

The Logic of Hungary

by George Friedman - May 14, 2024

A couple of weeks ago, I wrote a piece about mass demonstrations in Budapest in which protesters expressed resentment against alleged financial corruption running rampant through the country – corruption they believed the government was involved in or at least indifferent to.

The protests were enormous, peaking at a reported 100,000 participants. There have been four or five more demonstrations since, some in mid-sized towns where the ruling party of Prime Minister Viktor Orban has strong support. I remember similarly large uprisings in other countries such as in France in 1968, when demonstrations, unable to be put down by security services, forced Charles de Gaulle from office. In Budapest, the protesters appeared to be anti-Orban, but police were generally trying to maintain the peace, rather than trying to forcibly remove them.

To me, it seemed as though Orban's control was slipping given that there was no evidence of his own resistance. I was wrong – something I am morally required to admit. My mistake was in failing to recognize the difference between Budapest 2024 and Paris 1968. It is not that the demonstrations were insufficient, nor that the matter is closed. In fact, this weekend there were more demonstrations in the provincial town of Debrecen.

The mistake I made was to take at face value that Orban was a “strongman” who operated a repressive regime that governed by intimidation. Authoritarians govern by power and fear, so any demonstration that could appear to confer weakness on the regime must be put down. In such a government, when demonstrations like this take place, the police try to crush them through direct action and mass arrests. Orban has made no such move. I doubt he is relaxed, but he has done everything possible to show citizens that they have the right to speak their minds en masse. He has taken the view that the issue will resolve itself. Strongmen would argue that Hungary is a civilized country. So far, then, neither the protesters nor the government have become violent.

Many in Europe and the United States who regard him as an authoritarian leader might have to reconsider. I've never viewed him as such, but I expected him, in the state of panic I believed he might be in, to act as one would in this situation. This does not mean that his policies must be praised. It does mean that they are not superficial. Demons exist, but demonizing someone with whom you disagree is as dangerous as genuine strongmen are. Orban's reluctance to use force is

partly due to the nature of his government and partly due to his desire to show that the European Union has misrepresented him – and that, importantly, he is correct to keep Hungary at a comfortable distance from the institution.

The European dimension is critical. Europeans held Orbán responsible for Hungary's opposition to European values, generally assuming that without him, Hungary would embrace European values. I watched what could be seen of the demonstrators in videos and saw people with signs condemning corruption; I did not see anyone demanding immigrant access to Hungary, homosexual rights and other Western European values. So if the demonstrators had toppled Orbán – indeed, even if that is something they had sought – it seems unlikely that they would have changed the trajectory of Hungarian policy.

I was wrong to think Orbán was losing his support. Others are wrong to see the demonstrations as a rejection of Orbán's principles.

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