

Backlash in Budapest

Hungary becomes the latest site of protests in Europe.

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Vice-chairperson of Momentum party Anna Donath holds up a smoke grenade during an anti-government protest in the downtown of Budapest, Dec. 16. PHOTO: BALAZS MOHAI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hungary has moved in an anti-democratic direction since Viktor Orbán returned to power in 2010. But the protests in Budapest in recent days are a reminder that he hasn't dragged all of his countrymen along with his program.

The demonstrations began Wednesday after the National Assembly, where Mr. Orbán's Fidesz Party has a two-thirds majority, passed labor legislation that critics call the "slave law." It lets businesses ask employees to work up to 400 overtime hours annually, up from 250. The legislation also gives employers more time to settle overtime payments.

Hungary isn't welcoming to immigrants, many of its most-qualified workers leave for better-paying work elsewhere in Europe, and its roughly 1.5 births per woman is one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. All of this has led to a severe labor shortage, and liberalizing overtime laws is a good economic idea. But the measure is opposed even by nearly two-thirds of Mr. Orban's supporters.

The Assembly also created new administrative courts to handle government matters like taxes and elections. The government says the courts will be independent, but Mr. Orban's Justice Minister oversees them.

Freezing temperatures haven't been enough to deter thousands of Hungarians from marching against these measures. They see a threat to their democracy, especially given Mr. Orban's bad record on press freedom and the rule of law. Mr. Orban effectively has forced Central European University, an American institution founded by financier George Soros, to leave the country by next year. The ruling party has also dealt harshly with media critics while overseeing free but unfair elections.

Like the Yellow Vest protests in France, the demonstrations in Budapest started over a particular policy. But they've unified a disparate opposition and become a broader critique of Mr. Orban's heavy-handed rule. Some protesters have turned violent and thrown smoke grenades. Security forces retaliated with tear gas, but the government acknowledges lawful demonstrators have a right to assemble.

Mr. Orban isn't bending on the policies. His bet may be that he can ride out the protesters the way he has objections from the European Union to his limits on press freedom. The protests are a signal that Hungary's voters don't want their country to follow the authoritarian path of Vladimir Putin's Russia.