

## History won't look kindly on Orban-cheering conservatives

Dalibor Rohac

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As illustrated by Jeane Kirkpatrick's [essay](#) in Commentary, conservatives have been long pointing out the double standards that the political Left applies to autocracies that profess to embrace a socialist, anti-imperialist agenda.

Unfortunately, many conservatives have themselves fallen into a similar trap. Too many accept the conservative rhetoric of Hungary's strongman, Viktor Orbán, without realizing they are being taken for a ride.

Finally, a leader who stands up to George Soros, they say. First, the activities of the Soros-funded Open Society Foundations across Central and Eastern Europe are a fraction of what the Hungarian government invests into Hungarian irredentism in neighboring countries, including Ukraine, where Orbán's interference has played right into the hands of Vladimir Putin.

One need not agree with Soros' liberal politics to see that the efforts to "sweep out" his organizations have been deeply damaging. In particular, the de facto expulsion of the New York–incorporated Central European University from Budapest is a blow to America's soft power in the region.

Should we praise Orbán as a leader who stopped mass migration and is not afraid of Brussels? Perhaps, though Hungary's real problem is the opposite of immigration. Since 1990, the country's population has shrunk significantly, and about 600,000 Hungarians, most of them young and highly educated, now live in other EU countries. For all its anti-Brussels campaigning, the Hungarian government is quite happy to have essentially all of Hungary's public investment paid for by the EU, while allowing Fidesz-connected oligarchs to skim off a sizable chunk.

Take Lőrinc Mészáros, the mayor of Orbán's home village of Felcsút. A former gas engineer, he is now the second-richest man in Hungary, having made his fortune on EU-funded government contracts. When asked once to what he owed his success, he responded: "God, luck, and Viktor Orbán."

Graft is integral to Orbán's budding authoritarianism, which seeks to emulate the examples of Turkey and Russia, countries that Orbán mentioned in a 2014 speech as "stars of international analysts."

After coming to power in 2010, Orbán rewrote the electoral law and rushed a new constitution ("Fundamental Law") through parliament. The document was drafted by a small group within his party and was adopted exclusively by the votes of Fidesz. Since then, the Fundamental Law has

been amended seven times and the constitutional system has also been amended many times through the new institution of so-called “Cardinal Laws.”

In 2012-2013 alone, parliament passed 32 of such laws. A 2013 constitutional amendment stipulates, for example, that freedom of speech may not be exercised in a way that could violate the dignity of the “Hungarian nation.” Another amendment paved the way for reducing the retirement age for judges, removing the most senior 10% of the judiciary, including 20% of the Supreme Court judges and more than half the presidents of all appeals courts. That was declared illegal by both Hungary’s Constitutional Court and the EU’s Court of Justice. By the time those rulings were issued, most of the judges had already left office and could not return.

Last year, a new administrative court system was created to deal with a range of public law matters: police oversight, tax law, public procurement, local government, antitrust law, public protests, and election and media issues. The judges are appointed directly by the justice minister, who also makes decisions about their remuneration and promotions.

As U.S. senators, including Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Jim Risch, R-Idaho, write in their recent letter to President Trump, “press freedom has declined as advertisers have been strongly discouraged from placing ads in independent outlets and ownership has been consolidated under a foundation that is exempt from antitrust regulation.”

Since Orbán came to power, Hungary has dropped 14 places on the Heritage Foundation’s Index of Economic Freedom, with particularly alarming scores on measures of judicial effectiveness and government integrity. On the Human Freedom Index, published by the Cato Institute, Hungary took a plunge from 28th to 42nd place between 2010 and 2016 (the most recent year for which data is available).

If Hungary is not Russia or Turkey yet, its direction of travel is unmistakable. History will most certainly not look kindly at conservatives who are cheering it on.