

How to Encourage Illiberals: the Orbán-Merkel Meeting

31. July 2018 by [Péter Krekó](#)

‘A very strong Viktor Orbán meets with Angela Merkel’ and ‘Viktor Orbán is the model for German conservatives’ – these were only two headlines from the Hungarian pro-governmental media around the visit of Viktor Orbán to Germany beginning of July. The dominant narrative was: the triumphant, strong Viktor Orbán met with an increasingly weak German chancellor and Viktor Orbán dictated the terms and the content of the meeting. The Hungarian governmental media remained silent over disagreements in rule of law issues that the Chancellor referred to during the press conference and could focus on only one point of disagreement: migration - which is the favourite topic of the Hungarian government. The message is: Viktor Orbán is becoming the real leader of Europe and no other European leaders can politically afford rejecting him anymore since he represents the Zeitgeist.

While this interpretation might be overstretched, the meeting was a real diplomatic success for Viktor Orbán. And it came at the perfect moment for him. The bilateral meeting, of course, was planned for a long time, but it materialised only two weeks after the Hungarian parliament passed a legal and constitutional package which is deadly for democratic institutions. It contained the Stop Soros act, that helps to criminalise some Hungarian NGO's, sets up an administrative court system that undermines the legitimacy of the current judicial system in Hungary, claims that homelessness is illegal according to the constitution and puts restrictions on the freedom of assembly. At the same time, the government started a siege against the Hungarian academy of sciences in an attempt to reduce its independence by centralising its financial decisions.

These measures, which are diametrically opposed to European values, have now received their diplomatic legitimisation on high level. The idea of debate and engagement is based on the traditional German diplomatic philosophy: talking is always better than isolation, cooperation is always better than conflict. Even in the foreign ministry of Germany, led by the SPD, the discussions are about the lack of impact of diplomatic distance kept by Germany, and, consequently, the need for more dialogue in order to change Hungary's position.

But this approach only works with democrats, not with autocrats. This approach will not push Orbán towards more compromises in any of the three issues that are important to him and where we can see strong differences between the two governments. Orbán made this crystal clear in a recent [interview with Bild](#), where he said things like: ‘if I conducted a refugee policy like your chancellor, I would be chased away from power on that very day’, and ‘it will not be Merkel who decides who is going to live in Hungary.’

However, this is not just about rhetoric but about policies as well. First, Orbán will not abandon his hardliner attitude, and his in some features (e.g. how the refugees are treated in the transit zones, denying them the basic healthcare and humanitarian services) very inhumane migration policy. Just the opposite: during the meeting Orbán claimed that Germany and Hungary represent opposing worldviews when it comes to migration.

Orbán won't backtrack on his opposition against Ukraine because of the controversial education act narrowing minority rights in education- making Hungary the only country within the European Union which blocks Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration, pleasing Russian foreign policy.

And finally, Orbán won't change his course of building an illiberal state: the Stop Soros law, his attacks on CEU and the constitutional modifications. While Orbán used to be good at finding the right balance between illiberal steps and the necessary concessions, he seems to have lost his

inhibitions after gaining his third consecutive two-thirds victory. In fact, passing the 'Stop Soros' bill before the Venice Commission's report was completed was a clear signal to the European Union, Germany and EPP that Fidesz does not accept any red lines and conditions. In his speech in the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung a few weeks ago, Orbán openly threatened the EPP with an alternative should the group not follow his approach. In his words: 'It would be easy to establish a new formation consisting of like-minded central European parties – or, indeed, a pan-European anti-immigration formation. There is no doubt that we would have great success in the 2019 European election.' And continuing this sentence he also made it clear that this is just his plan B: his plan A being to transform the European centre right: 'But I suggest that we resist this temptation (...) and instead of desertion, we should take on the more difficult task of renewing the European People's Party, and helping it to find its way back to its Christian democratic roots.'

Orbán uses the topic of migration as a pretext to gain credit and form new alliances in the EU. His main goal, however, is to secure his authoritarian rule in Hungary and become an influential player at the EU level. Orbán is misunderstood as only a hardliner in the refugee issue. Yet, Orbán's platform is not an anti-immigration but an illiberal platform that does not respect the rule of law and the norms the European Union is based on.

This line of policy received a strong diplomatic encouragement last week – not just from the CSU, but also from the German government. German diplomacy should not be misled by the fact that Orbán uses 'Christian Democracy' instead of 'illiberal state' and Hungary has a German minority representative in the parliament (a Fidesz politician, just by accident). While it is unquestionable that German-Hungarian cooperation is important in the fields of defence, culture and economy, renewing these bilateral talks and their timing can only be interpreted as a reward for Orbán's recent illiberal measures.

This is not only an encouragement for Orbán - but also for his supporters in central and eastern Europe, and some parts of southern Europe. And while the Visegrad block should not be treated at all as homogeneous, Orbán's policies and his illiberal approach are increasingly popular in CEE and the Western Balkans. The Polish government is one of Orbán's best pupils, but not the only one. He has an increasing leverage in Croatia as well as in Slovenia. Furthermore, the new Slovakian PM, Peter Pellegrini, recently announced in a joint TV show with Viktor Orbán that Slovakia is thinking about passing a law on restrictions of NGO's similar to the Hungarian model. It might be much more difficult in a coalition government than with a two-thirds majority, but it still reveals an attitude that is becoming increasingly dominant in eastern Europe: if you want to be politically successful, you have to follow Orbán.

It is understandable that German foreign policy, in these difficult times, is focusing on saving the unity of the European Union. But the result can be the very opposite. Ignoring and rewarding Orbán's illiberalism only creates a huge wave of democratic backsliding in the EU that Germany will be unable to deal with. Attempts to save the unity of the European Union at any price can finally lead to the corruption of its moral and value foundations and its institutions.