the USA, and neighboring countries. Special attention is paid to the impact of the Hungarian governance model on regional politics in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as its perception by right-wing and conservative movements in Europe and the USA. The article also examines the dynamics of Hungary's relations with the EU and NATO, particularly in the context of Russian aggression against Ukraine and Hungary's position on this conflict. The research is based on a wide range of Western media sources, including leading newspapers, magazines, television channels, and online publications. The author traces changes in the tone and focus of coverage of Hungarian politics during the specified period, identifying key trends and turning points in the international perception of Hungary. The article also examines Western media's reaction to Hungary's presidency of the Council of the European Union. The author summarizes the main trends in Western media coverage of Hungarian politics and assesses their impact on Hungary's international reputation and its relations with key partners.

Keywords: Hungary, Western media, FIDESZ-KDNP coalition, "Orbanism", Ukraine.

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Introduction. Since 2010, the political landscape of Hungary has undergone significant changes under the leadership of Viktor Orbán and the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition. These transformations have drawn close attention from Western media, eliciting a wide range of reactions—from criticism to intrigue. This article explores how Western media have covered and interpreted the Hungarian government's policies from 2010 to 2024.

The analysis focuses on key aspects of Hungary's domestic and foreign policy, including changes in the democratic system, economic reforms, migration policy, and relations with the European Union. Special attention is given to the evolution of Viktor Orbán's image in the international media space and the impact of his policies on regional and European politics.

This study not only reveals the dynamics of Hungary's perception on the international stage but also illustrates broader trends in the coverage of political processes in Central and Eastern Europe by Western media.

Literature Review. The politics of the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition under Viktor Orbán has been a subject of considerable analysis and debate in Western media, particularly from 2010 to 2024. This period has seen Orbán's government challenge liberal democratic norms and face scrutiny from both domestic and international observers. A significant body of research, particularly from Ukrainian scholars and journalists, has delved into this issue, examining how Orbán's policies and political maneuvers have been received and represented abroad.

Ukrainian researchers like Ziabkin (2024), Zagrebelnyi (2024), and Erman (2022) have investigated the media portrayal of Orbán's administration, shedding light on the broader geopolitical implications of Hungary's political shift. Their work is complemented by Krupka (2024), Ozturk (2024), and Sydorenko (2024), who explore how Hungarian policies under Orbán have impacted relationships within the European Union, as well as Hungary's connections with other Eastern European countries.

Hungarian and Western academics and journalists have further enriched this discourse. Dtsstwffyi (2024) and László (2024) offer an insider perspective on the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition's policies, while Tharoor (2022; 2024) and Nielsen (2024) provide a Western viewpoint on how Orbán's government is perceived globally. Moreover, Demény (2024), Starcevic (2024), and Ocvirk (2024) contribute nuanced assessments of Orbán's strategies, illustrating the divergence between Hungarian domestic support and Western criticism. Petit (2023) and other scholars critically evaluate the narratives that Western media has constructed around Hungary's political trajectory, highlighting a complex interplay between media representation and political reality.

This body of work collectively offers a multifaceted understanding of the FIDESZ-KDNP's influence under Orbán, addressing both the domestic context and international reactions. The contributions of these scholars and journalists underscore the polarized nature of the discourse surrounding Hungary, as well as the varied lenses through which Orbán's Hungary is viewed across different regions.

Aims. The purpose of the article is to carry out a comprehensive analysis of the results of coverage by the Western mass media of the political course of the Hungarian

government under the leadership of Viktor Orbán and the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition from 2010 to 2024.

Methodology. The research is based on the analysis of publications in leading Western media from 2010 to 2024. Content analysis and discourse analysis methods were used to study the coverage of key aspects of Orbán's government policies. Sources include newspapers, magazines, and online publications. The analysis covers Hungary's domestic and foreign policy, economic reforms, migration policy, and media reforms. A chronological and thematic approach was applied to track changes in the perception and coverage of Hungary's policies. The results were validated by comparison with academic research and analytical reports from international organizations.

