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A Hungarian coup worthy of Putin



By Philip Stephens



You could say that Europe has crises enough without worrying too much about a Hungarian dissident turned petty tyrant. Hungary, after all, is not even a member of the euro. To overlook [Viktor Orbán's journey from anti-communist progressive to populist xenophobe](#) would, however, be to repeat a mistake made about Greece. The troubles of Europe's small powers can be a harbinger of bigger dangers around the corner.

Hungary's prime minister presents a reminder – should anyone on this continent need one – of the familiar trajectory from economic chaos to political authoritarianism. The European Union has had two grand projects since the fall of the Berlin Wall: the single currency and the advance of democracy eastwards. The euro is now in serious trouble. Mr Orbán sends a powerful message about [the perils facing democracy](#).

This week saw the [introduction of Mr Orbán's new constitution](#). Suffused with ethnic nationalism, it reeks of an ambition for one-party rule. It promises repression of personal freedoms within Hungary and, through an extension of

citizenship to Hungarian minorities elsewhere, threatens instability in ethnically-diverse neighbours.

The constitution has to be seen alongside a slew of new basic laws and the gerrymandering of the electoral system. Together, they bestow inordinate power on the ruling Fidesz party. The prime minister can claim to have won the 2010 election fairly. Now he is deploying a two-thirds majority in parliament to deny opponents the same possibility.

The authority of the courts has been limited and the judiciary subjected to closer political supervision. The constitution asserts state control over personal conscience and faith. Abortion and same-sex marriages are outlawed and recognised religions limited.

Paradoxically for a politician so visceral in his hostility to post-Soviet Russia, Mr Orbán's version of democracy is one that would surely win plaudits from Vladimir Putin. Much as in Mr Putin's Russia, the rule of law is subordinated to the entrenchment of one-party rule. As in Russia, Hungarians can still vote; citizens can protest and privately owned media can criticise Mr Orbán. But this is faux democracy. State institutions, the courts and the national broadcaster are firmly in Fidesz hands.

Mr Orbán's supporters point to the economic chaos inherited from previous socialist administrations, which mixed manifest incompetence with corruption. But the prime minister has reached beyond any reasonable effort to create a stable backdrop for recovery. Autocrats do not draw legitimacy from the sins of democratic predecessors.

Mr Orbán is a gifted politician. Ivan Krastev, the chairman of the Sofia-based Centre for Liberal Strategies and a leading central European scholar, describes him not so much as an ideologue as a "radical opportunist". In moving from left to right across the political spectrum, Mr Orbán has grabbed the chance to tap into Hungarian nationalism at a moment of crisis.

Some would-be autocrats, Mr Krastev notes, play to people's hopes and aspirations. He mentions Turkey's [Recep Tayyip Erdogan](#) in this respect. Others prefer to harness fear and prejudice. Mr Orbán belongs to this second category. A go-it-alone economic strategy – breaking loose from the EU and International Monetary Fund – has been drawn from the same nationalist playbook.

As things have turned out, his economic prescription has failed. Tax cuts have not brought down Hungary's debt and deficits. Government bonds have junk status. Foreign investors can no longer rely on the rule of law. For all Mr Orbán's blustering about [negotiating with the IMF](#) on his terms, Hungary is heading towards bankruptcy.

None of this makes Fidesz less dangerous. Centrist opposition parties have gained little from Mr Orbán's waning popularity. The ultra-right Jobbik party, with which Mr Orbán has lately been flirting, has seen its support grow.

This week's protests in Budapest, which saw many tens of thousands [rally against the constitution](#), may have marked a change in this political dynamic. For the first time disparate opposition parties and civil society groups showed a united front.

The protesters, though, need leadership at home and support from abroad. If the west can call for political freedom in the Maghreb – or, for that matter, Belarus – it can surely do likewise in central Europe.

So far the response has been muted. True, the European Commission has said that future financial help will be conditional on the restoration of central bank independence. [Hillary Clinton has voiced US misgivings](#) about threats to individual freedoms. Tut-tutting is not enough, however.

A better start would be for other EU leaders to make public their dismay. Democracy is at the heart of Hungary's bargain with the rest of the EU. Where are the tough statements from Angela Merkel, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron? A second step would see Hungarian ministers shunned at EU meetings in Brussels. There is a fine line to be negotiated. The quarrel is with Mr Orbán not the Hungarian people. But it should not be beyond the wit of European leaders to make clear this distinction.

Greece should have served as a warning signal for the eurozone. Hungary is now shining a light on the political risks of economic failure. The nationalist right is on the rise across much of Europe – from the "True Finns" to the Dutch Freedom party and France's National Front. Countries with weaker, democratic traditions are especially vulnerable. Europe should know by now the perils of contagion.