

Viktor Orbán's illiberal intellectual patronage system

The trick to solving the Rubik's cube, a dastardly Hungarian toy, is to manipulate the structure by applying spin in the appropriate spots until everything settles into place. It turns out kids in Budapest are not the only deft manipulators and spinners in Hungary. Since reclaiming the prime minister's job in 2010, Viktor Orbán has methodically twisted the country's media and intellectual life into perfect alignment with his Fidesz party. (The trick has worked so well that it would be unwise to bet against Mr Orbán's lot prevailing in elections on April 12th, though they are behind in the polls.) But reshaping the ideological order in a country of 10m people is small fry for someone of Mr Orbán's self-appointed global stature, like solving a single face of the Rubik's contraption. In recent years his "proudly illiberal" regime has exported its brand of conservative agitprop beyond its borders. Europeans be warned: the Budapest Megaphone is blaring at *you*.

This new illiberal industrial complex is as multifaceted as that wretched cube. In recent years a slew of websites, magazines, institutes, think-tanks, conferences and educational outfits have sprung up to influence the discourse not just in Hungary, but across the European Union. Brussels used to be a place of technocratic haggling. Now it is a battlefield for conservative culture warriors keen to spread the Orbánite word (think: more patriotism and stay-at-home mums, fewer migrants and green rules). Besides a penchant for nativist rhetoric, members of this reactionary international have two things in common: funding from Hungary, and an unerring knack for saying nice things about Hungary's current leadership. This may be coincidence. One suspects it isn't. It is certainly convenient for America's MAGA right to have a European emissary at hand to help out with the Brussels-bashing.

It is possible these days to live in an intellectual bubble crafted by the finest minds Budapest apparatchiks can afford. One might start the day by reading Brussels Signal, a website with Hungarian ties that celebrates whenever European populists gain ground

(quite often, recently). A related media venture, Remix News, features stories about crimes committed by migrants in Europe; another, the *European Conservative*, has weightier fare on policy matters. The afternoon can be spent reading the latest report from MCC Brussels, a think-tank, on how woke globalists are leading Europe to ruin. To discuss all this in person one can head to “Hungary House” in Brussels, a palatial venue that opened in 2024 and soon hosted a book launch for Jordan Bardella, a French ally of Fidesz. Conferences including conservative thinkers—often featuring Mr Orban, who else?—dot the calendar.

An unwitting consumer of this sort of fare may not realise the Hungarian regime is the driving force behind its own applause. Brussels Signal, which neither carries advertising nor sells subscriptions, is the creation of a former Fidesz political adviser. Many of the conferences and reviews promoting the Hungarian conservative credo are discreetly funded by quasi-state entities disbursing tens of millions of dollars a year. MCC Brussels, despite being only four years old, is among the best-funded think-tanks in Brussels, thanks to a generous stipend from the Mathias Corvinus Collegium, a research centre in Budapest. In practice it is an arm of the Orbanista establishment: it was endowed with over \$1bn in assets in 2020, including lucrative stakes in Hungary’s national oil company, and is chaired by a close aide of Mr Orban.

The various bits of the Budapest Megaphone claim to work independently of each other. Some propound a sort of Thatcherite line (disgruntled Brexiteers feature prominently); others are more squarely church-and-family types. Nonetheless the effect is of a conservative echo chamber, with one Hungarian-funded thinker extolling the virtues of another Hungarian-funded thinker (who will soon return the favour). Ties to America run deep. On March 21st the Trump-adoring “CPAC conference” will come to Budapest for the fifth time—indirectly paid for by Hungarian taxpayers.

What is the point of all this? Frank Furedi, the Hungarian-born boss of MCC Brussels, speaks of the need for an “alternative intelligentsia” to counter the prevailing liberal groupthink. Having lived under communist oppression, Hungarians are uniquely suited to see when ideological conformity becomes overbearing. In the hammer-and-sickle days before 1989 the ideological purity test involved proclaiming the dictatorship of

the proletariat. Now, the Orbanists say, Brussels types impose their belief in LGBT rights, funding Ukraine and so on with just as much oppressive aplomb.

Fair and balanced

Diversity of opinion is a welcome aim; even state-funded thinkers can make valid points. But part of the aim of the Budapest Megaphone is not to preach but to drown out. Core to its ranting is that Mr Orban is persecuted by the godless Eurocracy (which in recent years has withheld billions of euros of EU funds earmarked for Hungarians) because of his conservative, pro-family ways. That claim ignores the actual reason: EU types object to the systemic manner in which Fidesz has muzzled civil society, enriched family and friends, and hobbled the rule of law. Mr Orban's allies frame the conflict as "globalists v sovereigntists". "The EU v wreckers of democracy" is closer to the truth.

This unofficial propaganda ministry may be on its last legs—or just getting started. The opposition Tisza party, ahead in the polls, says it will throttle the Orbanite ideological network should it win. But in a twist that would delight Rubik's aficionados, a new backer may be forthcoming. America's MAGA-fied State Department is keen to "cultivate resistance" in Europe. It is said to want to shower money on the kinds of mouthpieces that receive Hungarian largesse. Populists who bemoan the state meddling in people's lives will no doubt reconcile themselves to the irony.