Results. At the end of the 1980s, as a result of the Velvet Revolution, Hungary, as a parliamentary republic, embarked on the path of building a democratic society based on a multi-party system. Until 2010, coalitions changed as a result of elections to the National Assembly, with conservatives, socialists, and liberals coming to power, but the commitment to democracy and pan-European values remained constant. All this was nullified when the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition, led by V. Orbán, came to power in 2010, leading to the rollback of democracy and the slide toward autocracy. This ruling coalition won parliamentary elections four times and secured a constitutional majority in the National Assembly [15, p.86].

Today, the country is characterized as a state with "illiberal democracy," where right-conservative ideology prevails. The multi-party system, which replaced the former communist one-party system, has evolved into a system where one party holds a constitutional majority in parliament.

This dominant political force has held power for over a decade, leading to a significant concentration of power and raising concerns about the state of democratic institutions in the country. Such developments call into question Hungary's initial democratic aspirations and provoke discussions about the direction of its political development.

This situation enables Viktor Orbán's government to pass any laws that support its course aimed at establishing an illiberal democracy in the country. Despite sharp criticism from Brussels, the policies of the Hungarian government coalition, led by Orbán, continue to pursue a line of strengthening state control over democratic institutions and reforming the public sector toward centralization, a return to conservative traditions of the Hungarian state, a rollback of democratic principles of governance, and the reinforcement of authoritarian tendencies.

This policy of the ruling coalition of Hungary and its leader, Viktor Orbán, is closely monitored by Western media, with the prime minister himself being the focal point of news and reports on Hungary. Orbán's personality and policies have consistently dominated foreign publications about Hungary since 2010. Even in 2024, nearly a decade and a half later, he continues to play a decisive role in articles analyzing news related to Hungary.

The most common portrayal of Viktor Orbán in foreign media is as an authoritarian dictator. In May 2015, "The New York Times" published a joint article

by economics professor Sergei Guriev and political science professor Daniel Treisman titled "New Dictators Rule with Velvet Fists," which discusses so-called "sophisticated" dictatorships, with Viktor Orbán also mentioned among the political leaders analyzed[16].

The theoretical starting point of the authors is that, unlike traditional dictatorships that operate with overt violence, there are now so-called "new" dictatorships that speak the language of global media, understand the laws of mutual economic dependence and the essence of information technologies, rarely resort to violence, concentrate power in one hand, dismantle the system of checks and balances, and gradually eliminate the opposition.

These politicians threaten to change the world order, control media owners through advertising revenue, hinder access to independent online content, use hackers, and even hire Western consultants for successful lobbying and communication. Viktor Orbán is included in the cohort of "sophisticated" dictators who deceive their voters with propaganda, censorship, and half-truths.

In May 2018, in issue No. 3 of the American magazine "Time," Viktor Orbán appeared on the cover alongside Russian President Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. The author of the article is Ian Bremmer, an American political analyst, editor, and head of the foreign policy department of "Time," and president of the Eurasia Group, who teaches applied geopolitics at Columbia University[17].

Bremmer explored why "strongmen," often referred to as dictators, and charismatic leaders like those mentioned above have once again come to the forefront of the political stage. According to the author, a common denominator for these politicians is that they offer their people "security" from external and internal threats. In Bremmer's article, there is also a narrative about "awakened nations," suggesting that, unlike the populations of Western Europe, the citizens of these countries have become aware of their vulnerability and therefore place more trust in decisive, capable politicians with a stable value system.

Regarding Viktor Orbán, the author notes that after another electoral victory in 2018, following the migration crisis, he is building an illiberal democracy where free elections exist, but civil liberties are restricted. Bremmer believes that the Hungarian prime minister deliberately uses fear as a strategy to intimidate the civilian population and turn them against migrants.

