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Hungary's prime minister

Orban the Unstoppable

Criticised abroad, Viktor Orban is going from strength to strength at home

BUDAPEST



FLUSH with cash from the European Union and backed by a phalanx of ultra-loyalist MPs, Viktor Orban, Hungary's prime minister, seems unstoppable. Brushing aside concerns about democracy, the European Commission last month signed a €21.9 billion (\$28.2 billion) partnership agreement. The money will arrive between 2014 and 2020 to boost competitiveness and growth. Hungary will also get €3.45 billion for rural development and €39m for fisheries. GDP rose in the second quarter at an annual rate of 3.9%. Industrial output is up 11.3%. Tourism revenue has risen by more than 10% year-on-year.

Next month's local elections will consolidate Mr Orban's grip on power. The once mighty left has splintered into three parties, none of which poses a serious challenge to his ruling right-wing Fidesz party. Instead, disillusioned Fidesz supporters are moving farther right. Polls show Jobbik, a nationalist party, neck-and-neck with the Socialists. Attila Juhasz at Political Capital, a

think-tank, reckons that Jobbik could win up to 30 mayoralities in small towns and villages. The party might even take Miskolc, a big city in the east.

Budapest highlights the opposition's malaise. The left-wing candidate, Ferenc Falus, a former chief medical officer, is a decent sort but has no chance. An amateurish video has provoked derision. It shows him standing in socks and sandals, drenched, together with a horse and a weeping grandson after issuing an ice-bucket challenge to Istvan Tarlos, the incumbent. Even 444.hu, a website scathingly critical of the Orban government, called on Mr Falus to give up. A poll by Nezopont, an institute close to Fidesz, shows Mr Tarlos with 50% of the vote. Had the left united around Lajos Bokros, a former finance minister, it might have had more chance: Mr Bokros gets 14% in the poll whereas Mr Falus trails with 11%.

Mr Orban swept to power with a two-thirds majority in April 2010, a feat repeated four years later, in part thanks to Fidesz-friendly adjustments of campaign rules and biased media coverage, according to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Mr Orban's centralisation of power has drawn protests from the European Union, America's State Department and human-rights groups. Corruption has worsened, says Transparency International, a watchdog. More than a third of the population live at or below the poverty line. The situation of the Roma, the largest minority in the country, remains as parlous as ever. In Miskolc a slum-clearance programme has made many homeless.

Mr Orban outlined his longer-term vision in a much-noted speech on July 26th in Baile Tusnade, in neighbouring Romania. Hungary, he explained, would become an "illiberal state". Speaking admiringly of Russia, China and Turkey, he said Hungary would remain a democracy, and not reject liberal principles such as freedom of speech, but would be based on "a different, special, national approach". The approach, say critics, was evident earlier this month when police raided the Budapest office of Okotars, an NGO that manages funds from Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein, and confiscated computers and documents for alleged financial mismanagement. Okotars strongly denies the charge. The police raid was "completely unacceptable", thundered Vidar Helgesen, Norway's minister for Europe.

The show of force has sent shivers through Hungary's non-profit sector. The EU had no comment, as the NGOs are funded by Norway. But Kate Byrnes, the deputy chief of America's OSCE mission, demanded that Hungary allow NGOs to operate without "further harassment, interference or intimidation", repeating earlier protests.

Whereas most EU leaders have scaled down their criticism of Mr Orban's illiberal ways, the Americans are stepping theirs up. Bill Clinton, a former American president, told a talk-show host on the Daily Show, a current-affairs programme, that Mr Orban was an admirer of "authoritarian capitalism" and never wanted to leave power. "Usually those guys just want to stay forever and make money," Mr Clinton added. A few days later, Barack Obama, America's president, took Hungary to task in a speech at the Clinton foundation, noting that "from Hungary to Egypt, endless regulations and overt intimidation increasingly target civil society".

The Hungarian foreign office insisted that Mr Obama's remarks "lack any factual basis". Around 80,000 NGOs are operating in Hungary and they receive more than 200 billion forints (\$825m)

in state funds, according to Zoltan Kovacs, a spokesman. The government has no intention of hindering their activities, but all NGOs are subject to Hungarian law, no matter where their funds come from.

Against this backdrop Tibor Navracsics, a former justice minister and deputy prime minister, can expect a bumpy ride next week at his hearing at the European Parliament. Mr Navracsics, who was Mr Orbán's right-hand man in his radical reforms since Fidesz came to power four years ago, has been designated as the EU's education commissioner. Education has been centralised in Hungary in recent years. Its universities were once renowned for producing distinguished scientists and thinkers, but are now notably absent in the top university-rankings. The opposition refers to Mr Navracsics as Mr Orbán's "butler". His close relationship with his master may be a liability during his tenure in Brussels

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