



Orbán's Illiberal Experiment: the Real Danger for Europe This Year

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While most of the attention in Europe this year targets, [for good reasons](#), the upcoming elections in Germany and France, so far the impression is that the big 'revolution' of European far-right forces that many expected will not necessarily materialise. In fact, it seems that Vladimir Putin has [bet on the wrong horses](#) when openly supporting the far-right players in Europe – a move that can easily backfire. The Dutch election, as I had predicted, did not prove to be a ['game-changer'](#), with Geert Wilders gaining only 13 percent of the votes. In France, according to latest polls, Emanuel Macron could land a significant victory in the second round of the presidential election, and it looks like the German election will not bring a breakthrough for the far-right either. The Italian general election and the parliamentary election in Austria next year give more cause for worries about populists from outside the mainstream taking over the mainstream. But right now Europe seems to face a more immediate threat – from the most mainstream of the mainstream: a central European country whose governing party belongs to the most mainstream European party, the European People's Party, Hungary.

Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister, has started speeding up his steps to complete his ['illiberal'](#) system, as he labelled it back in 2014, in light of the upcoming 2018 election. His government made billionaire George Soros its archenemy. In a big, quick siege, Orbán's government wants to [chase away the Central European University](#) from Hungary, and at the same time, [pass a law](#), which would practically be the equivalent of the Russian regulation on foreign agents. This latter law would force NGOs in Hungary to reveal their international sources of finances and also, to tag themselves as foreign financed institutions in every case when they appear in the public.

Orbán's attacks are, step by step, following [Putin's cookbook](#). The Russian law on foreign agents was passed in 2012, and the European University in St Petersburg is [threatened to be closed](#) by the Russian authorities. The attacks against the CEU and the NGOs became more intense after [Putin's visit to Budapest](#) in the beginning of February – which is, most likely, not just a mere coincidence. The Hungarian government is becoming the extended hand of Vladimir Putin, that is right now takes a hit on the enemies of his regime.

The more criticism Orbán received for his plans to close the CEU from academics, politicians and diplomats, the quicker he railroaded the bill through. Orbán's strong confidence was based on three international players of which they hoped they would support his case. First and foremost: Vladimir Putin, Orbán's most important international ally. Putin's support is unquestionable – even if it would be more precise to talk about pressure and blackmail. Secondly, the Hungarian government [expected](#) that they would enjoy the support of the Trump administration for its illiberal adventures and especially for its attacks against George Soros's interests. It proved to be a serious miscalculation: both the Budapest Embassy of the US and the State Department were highly critical towards this move. Furthermore, the president of Central European University was received at a [higher diplomatic level in the United States](#) than the Hungarian foreign minister a few weeks ago. A representative of the State Department is coming to Hungary next week to express the US government's position in this issue.



But generally, it seems that the US-Hungarian relations will deteriorate even more as a result of this action.

Thirdly, Orbán had hoped that the European People's Party would back him up. After Orbán supported Donald Tusk to be re-elected as president of the Council, against Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, the candidate of the Polish government (his most important political ally) a few weeks ago, Orbán had high hopes that he secured his position in the group with this declaration of loyalty. On the EPP's congress in Malta last week, Joseph Daul, the president of the European People's Party declared, in line with these expectations that *'he would vouch for his friend Viktor Orbán'*.

But passing the education law in Hungary resulted in a big outrage on the European level – after which the European People's Party cannot remain silent. Manfred Weber tweeted six times about the Central European University in the last days, underlining that he will defend academic freedom 'at any price' and referring to his 'intense' discussions with Viktor Orbán on this issue. Some members of the European People's Party called for [expelling Fidesz](#). But even though we witness an EPP that is [angry](#) and threatens to give green light to Article 7, [Fidesz's votes are still important to them](#). Any further serious steps from the People's Party depend on the Commission's evaluation of the modification of the Hungarian education law.

But this time, the EPP's political 'pragmatism' is threatening the fundamentals of the European Union. Past examples have shown that the European People's Party can still put some pressure on Orbán to change its policies – for example, when Orbán abandoned his ideas in 2015 on the re-introduction of the death penalty immediately after the group leaders made perfectly clear: either Orbán abandons this idea or he leaves the group. [Some say](#) that expelling Fidesz from the EPP would be the best idea. I still think it would do much more harm than good. Instead, the EPP should put more pressure on Fidesz and should draw clear lines: change or leave – otherwise Fidesz will lose all its inhibitions and Orbán will continue his policies, only strengthening the party's enemies and rivals on the far-right.

The European Commission itself will not be able to change Orbán's position. After Orbán practically gave up re-building ties with the United States, it is up to the EPP if they let Orbán finish his project to Putinise Hungary. Orbán is organising a 'freedom fight' against 'Brussels' and building up an illiberal state with EU money. If a university can be closed and the Russia-style legal intimidation of the NGOs can be introduced, the European Union will lose any remnants of credibility as a group of countries that are committed to democratic values. In fact, it might as well cease to exist as a political community. And the biggest winner of this process will be Vladimir Putin, who might not be able to undermine European integrity by supporting far right forces – but he might be able to do it via Viktor Orbán's euro-destructive policies.