When Fidesz won again with a constitutional majority in the National Assembly elections in April 2018, foreign media journalists focused on Viktor Orbán's new electoral success and its consequences. Jennifer Rankin, Brussels correspondent for The Guardian, who has written several articles on Hungarian topics, described the 2018 elections in Hungary as "the re-election of anti-migration Viktor Orbán poses a major challenge for the EU." She suggested that only a few people in Brussels were celebrating the resounding success of Hungary's prime minister in the elections, which poses a serious challenge to the European Union since Viktor Orbán has distanced himself from the club of liberal values while continuing to receive EU funds.

Rankin's analysis paints a picture of Hungary where the system of checks and balances has been practically dismantled, judicial independence has been softened, and independent media have been targeted. The Hungary depicted in her article is on the brink of democracy, where xenophobic rhetoric against refugees, Brussels, and George Soros is also prevalent. Viktor Orbán is increasingly portrayed as an autocratic politician who is performing a "peacock dance" with Brussels, but in 2018, there was no European leader on the horizon who was taking steps to hold Hungary's prime minister accountable. The then-president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, also showed no willingness to confront Viktor Orbán, which the article's author attributes to the fact that both were members of the European People's Party[18].

In November 2020, Vivian Walt, a Paris correspondent for the American magazine *Time*, published a detailed report on the domestic political situation in Hungary. On this occasion, she personally visited Budapest Mayor Gergely Karácsony, who had just taken control of the capital from Fidesz-supported István Tarlós a year earlier, an event that many foreign media interpreted as the breaking of the myth of Viktor Orbán's invincibility with the opposition's victory in Budapest in 2019. Walt's article emphasized that Hungary is moving toward an authoritarian system, and in the system built since 2010, which the Hungarian prime minister only calls an "illiberal democracy," judges, civil servants, and even the appointment of directors of individual institutions such as theaters depend on political loyalty. The media has become a mouthpiece for government propaganda, and NGOs have had their financial resources seized.

The government's measures related to the coronavirus pandemic were also examined in the *Time* article, where the government's decree introduced in March 2020 was interpreted as granting the prime minister absolute power. Walt's reports also noted that those who criticized the government were arrested, the few remaining independent news sites were silenced, and even the University of Theater and Film Arts was privatized. All this led to the Washington-based human rights organization Freedom House taking the position in May 2020 that Hungary could no longer be considered a fully democratic country.

In January 2023, Viktor Orbán held a press conference with foreign right-conservative journalists at the Carmelite Monastery in Budapest, who had arrived for the Matthias Corvinus College media conference. Rod Dreher, the editor-in-chief of "The American Conservative," who lives in Budapest and is affiliated with the conservative think tank "Danube Institute," which is supported by the Hungarian state, published an extremely detailed report on this meeting.

Dreher noted that the Hungarian prime minister is not at all the figure portrayed by Western media. However, H. David Baer sharply criticized Dreher's remarks in "The Bulwark," referring to him as a "blogger from Louisiana," accusing him of ignorance about Hungary and violating basic journalistic principles by becoming the news rather than reporting it.

Rod Dreher spoke of Viktor Orbán as a natural politician, whom he ranked among "one of the most significant world leaders of our time." H. David Baer also criticized

Dreher for his admiration of the Hungarian prime minister's political genius in his blog on "The American Conservative," failing to realize that his most enthusiastic comments are considered scandalous in the rest of Europe.

Baer described Dreher's discussion of Orbán's statements on Hungary's EU membership and the Russia-Ukraine war as careless and even explosive, as it angered Ukrainians so much that they summoned the Hungarian ambassador in Kyiv. Moreover, the opinions expressed in his blog caused a great stir in the Hungarian press, leading Rod Dreher to dismiss domestic opposition figures as "jackals."

Baer called Dreher a "lapdog" and summarized his image of Hungary as a "Christian-conservative Disneyland where one must always be vigilant, trust no one, even friends, practice self-censorship as a journalist, and consider nothing certain"[19].

On May 17, 2022, "The Washington Post" published a three-part series of articles about Viktor Orbán, which painted a vision of the "Orbanization" of the United States. The author is Ishaan Tharoor, a foreign policy journalist for the American publication and a contributor to the "Today's WorldView" section and newsletter, which focuses on global politics[20].

