

Orban: Wheel of Misfortune

April 2022

There was a brief moment when it looked as if Viktor Orban had changed. As the European Union voted to impose wide-ranging sanctions on Russia in a response to their invasion of Ukraine, Hungary's representative – so often the EU outlier in his autocratic nature and his naked approval towards, and support of, Vladimir Putin – indicated that he would not veto the action taken. Had the bringing of war to Europe, and the prospect of an even costlier war to come, finally tamed Orban's nationalist and rightwing fervour? Sadly, as subsequent events showed, not a bit of it.



Even in the face of an unprovoked and increasingly vicious war being fought on his doorstep, Orban was unable to fully join in the condemnation of Putin, indicating that Hungary would prevent the implementation of any sanctions specifically related to Russian oil and gas supplies on the basis that the Hungarian people should not suffer as a result of something beyond their control. At the time, this was passed off with gratitude that Orban was at least not standing in the way of the EU taking some action. But it is plain to see that Orban has never changed his position at all, just manipulated it to his advantage. A list of the self-described 'opponents' he had to face in the recent election runs as follows: the global media, the EU itself and Ukrainian president Zelenskiy. Already a man not in need of any help to either win an election or demonstrate control, with his vote-rigging, media suppression and cronyism all as strong as ever, Orban has through this PR exercise managed to present himself as being both nominally in opposition to Putin, while ensuring that Hungary remains in the good graces of Russia – and it is no small matter that the Russian president has already spoken in glowing terms of Orban's re-election.

The truth is that Hungary and the EU have been on diverging paths for some time – Orban's increasing authoritarianism at odds with the EU's democratic mandate, and his rampant suppression of anything he does not like from homosexuality to a free press a fundamental challenge to European openness. In fact, it is no small way due to Orban that the EU now decides funding based on a metric that measures respect for democratic and legal norms. In this respect, we should not have expected a war to make him change, not least when he can continue to have 'the best of both worlds' by gaining all the benefits conferred by being a member of the European Union, while sucking up to Putin at every opportunity.

However, there are two problems arising. Firstly, the question of whether Hungary will suffer from some degree of business shyness and moral repugnance as a result of its continuing ties with Russia. While exercising political opprobrium against Hungary is difficult because of the shield of EU membership, the Union is already implementing some measure of high-level financial punishments (as described above) and this could be followed by businesses choosing to limit their existing exposure to the Hungarian market as much as possible in riposte to Orban's slavish devotion to Putin, or not considering it for any further ventures. This will of course all be grist to Orban's mill that insists he is fighting a one-man battle against the perfidious forces of the left, but as with the consequences of the Russian sanctions, the right thing must be done despite the consequences.

The other line that remains not yet played out is how Orban may now have damaged his other intra-European relations. For some time now Poland and Hungary have been partners in what has been termed an 'illiberal alliance', pushing the EU's frontiers of tolerance as to domestic freedoms and independence and actually challenging in court the assertion that funding was dependant on adhering to democratic norms (a battle they lost). Hungary's justice minister has accused the EU of abusing its power (to shut down illegitimate judicial chambers) and Poland's deputy minister has already started the faint drumbeat of mythologising some supposedly lost 'sovereignty', and we all know how that song ends. But Poland has been one of the EU's loudest voices in the anti-Putin chorus, consistently pushing for further and greater action (even if the business with the planes petered out curiously), and Orban was a notable absence from the Central European grouping of leaders who visited Zelensky last month. Given that the Ukraine war is going to dominate all political discourse for the foreseeable future, Orban might find himself isolated even further through nobody's fault but his own.

And it is difficult to see how that is a bad thing. One of the few bright lights in the war has been the bravery of the Ukrainian people in standing up to modern fascism and the reiteration that the 'European ideals' of freedom and justice still hold true. In light of this, a man who actually fulfilled the Trumpian promise to 'build the wall' need not concern the forward-thinking. When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.

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