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Eastern European attitudes

Orban the archetype

One man epitomizes hostile views in migrants widely held by his people

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HE ORDERED a fence topped with razor-wire along the 175-kilometre border with Serbia. He cast Christian Europe as battling Muslim hordes for survival, stirring memories of ancient battles against Ottoman invaders and shattering political taboos. Viktor Orban, Hungary's prime minister, is a pugnacious opponent of immigration. His stance is shared not only by many of his people but also by plenty in other eastern European countries. Whereas 96% of Germans approve in principle of taking in refugees (and 59% support taking in more now), 71% of Czechs are against taking any. How to explain this discrepancy?

Throughout history Hungarians and their neighbours have benefited mightily from migration and the charity of others. The second world war, the Russian invasions of Hungary in 1956 and

Czechoslovakia in 1968, Poland's tortured 20th century—all have produced waves of refugees. Hungary has a tradition of welcoming strangers. Indeed, the Magyars themselves are comparatively recent arrivals in Europe, having come from the Urals just over a millennium ago. St Stephen, Hungary's first Christian king, advised his son, St Emeric, in 1036 to "make the strangers welcome in this land, let them keep their languages and customs, for weak and fragile is the realm which is based on a single language or a single set of customs."

Mr Orban's personal journey is a good starting point for understanding how things have changed. He shot to fame in June 1989 after speaking in front of 250,000 at the reburial of Imre Nagy, the leader of Hungary's failed 1956 revolution. A founder of the Alliance of Young Democrats, or Fidesz in Hungarian, he demanded that the Russians depart. Within months the communist government folded.

But like his countrymen, Mr Orban found operating in freedom a tougher task than expected. Competition became stiffer. He groped his way ahead in elections, won power in 1998 but lost it again, and was in the wilderness for eight years from 2002 until finally tightening his grip on power by embracing semi-authoritarian tactics. Former allies were cast aside. Foes fared worse. Success came from strength rather than co-operation, he surmised.

Many of his countrymen learnt a similar lesson. A quarter-century after tearing down the Iron Curtain they still feel like second-class citizens in Europe and if anything expect to receive aid rather than give it. Unlike their prime minister, who is fluent in English, two out of three Hungarians cannot speak a foreign language. Contact with different races is minimal across the region. Poland is 98% white and 94% Catholic. Many social spheres remain deeply insular and conservative.

Mr Orban, born in 1963, may now move in elevated circles but he comes from the same stock. He grew up in a village outside Budapest. Every summer he worked on a collective farm. Suspicion was everywhere under communist rule. Politics was impossible to discuss outside trusted company. "People did not gather because that could be dangerous," he says. "Family was the only thing that could defend you from the outside world." Sealed off behind the Iron Curtain, life remained mostly unchanged for decades. The great social debates in the postwar West—feminism, anti-racism, gay rights, the end of deference to authority—went pretty much unnoticed, and still mystify supporters of Mr Orban.

His worldview was shaped, he says, by an Hungarian epic called "Miklos Toldi", describing a 14th century nobleman who protects women and children. "There is no shame in being strong and successful and we should not pretend that we are all equal," he says.

Mr Orban's politics is based on such beliefs, says Gyorgy Schopflin, an ally and Fidesz member of the European parliament. The prime minister wants a Europe where Christian and national traditions—which he believes are under threat—are taken seriously. The assumption in the West that post-communist societies would seamlessly absorb Western liberal mores on immigration and multiculturalism was profoundly wrong, according to Mr Schopflin. "These countries are still defining their identities," he says. "They don't want to adopt the Western approach."

In a region with recent memories of being ruled from Moscow, sovereignty remains a powerful rallying point. Talk of compulsory quotas for accepting asylum-seekers raises hackles. Yet despite such sentiments as well as Mr Orban's hard line, Hungary is still a society in flux. The tens of thousands of refugees pouring through the country have triggered the largest volunteer response since the end of communism. Some citizens drive out to the roads where migrants tramp towards Austria and hand out food. Others join well-organised rotas at the main train stations, distributing food, clothes and water, running ad-hoc nurseries, taking the sick to hospital or even holding concerts.

Ferenc Gyurcsany, a former prime minister, hosted several refugees in his home, as a growing number of Hungarians are doing. Mr Orban says he does not rule out hosting a refugee family himself, telling a German newspaper that he would consider it as long as others did not "take it as an encouragement" to come to Europe.

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