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Putin, Erdogan and Orban: Band of Brothers?

By András Simonyi



Are President Vladimir Putin of Russia, newly elected President Recep Erdogan of Turkey and their little brother, Prime Minister (soon to be president?!) Viktor Orban of Hungary the new Band of Brothers?

They can proudly declare that they have created hybrid systems, illiberal regimes in their countries, with their structures of democracy castrated (my sincere apologies to the eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire) over the last few years.

Historically Russia, Turkey and indeed Hungary have been vacillating between the West and the East, between Charlemagne and Genghis Khan as their role model. Yet again they seem to be in their "Genghis" phase.

While one should be aware of the enormous differences among their leaders, there are some striking similarities. All three are talented politicians. They have all acquired a taste for lasting power and have decided to stay in the leading position of their countries for a very long time. Ideology, process and politics, formal democracy are for them mere tools in the service of achieving this goal.

No doubt, Putin, Erdogan and Orban all have an amazing sense of understanding of the soul (read: the fears) of their population. They are addressing the dreams of their people of past glories and grandeur, build their ideology on the "exceptionalism" of their nation [sorry America, you are not alone in this game]. They also build on nationalism and xenophobia, and fail to realize that it is exactly the crossbreeding of their diverse nationalities that have been a major source of strength through the centuries.

Their ambition is to be the leading force and perhaps the example in their respective regions (believe it or not, Orban included), seeing themselves as a source of inspiration for others. They build on the sentiments of abandonment by the West in the broader population. (Here we must admit: Viktor Orban is somewhat of a cuckoo's egg in this nest as he is the Prime Minister of a country that is a member of the European Union and which would be totally bankrupt without the 17 billion Euro assistance that was poured into the country during 10 years of membership.)

Their animosity towards the West is personal. It is driven by the fear of democracy, with its checks and balances, and with election systems that, despite all its faults, still makes political change possible.

Some of the reasons for their emergence is of our own making, which lie in our complacency. We took the victorious, unstoppable and continuing advances of democracy in the world for granted. The West was not empathetic to the sufferings and difficulties on the road of transition in Eastern Europe, failing to understand the threats posed by disappointment. Europe has not been generous to Turkey, whose membership in the EU should have been granted a long time ago, thus it let pro western elites down.

We need to be careful in drawing conclusions, however. Erdogan might come to his senses, and not aim for a 99 percent win five years from now. His victory is hardly overwhelming. The election results no doubt show strong signs of health in Turkish society. Hungarians are quietly building steam. Orban is overly complacent, a sure sign of the beginning of the end. Putin needed the invasion of a sovereign country to boost his popularity.

We must be clear in our message: no one should see the impotence of some leaders in the West as the downfall and the end of western democracies. The response to the malfunctioning, even serious crisis of liberal democracies is not illiberal "democracies" but better, more robust democracies. The response to weak western leadership should not be the acceptance of the model of autocratic leadership from authoritarian states, but good, solid, pragmatic and consensus based leadership of the rule of law. The response to a runaway press in a value crisis is not state control and censorship of the media, but the reestablishment of the moral standards of journalism. The answer to a debilitating inequality of the distribution of wealth in our societies is not the creation of a new class of robber barons and oligarchs, nor the stifling of competition, but a stronger oversight and transparency of economic and business transactions. Lasting answers to the challenges of the 21st Century lie in strong democratic institutions.

It is in our interest to hold up the experiences of the Nordic countries as the example to follow. Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland have all responded to the recent threats and challenges

with a call for more democracy, not less. More diversity, not less. More solidarity, not less. More open and more competitive economies, not isolation and autarchy.

The contagion of the illiberal model (recently openly praised by Viktor Orban in a public speech as the real alternative to the "failed liberal western system") is yet another wake up call for us to understand the realities of the world, which is a mess.

Surrender is no option. This *Band of Brothers* better get ready for rough times ahead. Democracies will strike back. With more democracy, not less.

Amb. András Simonyi is Managing Director of the Center for Transatlantic Relations, Johns Hopkins University.

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