



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# American sanctions against Orbán's right-hand man—will Trump help?



So far, US sanctions under the Magnitsky Act have been imposed on corrupt officials and wealthy individuals associated with autocratic regimes outside the circle of countries that are among the US's closest allies.

Antal Rogán, the Chief of Staff to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, is an important precedent in this respect when it comes to sanctioning high-ranking officials from a partner country, a member of NATO and the EU.

Rumours that the US will sanction someone from the Hungarian Prime Minister's inner circle have been circulating for more than a year. The administration in Washington was targeting an official who maintained Budapest's links to already sanctioned Russian political and economic entities.

In April 2023, the US imposed sanctions on the Budapest-based International Investment Bank (IIB), a Russian financial institution involved in financing projects in Eastern Europe. One of the sanctioned individuals was a Hungarian citizen.

“The IIB’s presence in Budapest enables Russia to increase its intelligence presence in Europe, opens the door for the Kremlin’s malign influence activities in Central Europe and the Western Balkans, and could serve as a mechanism for corruption and illicit finance, including sanctions violations,” the US Treasury Department **stated** at the time.

## The architect of corruption

The sanctioning of Mr Rogán is justified by his leading role in systemic public corruption in Hungary. “Antal Rogán is a primary architect, implementer, and beneficiary of this system of corruption,” said David Pressman, US Ambassador to Hungary.

David Pressman rightly assumed that Budapest would react bitterly when he announced this decision in the last days of his ambassadorship.

“It is well known that Antal Rogán also plays a central role in controlling Hungary’s media ecosystem, so I can imagine what he will direct the newspapers to write tomorrow,” **said** the outgoing American ambassador.

## The reactions show that Viktor Orbán's government sees this as political revenge on the part of the outgoing administration

On the very same day, official Budapest furiously rejected the accusations against its high representative. The reactions show that Viktor Orbán's government sees this as political revenge on the part of the outgoing administration and by no means an objective statement by the US financial authorities.

“This is a personal act of revenge by the ambassador sent to Hungary by the failed American administration. How fortunate that in just a few days, the United States will be led by people who see our country as a friend rather than an enemy,” **wrote** Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjartó on Facebook.

## Budapest takes it personally

Budapest is therefore confident that the sanctions will only be short-lived and that the new, friendly administration of Donald Trump will lift the sanctions against PM Orbán's closest associate through a political decision.

This is possible, but among the almost 700 officials around the world who have been sanctioned under the Magnitsky Act since 2012, there are many who had the same expectations, which have not been met even with the change of administration.

“The handling of Rogán’s sanctions could serve as an early test of the incoming administration’s foreign policy priorities in Eastern Europe,” **stated** the magazine, Hungarian Conservative, close to Orbán's government policy.

The Hungarian prime minister is certainly at the forefront of the few European leaders with whom Donald Trump has a close relationship and, at the same time, identical views on the most important foreign policy issues.

### The Hungarian prime minister wanted to establish himself as the most important European partner of the new American president

Viktor Orbán has visited Trump three times in the US during 2024, including the July meeting that followed the Hungarian Prime Minister's controversial meetings with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping during Hungary's presidency of the EU Council.

In this way, the Hungarian prime minister wanted to establish himself as the most important European partner of the new American president and received positive feedback from Donald Trump.

But are Budapest's expectations arising from the strong ties between the two leaders enough to make the lifting of sanctions against the most powerful member of Orbán's establishment inevitable?

## Will Trump have time for Orbán?

When he arrives in the White House on 20 January, Trump will certainly reverse numerous decisions made by his predecessor Joe Biden. After all, he already did this in the first days of his term of office in 2017, when he took over from Barack Obama.

However, it remains uncertain whether Trump's "revenge" decisions will also include the OFAC sanctions against Viktor Orbán's right-hand man.



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Simply put, Trump wants to undo many decisions made by the outgoing president and will prioritise them in his first days in office. Most of these are outside the realm of foreign policy and concern domestic issues that Trump wants to abolish as quickly as possible in order to fulfil the expectations of his voters and the new establishment.

**According** to the Financial Times, bureaucrats at the EU headquarters in Brussels are already analysing a number of Biden's decisions related to sanctions against Russia in preparation for possible negative consequences that could result from Trump's potential softening of the regime towards Russia. "The bloc's officials hope Trump will keep those sanctions in place to use as potential leverage in any possible negotiations with Moscow over a ceasefire."

For this reason, the US sanctions against a high-ranking Hungarian official have a good chance of remaining in force, as they will be part of the pile on Trump's desk that requires decisions. Many of these sanctions are a higher priority for the incoming president and many will be a part of broader calculations, such as balancing relations with the EU and Russia.

In this sense, Europeans will undoubtedly support the decision made by the outgoing American administration, as sanctioning the individual at the top of Orbán's influence pyramid was a valuable service to the EU,

which was unable to use this mechanism to address its most prominent internal opponent.