

# What on earth is this ignorant nonsense being spread about Hungary?

A message for western Europe's hysterical media – Hungary knows what a dictator looks like, and Viktor Orbán is not one



[Tibor Fischer](#)  
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'Viktor Orbán's chief foes in the EU are all from the left.' Photograph: Sebastien Pirlet/Reuters

What, I wonder, would be the reaction if a Hungarian who had no English, who had never visited the country, were to write an editorial savaging the United Kingdom for not being a real democracy as it has no proper constitution, decrying that the head of state is the result of a coitus, not an election, and the little freedom of speech left is being destroyed by David Cameron through a royal charter (a *royal* charter, not even the fig leaf of a law, I mean how fascistic and anachronistic can you get?)

This editorial would probably go viral to universal hilarity. Yet it is precisely this level of ignorant nonsense and condescension that has been directed at Hungary over the past year. The word hysteria is much abused, but I can't come up with a more apt term to describe most of the media coverage regarding Hungary, particularly in Germany and France.

The focus of this turbulence is the current prime minister, Viktor Orbán. He won the last election with a landslide almost impossible in a democracy. The left (in Hungary the left really isn't the left, but the former communists who were as

Marxist as Al Capone) were completely broken and so they have gone abroad to create an utterly distorted picture of the country.

There's been a lot of noise about antisemitism and anti-Roma sentiment in Hungary. Yes, there's prejudice and poverty in Hungary as there is in every country. It's funny how no one outside of Hungary was concerned about these matters three years ago, when the former communists were in power, and there was just as many hook-nosed caricatures knocking about and Roma being stabbed.

Orbán, on the other hand, introduced a Holocaust memorial day, compulsory Holocaust education in schools and made Holocaust denial illegal (something I disagree with as I have this romantic attachment to freedom of speech). His party, Fidesz, has three Roma MPs, which is three more than the former communists had, and Lívia Járóka, the first Roma woman to serve as an MEP.

The attacks aren't about principles, but politics. Orbán's chief foes in the EU are all from the left (if Daniel Cohn-Bendit and some Belgians are against you, surely you're doing something right) which is ironic as one of the measures the left have been clamouring for in these times of austerity, a Robin Hood tax, is exactly what Orbán did, fleecing big business.

Changes to the constitution have provoked a furore. Are they good changes? Ask two constitutional lawyers in a room a question, you'll get three different opinions. Hungary has a system of parliamentary sovereignty, just like ours here in Britain, and if citizens don't like the changes, well, they can vote for the opposition and change things back.

Some in the Hungarian opposition have behaved shamefully. They have promoted a grotesque image of Hungary abroad. The writer György Konrád, one of the founders of the Free Democrats (SZDSZ), the party that was definitively wiped out in the last election, has thrown his toys out of the pram by talking of the end of democracy, when all he means is the end of his friends enjoying the excellent patisseries from the Hungarian parliament's buffet.

If there's one person who's earned the title of democrat it's Orbán. Just as democracy doesn't guarantee justice, happiness, peace or affluence, having a democrat in charge doesn't guarantee efficiency or good sense (even Orbán's supporters are bewildered by some of his actions and appointments). Orbán felt he wasn't dynamic enough in his first term in office in 1998, and his desire to smash the remnants of the communist system is now perhaps too precipitous. But he was voted into office and has the right to get things wrong.

My friends and relatives in Budapest (many of whom can't stand Orbán) are appalled by these smears and anti-Hungarian fury. Orbán's enemies are doing him a favour, I suspect. By pushing a line that is so absurdly removed from reality

they will convince voters who might not have given Orbán a second chance (because economically things aren't so great) to do so. A year or so down the road – when there aren't Jews hanging from lampposts or packs of journalists in dungeons – some on the left might feel a little awkward.

Most Hungarians know what it was to live in a dictatorship, some are old enough to have known both fascism and communism. No one wants to go back to that. No one. To suggest that some contentious or poorly considered legislation is the death of democracy is simply ridiculous and an insult to the nation.