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“Brussels is financing the entire Orbán machine”

Hungarian journalist Péter Magyari discusses how to tackle the autocracy taking over his country

Once a darling of the West for his opposition to Cold War era communism, Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán is now taking his country down a distictly authoritarian course. He has famously vowed to build an "illiberal democracy", his government has cracked down on critical media, blocked EU moves to uphold LGBTI rights, attacked judicial independence and filled key institutions with its own supporters. Luxembourg's foreign minister has accused his country of treating refugees "worse than wild animals". Michael Bröning spoke to Hungarian journalist Peter Magyari about Orbán's popularity at home, and how the EU can encourage Hungary to uphold values of tolerance and openness.

Hungary is facing an election next year. Is Viktor Orbán likely to win again?

I would assume so, unless something significant changes in the meantime. That doesn't mean though that the entire population is behind Orbán . Only a quarter of Hungary's 8 million voters back his Fidesz party, but it is still the largest group in parliament. The only reason Orbán will win the elections is because he's managed to tailor electoral laws to his own circumstances. There is now only one round of voting instead of two, so the smaller parties will have to form an electoral alliance before the vote to be in with any real chance of beating Fidesz.

Electoral reforms in 2012 saw the number of seats in Hungary's parliament reduced from 386 to 199. Directly-elected seats carry more weight in Hungary's new, slimmed-down parliament, while the number of MPs elected through party lists has fallen sharply. This has hit smaller left-wing parties particularly hard. Constituency boundaries have been changed in such a way that an Orbán candidate will always have an advantage. It's a case of classic gerrymandering. Orbán and his entourage know only too well they can't afford to lose

the election. If they lose, the crimes they've committed in government will land the lot of them in court.

Orbán's government has been plagued by corruption allegations. Won't these damage the Prime Minister himself in the long run?

In principle, yes, but in reality Hungarians' trust in politics in general has collapsed so badly, even the worst corruption scandals hardly cause a stir. It's just par for the course. Trust in democracy and the multiparty system in Hungary has fallen more dramatically since 1989 – when communism ended – than in Ukraine.

Right-wing populists in Western Europe claim to be fighting for the man or woman on the street. Do similar claims from Orbán explain his own popularity?

Yes, in part. But Orbán's supporters have traditionally come from the rural middle or upper-middle class – the very people who are currently benefitting from his policies. So we're not talking primarily about those who've been "left behind" economically. That said, the proportion of less affluent voters backing Fidesz is growing, not least because Orbán's offered this section of the electorate various sweeteners.

You see, in Hungary there is another, more significant aspect at work, and that's the way politicians use history and the Hungarian identity for their political goals. Hungarians suffer from a "victim complex", which is entirely understandable considering all the times Hungary's been occupied throughout its history.

It's left its mark. In the national anthem, we sing "Atoning sorrow hath weighed down / Sins of past and future days" – and that's just the first verse... Orbán understands how to manipulate this feeling of being surrounded by enemies. It is like he comes striding straight out of Hungary's history books into the politics of our nation, the politics of Christian Hungary. He projects heimself as the long-awaited saviour, come to deliver our country from the brink of downfall. But there doesn't seem to be a specific ideology beyond this historically charged narrative. In this respect, Orbán is quite different from autocrats like Erdogan or Putin. He runs Hungary more like a shady family business, in which democracy, transparency and the rule of law are a mere inconvenience.

What role does the migration crisis play in this context?

A dual role. One the one hand it is a symbol of the [cultural] threat to the country posed by Muslim migrants, whilst on the other it presents

an opportunity to "protect" the country from EU bureaucrats and institutions. So Orbán was able to link Brussels' criticism of Hungary's commitment to law and order to Hungary's "progressive" migration measures, shifting the blame. Hungary was attacked, he says, because it was open and honest about its desire to protect Eastern Europe. He contrasts this with the rest of the West – blind, embodied in Angela Merkel, who is often portrayed by Hungarian state media as a blinded ideologue impervious to reason, although Orbán's never actually denounced her directly.

How helpful is pressure from the EU? Is it really just strengthening Orbán's hand?

No, pressure from Brussels and other EU countries is extremely important. Criticism from abroad builds a sense of self-confidence and encourages critical citizens not to give up on the fight against authoritarianism. Sure, Hungary is not North Korea. If you want to go and stand on a street corner and yell invectives at the Prime Minister at the top of your voice, no one's going to bundle you into a van. Not yet at least. But we are seeing, for instance, a clear inclination [on the part of the government] to restrict press freedoms. The government doesn't explicitly censor material, but it has introduced guidelines allowing adverts to be withdrawn [from publications it doesn't agree with]. It's an economic weapon which poses a real threat to a press already in crisis.

So how can EU make sure its pressure brings results?

Very easily. The only thing Orbán and Hungary's political elite care about is EU funding. In practice, Brussels is actually financing the entire Orbán machine. If you want to know who's in the Prime Minister's good books at the moment, just look at the register of EU tenders allocated to Hungary. The further up the list and the bigger the amount, the higher the regard Orbán has for the CEO of that company. Any move on the EU's part that alters the flow of money to Budapest will have an impact.



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