

Hungary, Canary in the Illiberal Coal Mine

An alarming rise in anti-Semitism and attacks on press and academic freedom.

By William A. Galston Dec. 18, 2018 7:33 p.m. ET

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/hungary-canary-in-the-illiberal-coal-mine-11545179625>



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán delivers a speech in Budapest, Oct. 23. PHOTO: BERNADETT SZABO/REUTERS

With a declining population of 9.7 million, Hungary makes up less than 2% of the European Union. But under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Hungary punches above its weight. Mr. Orbán's staunch opposition to admitting more than a million refugees into Europe in 2015 thwarted German Chancellor Angela Merkel's plan to distribute them throughout the EU, and his program of what he calls "illiberal

democracy” has inspired other Central European leaders, including in Poland, to follow suit. Events in Hungary are often leading indicators of developments elsewhere.

Hungarian democracy had another bad year in 2018. More than 400 private news outlets have been brought under the control of a holding company run by close allies of Mr. Orbán, including his personal lawyer and a lawmaker from his party, Fidesz. While proponents defend the move as promoting “balance” in Hungarian media, critics say it amounts to a thinly veiled return to a communist-style centralized state-media system. Adding credibility to the objections, Mr. Orbán issued a decree exempting the holding company from scrutiny by the agency charged with protecting competition against excessive concentration. Meanwhile, one of the two remaining major opposition newspapers shut down after the government ceased advertising in it.

In another move to circumvent checks on his power, Mr. Orbán created a parallel court system with jurisdiction over “public administration,” including electoral law, political protests and public corruption. Mr. Orbán’s justice minister will control the selection and promotion of the judges in this system, making it unlikely that challenges to the integrity of future elections will receive an impartial hearing.

After years of mounting pressure, the Orbán government forced the Central European University, founded by George Soros, to shut down its Budapest campus. This was a defeat for academic freedom and a humiliation for American diplomacy.

Despite having pledged to protect CEU during his confirmation hearings, U.S. Ambassador David Cornstein did nothing to influence the outcome. Early in his tenure, the U.S. Embassy summarized the view he had expressed in an interview with a prominent Jewish publication: “The Ambassador noted that he has heard about concerns regarding democratic backsliding in Hungary . . . but so far has not experienced instances of that.” When the university’s shutdown was imminent, Mr. Cornstein blamed Mr. Soros rather than Mr. Orbán, calling CEU a “guest”: “The university is in another country. It would pay to work with the government.” Besides, he explained, the closure “doesn’t have anything to do with academic freedom.” Few outside Mr. Orbán’s entourage agreed with this assessment.

The consolidation of the Orbán regime has coincided with a rising tide of anti-Semitic episodes. During this year's re-election campaign, Mr. Orbán resorted to anti-Semitic rhetoric not heard in European politics since World War II.

Just last week, former State Department official Ira Forman reports, the cover of a business magazine closely linked to the government featured a photo-illustration of Andras Heisler, head of the Federation of Hungarian Jewish Communities, festooned in a cloud of paper money, including a bank note that appeared to protrude from his forehead. The federation condemned the cover, saying that it "revives centuries-old stereotypes against our community."

Mr. Orbán refused to condemn the cover, claiming that such criticism would amount to an attack on freedom of the press. This stance is part of a systematic strategy he has adopted to take political advantage of anti-Jewish sentiments.

Mr. Orbán has also appointed Maria Schmidt, the magazine's former owner, as head of a new Holocaust museum designed to depict Hungary's role in a more favorable light than does the existing museum, which acknowledges the Hungarian state's collaboration in deporting more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz.

Ms. Schmidt has defended anti-Semitic figures, past and present. She has criticized the Nuremberg war-crime trials. She has said the extermination of the Jews represented a marginal point of view not among the Nazis' principal war aims. When the Hungarian Jewish community criticized her, she responded that "some groups would like to consider their ancestors' tragic fate an inheritable and advantageous privilege." In so doing, she declared menacingly, "they exclude themselves from our national community."

In the face of mounting evidence that Hungary's government is both undemocratic and illiberal, the Trump administration has stood mute. When the U.S. refuses to defend its principles, it gives a green light to autocrats everywhere. In this respect, too, Hungary is a leading indicator.

Appeared in the December 19, 2018, print edition.