

Hungary's Victor Orbán's "Latest Dance"

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Viktor Orbán of Hungary is not to be hectored to. Arching with fury at the EU's September motion to sanction Hungary for bad behaviour under the Article 7 process, he was resolved to ratchet things up. The [motion](#), while getting 448 votes concerned about judicial independence, corruption, freedom of expression, academic freedom, the rights and migrants, amongst others did have 197 opponents. (48 abstained.) Spot, as it were, the east-west European divide.

There was a time when Hungary was [known](#) as the "merriest barracks in the socialist camp" dominated by more tempered form of "goulash communism". The merriment, not to mention any gastronomic softness, has long soured, substituted by a more patriotic, state-centred sludge. Protesters are now being given the treatment that would not have been unseemly in the times of the Cold War.

A week-and-a-half of protests against the overtime law passed by the Fidesz majority yielded the police forces fifty arrests. Orbán's ruling party could not see what the fuss was all about. The law in question [increases](#) the number of overtime hours employees can be made to work from 250 to 400, a calculation to be made after three years. Pity for those workers, given the exodus of Hungarian employees to western Europe.

Opposition members of Parliament keen to get more coverage from the state media on the protests have also been frogmarched out of the broadcaster's headquarters. In future, they can expect even less in the way of discussion, given the decree of December 5 exempting the Central European Press and Media Foundation from regulatory oversight. That particular conglomerate is the result of a merger of some 480 pro-government media outlets.

All strong men need hearty, well-rounded enemies, and the Viktor's latest efforts also feature a final decision on the subject of the Central European University. The university's presence in Budapest offers Orbán a target of lightning rod value, given its link to the wily financier George Soros and US-accredited courses run at the university that has his backing.

In April 2017, a bill was passed imposing a requirement on foreign-funded universities to have a home country campus, and in the capital. But negotiations between the CEU and the government stuttered and stalled, prompting a move to Vienna effective from September 2019. "CEU has been forced out," [lamented](#) the university's president and rector Michael Ignatieff. "This is unprecedented. A US institution has been driven out of a country that is a NATO ally. A European institution has been ousted from a member state of the EU."

The CEU-Orbán tussle illustrates the convoluted nature of central European politics and its association with US and European political forces. Fine for Ignatieff to complain about NATO

and EU ties being ignored, but the Hungarian leader is a creature of confusing plumage happy to make the necessary, if costly sacrifices.

The confusion was given added succour with the remark [made](#) by Hungarian State Secretary Zoltán Kovács that, “The Soros university is leaving but staying. It’s common knowledge that a significant number of its courses will still be held in Budapest.” The CEU’s warnings were “nothing more than a Soros-style political bluff, which does not merit the attention of the government.”

While he speaks of a common heritage to be defended against the door banging barbarians from the east, Orbán is also very much the self-proclaimed leader of its protection, something that gives him bullyboy status in such matters as immigration.

Eyeing the Trump administration across the pond on how it would respond to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, the Hungarian government followed suit and demonstrated cold indifference when the final draft was approved by all UN member states in July 2018. (In so doing, it also kept company with Israel, Austria, Poland, and Australia, all similarly reluctant to subscribe to its spirit.)

It says much that the GCM could cause such agitation, notwithstanding its non-binding nature. Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó [went so far](#) as to insist that, in exiting the adoption process related to the GCM, “the Global Compact is not binding with relation to Hungary.” Migration, he suggested, should not be organised but stopped. “Assistance must be taken to where the trouble is, and people in need must be given support to enable them to remain as close as possible to their homes, and return home at the earliest opportunity.”

It is convenient, more than anything, to assume that the Hungary that emerged from the Cold War thaw was somehow more liberal, hopeful for a caring state of mind open to consultation and deliberation. Authoritarianism was in retreat; the democrats could finally come out. More on all fours with reality, it always retained an authoritarian default position, one that makes an Orbán figure less incongruous than imagined.

The first post-communist government was more than accommodating to communists; subsequent political arrangements fed a more nationalist orientation. Orbán sold himself as the appropriate central force to deal with the lingering ailments of socialism while also curing the problems arising from the post-1989 transition. Now, he is proving what a certain type of European can do to that oft-misguided notion of “shared values”. Shared, yes, but by whom?

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