

Boris Johnson and the Organisation of Britain

Via [International Viewpoint](#)

In January of 2020, Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister and strongman of Hungary, called Boris Johnson, “one of the bravest politicians in Europe”. He congratulated the Tory Party on winning the general election the previous month despite “the whole world” being against Johnson.

Such fulsome praise from a deeply authoritarian and anti-democratic leader is unusual but it wasn't the first time that Johnson's and Orbán's paths had crossed. Both of them emerged from the Steve Bannon stable and both of them were committed to populism, the ending of the European Union and the overthrow of liberal democracy. Bannon, Trump's previous ideological guru and campaign director in the US election of 2016 had long had the aim of cultivating a stable of European populists who would further his far right ideas throughout the continent and Brexit was one of his favourite projects. In his comments last year, Orbán also praised Brexit and marked it out as:

Orbán's links with the Tory party go back to the Brexit referendum, in which Johnson played such a major role. Tory MEPs had been criticised for standing almost alone among mainstream western European conservatives and refusing to censure Hungary over breaches of the rule of law. Orbán had been one of the first guests of Theresa May in Downing Street after she became Prime Minister in 2016.

Orbán's regime in Hungary has been a textbook case of dismantling democracy while maintaining a pseudo-democratic façade. He has placed himself as the defender of a Europe of “Christian values” opposed to liberalism, human rights,

minorities and the European Union. This is the culture war writ large and is straight out of Steve Bannon's playbook. For Fidesz (Orban's party) to gain traction, Orban had to appeal to the populist images from Hungarian history, the leading one of which is hatred and fear of the Turks and Islam, who ruled Hungary for centuries in the guise of the Ottoman Empire. In 2015 as refugees from Syria came streaming up the Balkans through Greece, Hungary sealed its borders and erected barbed wire fences, issuing a statement that it would accept no refugees and that any found in Hungary would be detained. Many refugees found themselves sleeping in or near the main railway station in Budapest en route to Germany or Austria. A BBC reporter asked a waiter in a nearby restaurant why Hungary was not prepared to accept any and his response was that Hungary was "the Christian shield of Europe as it had been for centuries". Orban succeeded in mining this rich field of Islamophobic feeling and virtually no refugees settled in Hungary.

He also ignored the exhortations of the EU to accept some and his stance strengthened his stance of gallant little Hungary thumbing its nose at the large European states and refusing to water down its culture in any way. There are parallels here with Brexit.

Another traditional feature of Hungarian culture has been antisemitism and this also was mined with George Soros, the Jewish financier, who also supported the European University in Budapest being characterised as an evil force who was trying to weaken Hungary's Christian roots and impose liberalism and refugees on the country. Orban used images of Soros on his election billboards which were so deeply antisemitic as to hark back to the anti-Jewish cartoons of the Nazi era.

Step by step and in the face of EU opposition, Orban has marginalised the press, academia and the judiciary, last year passing a law that anyone publishing any information about the

Covid pandemic there unofficially would be subject to a prison sentence. Effectively total censorship. There are still some sources of resistance such as the recently elected Mayor of Budapest from an opposition party. But similarly to populist leaders elsewhere it is not in the capital that he draws his support but in the small towns and the countryside. Gradually the rights of LGBTQ people and women have been removed in the name of "Christian values"

In 2018, as Foreign Secretary, Johnson caused outrage by openly congratulating Orbán on his re-election as Prime Minister. In his strategy of gradually dismantling political opposition in the UK, Johnson has seen the blueprint in Hungary. Suspending parliament, muzzling the media, with the BBC now a government mouthpiece, banning demonstrations and having his ministers appear with flags always in the background, Johnson is pursuing the same route as Orbán has already taken and with no EU to guarantee rights post Brexit, is prepared to use nationalism and "British values" as a cover in the same way that Orbán has used Christian values in Hungary.

Hungary is now classed as a semi democracy and is effectively a one party state. Johnson's aim is to do the same in the UK and to emulate his good friend on the banks of the Danube. It is already late but not too late to prevent this becoming reality.