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“Champion of illiberalism”

by Harold Meyerson

While Europe watches apprehensively and moves cautiously against the increasingly authoritarian regime of Vladimir Putin, it might also want to cast a cold eye at one of its own. Hungary — a member, with all the customary rights and privileges, of the European Union — has declared Putin’s Russia to be a more attractive political model than the liberal democracies of the West.

In a [speech in late July](#), Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán told his countrymen that the nations whose systems are “capable of making us competitive” in the global economy “are not Western, not liberal, not liberal democracies, maybe not even democracies.” Those countries, he continued, were Russia, China, Turkey and Singapore.

If Orbán’s conclusions sound alien to Western ears, some of his arguments are all too familiar. He cited as evidence of democratic dysfunction the political divisions and economic inequality in the United States. He accused the European Union of neglecting the interests of whites in favor of immigrants. Hopping merrily between leftist, rightist and centrist critiques of the political paralysis and economic chasms that characterize many Western nations, our own most particularly, Orbán concluded that the solution to these myriad malaises was illiberal nationalism.

Evidence of Orbán’s own illiberalism is not hard to come by. [Since taking office in 2010](#), he has reduced the independence [of Hungary’s courts](#) and cracked down on independent news outlets. He has endeavored to whip up a paranoid nationalism, raiding nongovernmental organizations that received [funds from Norway](#). (Even on the xenophobic right, Orbán’s attack on Norwegian imperialism is notable for its nuttiness.) Like Putin, Orbán espouses a nationalism that claims to represent his compatriots wherever they may be (he delivered his talk to an ethnic Hungarian audience in Romania) and that is specifically Christian. Where that leaves non-Christian Hungarians is a good question, particularly since Hungary has a rich [tradition of anti-Semitism](#) that [continues to the present day](#).

There’s nothing novel in Orbán’s arguments, even when sounded in a nation that’s been at least nominally affiliated with the West. During the 1930s, Americans and Europeans on both the left and right argued that the Depression made clear the inability of liberal democracies to address their nations’ needs and that the presumed successes of Soviet Russia and Mussolini’s Italy demonstrated the superiority of communism and fascism. Financial collapse — in both 1929 and

2008 — and its prolonged aftermath created climates in which authoritarian, nationalistic demagoguery could flourish.

As in the '30s, Orbán's bill of indictments gains credibility precisely because most Western nations seem largely incapable of arresting their economic woes. The one great exception in the '30s was the United States under Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, which created public works programs and enhanced employee rights, reinvigorating the economy and rebalancing it toward workers. The one great exception today is Germany, where law and custom blocked the financialization of its economy and gave workers a say in corporate management, thereby avoiding the massive offshoring of industry that enfeebled its Western counterparts and creating a robust and more egalitarian economy.

Putin's Western cheerleaders — not just Orbán but the nationalist parties of Europe — condemn the United States and Western Europe for their tolerance of immigrants and gays. But they've gained traction chiefly because of the economic stagnation that beleaguers the non-German West. Condemning Orbán, or France's Marine Le Pen, Britain's Nigel Farage or the tea party, is all well and good, but relegating these leaders and forces to the sewer from which they slithered requires more than just an affirmation of tolerance. It requires ambitious, affirmative policies to create more inclusive economies — raising wages, promoting domestic investment and rebalancing the governing structures of corporations. A growing anxiety and pessimism is evident in every major Western nation save, again, Germany. Unless the West can meet the challenges of the global economy as well as Germany can, the illiberalism that Orbán champions will only advance.

Europe has an even more immediate challenge as well. In his talk, Orbán asserted that there's nothing incompatible about illiberalism — which, based on his own actions, means suppressing an independent judiciary and civil society — and belonging to the E.U. Creating and observing democratic laws and norms, however, is a prerequisite for E.U. membership. Why shouldn't dismantling such laws and norms be grounds for expulsion? If Europe can't defend democracy within its own borders, what, exactly, is its purpose?

Harold Meyerson writes a weekly political column that appears on Thursdays and contributes to the PostPartisan blog.

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