The first part of his analysis was published on May 17 of the same year, where he discussed how American conservatives are following Hungary's lead and how the influence of the Hungarian prime minister's policies has long extended beyond his own country. Tharoor began the first part of the series by stating that "in the summer of 2018, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán declared war on an entire generation" and foresaw the advance of right-wing nationalist parties in the upcoming European Parliament elections, saying, "We may be witnessing a historic moment where we say goodbye not only to liberal democracy but also to the elite of 1968."

By this, he referred to the socio-cultural consequences of the Paris student uprising that took place that year, such as the promotion of feminism, atheism, and leftist cosmopolitanism, which rejects patriotic traditions. Orbán fights against these phenomena, linking their origins to the 1968 generation, which is why he predicted that the 1990s generation would replace them, as he put it, "now it is the turn of a generation of Christian convictions and dedicated anti-communists in European politics."

According to Ishaan Tharoor, since his re-election in 2010, Orbán has turned Hungary into a Petri dish for experiments with illiberal democracy, and by 2022, it was time to export the model he had developed. However, Viktor Orbán's influence and his political vision of a new Christian democracy are by no means confined to Europe, as they serve as a significant source of inspiration for American conservatives.

Stephen K. Bannon, former advisor to President Donald Trump, described the patriotic political program of the Hungarian prime minister as "Trump before Trump." It is no surprise that some American conservative intellectuals have traveled to Budapest with scholarships or taken creative sabbaticals there, and the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) chose the Hungarian capital as its venue.

Tucker Carlson, one of the most influential conservative media personalities and political commentators in the United States, also praised the Hungarian prime minister on his former Fox News program and conducted two interviews with Viktor Orbán in Budapest. As early as 2019, he stated that Hungarian political leaders genuinely care

about the welfare of their people, at least in his opinion, as evidenced by a program that directs tax revenues to increase the native population rather than prioritizing migration and supporting immigrants.

Tucker Carlson continued to popularize the so-called "Great Replacement Theory," which posits that the arrival of migrants is part of a premeditated political project aimed at displacing the native population. This theory has become so deeply ingrained in mainstream right-wing thinking that, according to a recent public opinion poll, three out of ten Americans believe that immigration threatens their political and cultural influence. No Western political leader speaks as loudly about demographic threats as Viktor Orbán, even though the proportion of Muslim and Arab populations in Hungary remains negligible. Despite this, during the 2015 refugee crisis, he alarmed the Hungarian population with the prospect of Syrian asylum seekers being resettled in Hungary, framing this possibility as an existential threat, and subsequently increased state support for domestic population growth, undoubtedly strengthening his position among Europe's far-right.

To support this, Ishaan Tharoor cited another statement by Viktor Orbán at the III Budapest Demographic Summit in 2019. There, the prime minister said that "some European political forces, for ideological or other reasons, want to replace the population on the continent," which, according to the author, was directed particularly at George Soros, although it is ironic that the American businessman of Hungarian origin helped the young liberal group led by Viktor Orbán in the 1980s, which later became the Fidesz party.

After the regime change, there was a political and ideological shift in the current prime minister, who targeted NGOs and institutions that threatened his rule. An example of this is the fate of the Central European University (CEU), associated with Soros's name, which relocated its headquarters from the Hungarian capital to Vienna following the crackdown in 2017. The first part of the series also mentioned the dismantling of the independent press in Hungary and the transfer of media ownership to Orbán's allies, as well as the surveillance of investigative journalists using spyware, specifically the Pegasus scandal. In his analysis, the Washington Post journalist concluded that American conservatives see a glimmer of hope in Hungary's example under Viktor Orbán, which they view as a victory in the cultural war and a model for action. As a result, J.D. Vance, a Republican senator from Ohio, hinted in an interview with "Vanity Fair" that Donald Trump's re-election in 2024 could accelerate the conservative takeover of local institutions, including universities, which he believes "need to be taken from the left and turned against them," because a political program is needed to eliminate "woke" ideology.

