

Orban's anti-liberal manifesto

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On 26 July at the open summer university in Baile Tusnad, in the Romanian region of Transylvania, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban gave a speech about his vision of a state in the modern world. He declared that Hungary would move away from the system of liberal democracy which he believes to constitute an obstacle to economic success. Orban's speech heralds a further shift for Hungary away from EU democratic standards and further tensions in the country's relations with Western countries and its neighbours – particularly Romania – where the statements about building the 'nation's unity' beyond the existing state borders are provoking controversy due to large Hungarian minorities living in these countries.

The twilight of liberal democracy

The main point of Orban's speech is that the system of liberal democracy which functioned in Hungary in 1990-2010 failed because it was not able to compel the government to work in the national interest, it did not take into account the fact that Hungarians living outside the state's borders belonged to the nation, did not protect the nation's property and did not save the country and its households from debt. The Hungarian prime minister stated that the world had undergone a substantial change following the 2008 financial crisis and compared its significance to the end of the World Wars and the collapse of communism. According to Orban, in the era that is now dawning the states which are successful are not liberal democracies or democracies at all. He mentioned Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey as examples to illustrate his point.

Orban believes that the key is to find a way to structure a state's organisation which would enable it to be successful at competing globally. Hungary should find its own path and create a 'society based on work' while breaking away from the dogmas and ideologies of Western Europe. According to Orban, a liberal state is not guided by the principle of justice but in fact safeguards the interests of the rich and does not take into consideration the needs of the national community which also encompasses individuals and households who are economically weaker. In Orban's view, democracy does not have to be liberal and a new system which respects Christian values, freedom and human rights is compatible with EU membership.

He went on to express his appreciation for the role of the Hungarian minorities living in the neighbouring states played in keeping Fidesz in power, stating that it won a two-thirds majority of seats in parliament due to the votes of Hungarians living abroad. He also mentioned the disagreement with the Norwegian government over the funding of non-

governmental organisations. He claimed that an NGO should have its own, domestic financial resources and that activists who use foreign sources of funding are 'paid political activists', instrumental in exerting external pressure on Hungarian politics. He deemed it was well-founded to set up a parliamentary commission to monitor and unmask foreign influences.

The internal political context

The theses championed by the Hungarian prime minister are rather ideological guidelines and do not specify changes to be made in the state. It is worth remembering that Mr Orban has used strong rhetoric in front of a larger audience many times in previous years and then, in other circumstances, he has softened his position. Nevertheless, Orban's manifesto sets the course of action for his political camp. It may be inferred from this speech that Orban approves of the stance which challenges the political standards dominant in the West and diminishes the role of the EU as the community and which also realises Hungarian national interests.

Many of the measures undertaken by Fidesz under its previous term (2010-2014) have been criticised by the European Parliament, the Venice Commission (the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional issues) and the OSCE which levelled Orban with weakening democratic mechanisms, restricting the independence of the media and blurring the boundary between the party and the state. So far the Hungarian government has defended its controversial moves by indicating that democratic standards are used instrumentally by its adversaries (Liberals and the Left) and it has been inclined to make tactical corrections to its actions. Orban's speech and the measures taken by the Hungarian government immediately following the elections in April (including imposing a progressive tax on advertisements, which would have more impact on the media that are critical of the government, and an attempt to freeze funding for organisations monitoring actions of state organs) indicate that further action should be expected in the upcoming term in office which will lead to strengthening the domination of Fidesz and moving away from Western European democratic standards.

In this speech, which shifted the focus of the contention over issues related to the political system and ideology towards challenging the very principles of liberal democracy, Orban may have found a way to prevent the erosion of the cohesion of his political camp. After having defeated the left and extreme right in the election to again secure a two-thirds majority in parliament, the party does not have strong opponents or a clear political agenda. The majority of Fidesz' demands have been met (including the amendment to the constitution and electoral system, granting citizenship to Hungarians living abroad, a flat tax rate) and the prime minister has not presented his manifesto for the next term (this is the first time this has happened since 1990) and has only talked about continuation. Following the election, within the party and its business base the internal battle for ascendancy has intensified. Leading politicians from the ruling party are becoming involved in a struggle for control of particular areas of the state's activity. Certain Fidesz politicians have begun to criticise the government and a series of critical articles have been published in media outlets which have previously been favourable to the government. This is most likely linked to attempts to weaken the influences of Lajos Simicska, Fidesz' former treasurer, who has

emerged as the leading businessman in party circles in recent years. Orban's ideological speech may be interpreted as an attempt to consolidate his political camp.

Reaction from abroad

Orban's speech appears to throw down the gauntlet to the European institutions and Hungary's EU partners. Although in his previous speeches the Hungarian prime minister criticised the Western countries and their ways of dealing with the economic crisis, this is the first time he has so openly challenged the political and economic model functioning in the EU. Orban's speech will probably contribute to entrenching Hungary's isolation in the EU and to further cooling the country's relations with Western European states and the US. The new European Commission led by Jean-Claude Juncker may respond to Orban's statements and actions in a tougher manner than the previous leadership. Orban was opposed to Juncker's candidacy and he might use this fact to play down his criticism of the European Commission by presenting it as having been motivated by personal reasons. On the other hand, mentioning Russia among the states which are a source of inspiration for Hungary in the situation of tensions between Russia and the EU over Russia's interference in Ukraine, Hungary's largest neighbour, is negatively received in the remaining EU states and in Ukraine.

In Baile Tusnad Orban emphasised that the fragility of the present international order should be treated as a challenge but also an opportunity for the whole Hungarian community in the Carpathian Basin. Rhetoric of this type sparks fears in Romania and other countries bordering Hungary and inhabited by large Hungarian minorities. The head of the Romanian counterintelligence (SRI) George Maior announced that the task of his services was to prevent the Hungarian demands from being put into action in Romania. In the capitals of the neighbouring countries there is however the awareness that Orban's influence on the Hungarian minority is limited. Orban's speech provoked mixed feelings among Romanian Hungarians. Leaders of their major political party took no part in the meeting. Certain opinions have been heard indicating that the criticism of foreign funding of non-governmental organisations may backfire on minority organisations in Romania, supported by Hungary. The majority of Slovak Hungarians support the leaders who openly criticise Orban's policy with regard to his compatriots abroad.

The reception in society

In Hungarian society there is a widespread sense of disappointment with the political transformation and the substantially slower dynamics of economic development after 1990, particularly against the backdrop of other Visegrad Group states which is the scale Hungarians usually use to measure their country's performance. However, the attachment to democratic values and the conviction that Hungary is rooted in Europe is strong in Hungarian society. Before Hungary joined the Euro-Atlantic structures the support for the country's membership in NATO and the EU exceeded 80% (in referendums in 1997 and 2003 respectively). Society's frustration grew worse due to the incompetent and sleaze-ridden rule of the left in 2002-2010 as well as the financial crisis (this hit Hungary badly; it has been struggling with the highest levels of public and private debt in the region). Orban's promise

of fixing the country paved the way for him to come to power and ensured a landslide victory in the next two elections. The proposal to move away from the model of Western democracy and to look for political models among such countries as Russia, Turkey and China is attractive for a section of the right-wing electorate but may be difficult to accept for a huge part of society and in the future may constitute a burden for Orban as it provides serious arguments to his opponents.

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