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Hungary's Viktor Orban Walks in Putin's Footsteps

By Casey Michel

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The wind is "blowing from the East." That's how Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban has described the recent swirl of Russian precedent and influence, the storm of ethnic chauvinism and anti-Brussels sentiment that begins in Moscow and whips low across the Ukrainian plains.

This storm is currently sweeping across Donetsk, and if Orban has his way, it's heading directly toward the EU. How the EU will handle this rapidly approaching reality remains anyone's guess.

Hungary's Viktor Orban
channels Putin's rightist,
ethnic-based rhetoric.

Orban last month called for the end of the "liberal state." Six years after the economic recession battered Europe and four years after ascending to power, Orban claimed that the era

of the welfare state had come to a close. Hungary, he said, would not become an economic colony of Brussels, but would develop itself into a "workfare" state.

Likewise, Hungary should form itself into a buttress against all that horrific tolerance that the EU has seen fit to promote. Amoral allowances like abortion rights and protection for sexual minorities may be fine for other nations, but they are not for Orban.

It's time to "respect Christianity, freedom and human rights," as Orban says, and to crack down on NGOs that receive funding beyond Hungary's border. It's time for the rise of the "illiberal state."

If these parameters sound familiar, it's not surprising. Russia has enacted conservative legislation rooted in similar arguments, and indeed in his speech Orban cited Russia as an appropriate model for political development.

Hungary's democratic backslide has wrung more than a few hands over the past few years. Local media has become increasingly restricted, and opposition parties have repeatedly warned of electoral malpractice.

This latest speech from the president, as Human Rights Watch noted, was not necessarily unexpected. But it was still shocking.

After all, Hungary stands as a full member state of the European Union. It has now spent a decade as a member, having sloughed its communist, Soviet-dominated past. Budapest remains one of Eastern Europe's jewels, and Hungarians are as entrenched in European economic and defense groupings as any other nation. Hungary is, in a sense, a quintessential EU nation-state.

And that's what makes Orban's calls so disturbing. It's not simply that Orban has sought to curtail the powers and avenues of potential political adversaries. That would be understandable, although distinctly unfortunate.

What's frightening about Orban's policies is that he seems to be following Russia's precedent. Not only has Budapest seen itself fit to mirror the Kremlin's suppression of civil rights, but Orban has begun channeling the rightist, ethnic-based rhetoric that Putin has perfected.

Much as the Kremlin defended its annexation of Crimea by claiming that it was simply protecting ethnic Russian speakers, Orban has taken on the role of guarantor of the safety of Hungarian nationals, regardless of whether they are actually Hungarian citizens.

After the eruption of fighting in Ukraine, and as Russian nationalists began to craft the idea of a new, greater Russia, Orban wasted little time in calling for autonomy for ethnic Hungarians in southwest Ukraine. In fact, while formalizing his call for an "illiberal state" last month, Orban was speaking to an audience of ethnic Hungarians in Romania, some of whom have begun agitating for greater autonomy in Transylvania.

Just as the Kremlin's supporters envision a new Soviet Union, a century after the Austro-Hungarian Empire drew its last breath, fascist and nationalist groups within Hungary have begun clamoring for a greater Hungary, for an empire restored to the glory it once knew.

Whereas Putin has Alexander Dugin and his Eurasianists, who call for Russia to create a new empire in the East, in Hungary the openly anti-Semitic and extremist party Jobbik strongly influences Orban's policies. There's even a link between the two: When the Kremlin illegally annexed Crimea earlier this year, some Jobbik members voiced approval.

The internal dynamics within Hungary and Russia are distressingly similar. A populist, hard-right president has been painted as domestically centrist by the frothing, fascistic groups calling for territorial expansion and ethnic supremacy.

But where Russia has morphed into the EU's bete noire over the past few months, Hungary is fully ensconced within Europe's liberal structures. The EU's supranational structures were supposed to buttress the rights gained since the fall of communism.

Orban, however, has seen fit to challenge that assumption. And he's looking to Moscow as an example.

More than French concerns about defense industry profits, and more than British hopes of attracting Moscow's oligarch money, the situation currently unfolding in Hungary presents Russia's greatest challenge to the rights and protections achieved by the EU.

A decade ago, naysayers pegged Bulgaria as Moscow's "Trojan Horse" in the EU. Greece, Cyprus and Italy have also earned the title. But these detractors were only half-right. Moscow's precedent of autocratic intolerance, of ethnic-only borders, has in fact taken root in Budapest.

And Orban was only half-right, too, because there's something coming from the East. But it's not a wind. It's a virus. And with Orban's help, this virus has begun to infect the EU.

Casey Michel is a Bishkek-based journalist and a graduate student at Columbia University's Harriman Institute.

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