Ishaan Tharoor also saw evidence of following Orbán's course in the fact that, according to some analysts, a political trend infused with the venom of the Hungarian prime minister's war against the "elite of 1968" is increasingly spreading among American conservatives. Kim Lane Scheppele, a sociology professor at Princeton University and an expert on Hungarian politics, described Viktor Orbán's rhetoric, which generates sympathy among the right, as worrisome, as it conceals a dictator who holds all the power.

The second part of the series illustrated the "Orbanization" of American conservatives through the politics of Florida, specifically focusing on actions against the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people, grouped under the acronym LGBTQ. The third article, which concluded the analysis, discussed the erosion of democracy.

Western media paid considerable attention to Hungary's upcoming presidency of the European Union. The online publication "Central European Times," in an article titled "Hungary's EU Presidency: Steering the European Agenda in Turbulent Times," writes about Budapest assuming the presidency of the Council of the European Union on July 1, 2024, under the slogan "Make Europe Great Again." Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is widely regarded as the bloc's closest leader to Russia and its biggest dissident, which means that Hungary's presidency could lead to conflicts on issues including Ukraine's potential EU accession and climate policy.

The article further analyzes the following topics: Hungary focuses on the economy, Orbán outlines Hungary's position on Ukraine, Orbán criticizes Weber, EPP, and migration, and Orbán emphasizes the importance of the German economy to Hungary. These headlines reflect various aspects of Viktor Orbán's and Hungary's policies regarding the EU, Ukraine, migration, and economic relations with Germany, demonstrating the wide range of issues the Hungarian government is dealing with in the context of European politics[21].

In the online publication "Wilson Center," Masha Ocvirk published an article titled "What Awaits Hungary's Presidency of the EU Council?" In it, the author discusses the fact that in recent years, relations between the EU and the Hungarian government have been far from simple. For several years, the country has been under scrutiny due to concerns about the deterioration of the rule of law and has often used its veto power to block progress on key legislation, such as military aid to Ukraine. Therefore, trust in Hungary's leadership of the EU has become a subject of controversy. In June of last year, the European Parliament even passed a resolution questioning its ability to serve as an honest broker and urging the European Council to take appropriate action.

Although Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán could stir up trouble with his rhetoric, the disruptive potential of Hungary's presidency should be approached with caution.

Shortly before the official start of Hungary's presidency, on June 25, 2022, EU member states agreed to officially begin membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. This was considered a tactical move by the outgoing Belgian presidency to provide another necessary political signal for the future of Ukraine and Moldova in the EU. In the past, Hungary had hindered Ukraine's accession progress, citing issues of corruption and the protection of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. Hungarian Minister for European Affairs János Bóka stated that the presidency does not plan to open or close any negotiating clusters for the respective two countries. However, this official start is still significant, as both sides can begin the "screening process"—an assessment of the candidate countries' alignment with EU legislation and what is needed to advance in the membership process.

The next six months will be marked more by broad political discussions about the new EU institutional leadership and priorities for the next five years than by progress on specific legislative files. Therefore, Hungary's role in setting the agenda will not significantly increase its ability to hinder progress—no more than it already has by using its veto power. However, attention should be paid to the political discourse and whether Hungary will use this focus to undermine EU unity—especially on foreign policy issues—and to strengthen far-right and nationalist voices that have gained ground in the European Parliament elections in June. Nevertheless, making progress on its priorities, such as defense and enlargement, could provide Hungary with an opportunity to improve its strained relations with Brussels. Will Hungary take advantage of its presidency and, as its Minister for European Affairs stated, become "an honest broker, loyally working with all member states and institutions"?[12].

On the website of The European Policy Centre, Perle Petit published a study titled "Will Hungary Achieve Another 'First in the EU' by Being Stripped of the EU Presidency?" This headline poses an ironic question about the possibility of Hungary becoming the first country in EU history to be stripped of its right to hold the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. The phrase "another 'first in the EU'" hints at Hungary's previous negative "achievements" in its relations with the EU.

Hungary is set to take over the EU's rotating presidency in July 2024, right after the European elections, but its negative track record regarding respect for EU rights and values raises doubts about the appropriateness of Hungary's presidency altogether. This issue gained relevance in recent weeks following the European Parliament resolution of May 24, which questioned "how Hungary can credibly fulfill" the responsibilities of the presidency. The resolution, sponsored by a majority of political parties, was passed with 442 votes in favor and 144 against.

This comes after several EU measures aimed at the country to curb its further slide into autocracy - from the Parliament's initiation of Article 7 procedures to the Commission's blocking of EU funding due to rule of law regulations. So far, little of these efforts have troubled the Hungarian government.

The Orbán regime thrives by using its controlled media empire to portray any EU actions as depriving the Hungarian people of their right to self-determination of Hungarian values. Unfortunately, the EU currently has little it can do about this, as state disinformation - prevalent in Hungary - is a complex moving target that is difficult to address at the national level [13].

Discussion. The political developments in Hungary under Viktor Orbán and the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition have been closely scrutinized by Western media from 2010 to 2024, often leading to polarized perspectives. Orbán's approach has been widely framed as a move away from liberal democratic norms towards a form of governance that he himself describes as "illiberal democracy." This term has come to symbolize the shift in Hungary's political landscape, as Orbán's policies have increasingly emphasized national sovereignty, conservative values, and centralization of power.

The Western media's portrayal of Orbán has predominantly been one of concern, focusing on Hungary's perceived slide towards authoritarianism. Articles have underscored Orbán's consolidation of power through legislative changes that favor the

ruling party, raise barriers to political opposition, and erode judicial independence. This, coupled with a controlled media landscape, has led many international observers to view Hungary as a nation where democracy is under strain. Such coverage is exemplified by Walt's (2020) and Rankin's (2024) analyses, which emphasize the dismantling of democratic safeguards and the increasing role of state-controlled narratives in shaping public opinion.

Yet, while Western media largely critiques Orbán's policies, some articles also highlight his influence on global conservatism and his perceived role as a model for right-wing movements beyond Hungary. Tharoor's (2022; 2024) exploration of Orbán's appeal to American conservatives underscores his international impact, positioning him as an emblem of a new wave of conservative leadership that appeals to those disillusioned with liberal values. This dimension reveals a duality in Orbán's media coverage: he is not only seen as a domestic authoritarian but also as a figure whose policies resonate with certain political groups globally.

Hungary's evolving relationship with the European Union has been another focal point in media discussions. Orbán's confrontations with Brussels over issues like migration and rule-of-law violations have been recurrent themes. Reports, such as those by Petit (2023) and Ocvirk (2024), detail Hungary's challenges to EU unity, particularly as it assumes the EU Council Presidency in 2024. Western media often portrays this as a critical juncture, questioning whether Hungary can lead the EU while simultaneously being one of its most significant dissenters.

Overall, Western media coverage from 2010 to 2024 reflects a complex and often adversarial stance towards Hungary's political developments. While critiques of democratic backsliding are prevalent, Orbán's adeptness at influencing conservative narratives and his strategic defiance of EU norms are acknowledged. The portrayal of Orbán in Western media underscores both the apprehension surrounding Hungary's political trajectory and the broader implications of its leadership style on regional and global politics. This dichotomy serves as a testament to the contentious nature of Orbán's Hungary and the divisive role it plays within both the EU and the broader political landscape.

Conclusion. From 2010 to 2024, the policies of the Hungarian government under the leadership of Viktor Orbán and the FIDESZ-KDNP coalition have attracted significant attention from Western media, often eliciting criticism and concern. Overall, Western media have portrayed Orbán's policies as a challenge to the traditional liberal-democratic values of the EU, while also acknowledging his political acumen and influence on European politics. This ambivalent assessment reflects the complexity and contentious nature of Hungarian politics during the period from 2010 to 2024.

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