

GUEST ESSAY

I Watched It Happen in Hungary. Now It's Happening Here.

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Mr. Pressman served as the U.S. ambassador to Hungary from 2022 to 2025.

As the most recent U.S. ambassador to Viktor Orban's Hungary, I'm often asked if the Trump administration's tactics and policies feel familiar. The short answer is yes. But the more important — and unsettling — question is this: Does the way Americans are responding feel familiar, too?

After years watching Hungary suffocate under the weight of its democratic collapse, I came to understand that the real danger of a strongman isn't his tactics; it's how others, especially those with power, justify their acquiescence.

Take the judiciary. I met leaders of Hungary's sole independent judicial body in October 2022 to discuss their work. For months afterward, their faces (and mine) were plastered in the papers, branded as traitors and foreign agents, just because they had raised concerns about the rule of law in Hungary. The response from other powerful judges? Silence.

Or take the private sector. Since Mr. Orban became prime minister in 2010, the state has awarded billions in public contracts to his son-in-law and childhood friend, a former plumber named Lorinc Meszaros. What have Hungarian business leaders said? Nothing.

Last year, when Mr. Orban's close associates reportedly told a multinational retailer to give the prime minister's family a cut of its business, did other multinational companies speak up? They did not.

Hungarians with little power or privilege to lose would occasionally protest. But those with power remained reliably, pliantly silent.

The American officials and academics who, like me, lived in Hungary during this period would often tell ourselves stories to explain this submissiveness: that docility is rooted in Hungary's oppressive communist past, that its democracy was simply too young to withstand a strongman.

Then I returned to the United States, and what I've witnessed over these past months at home has exposed those stories as wishful thinking.

Here, too, powerful people are responding to authoritarian advances just as their Hungarian counterparts have — not with defiance, but with capitulation, convinced that they can maintain their independence and stay above the fray.

Major corporations whose logos were once plastered on Pride floats parading down Fifth Avenue now choose to remain on the sidelines. Institutions and professions that have long acted as bastions of critical inquiry, civilized contestation and government accountability have fallen silent.

Many law firms have opted to become instruments of a strongman rather than custodians of the rule of law. Former self-identified defenders of our democracy (back when it cost nothing to support democratic principles), including some who served in Democratic administrations, remain partners at captured institutions, earning millions while skirting their moral and civic responsibility to take a stand.

They cling to the illusion that they can preserve their independence and integrity while making deals with a strongman, just as Hungary's elite believed they, too, could emerge unscathed.

Mr. Orban often describes Hungarians as possessing a unique intellect and cunning that enables them to outlast their adversaries. It is a self-aggrandizing myth and a potent tool of self-deception. Believing you can outfox a fox is how you become its prey. And American elites, confident in their cleverness, have welcomed a fox into the henhouse.

During my time in Hungary, I saw Hungarian mayors tell themselves that they were pursuing a savvy strategy by appeasing Mr. Orban even as he effectively stripped them of their revenues and authority.

Investors and executives bought into this narrative, even as their businesses and entire sectors fell prey to economic policies intended to enrich Mr. Orban's family and friends.

Hungarian judges bought into it, even as Mr. Orban's machine slowly swallowed their profession. Some saw capitulation in simple terms: as the only way to preserve their access to resources and keep the people who worked for them employed. "We'll eventually get through this," they surely told themselves, "but first, we must go along."

So they all made deals that Mr. Orbán engineered: peace with the strongman, in exchange for subjugation and humiliation. *Going along* is what did them in.

Those best positioned to uphold democratic norms chose the comfort of an illusion over the courage of action. They were and are invisible by choice — and that choice disfigured them and ultimately their country.

The lesson of Hungary is this: We cannot claim to care about democracy only when it costs nothing. President Trump, like Mr. Orbán, no doubt believes that everyone can be bought. America's elites are proving him right. There is a Hungarian phrase I heard often: "Van az a pénz" — "There's always a price."

If we're serious about defending democracy, it's not enough to hold our government accountable in court. Lawsuits against the Trump administration are fine, but they seem almost anachronistic in this increasingly extralegal moment, and they do little to counter our own elites' very Hungarian acquiescence.

Last month, young Hungarians marched in Budapest's Pride — despite the fact that Mr. Orbán had banned it. As usual, Hungarians with power and privilege mostly stayed away.

In February, Mr. Orbán said he was banning Pride because the U.S. ambassador had left Budapest, so "the event is no longer under international protection, and it will not take place." While I appreciate his backhanded acknowledgment of American leadership in advancing human rights, the march in Budapest was never led by me. It was never under international protection. It has always been, and was again last month, a march of brave, young, gay Hungarians with their lives, futures and country on the line. Hungary's elites, like so many corporate logos that once decorated floats on Fifth Avenue, were nowhere to be found.

To the stewards of our nation's great cultural and commercial institutions: Don't dupe yourselves. The illusion that you are smarter than the strongman, that you'll outmaneuver him with silent cleverness, is just that — an illusion. Now, more than ever, your principled leadership matters.

Look at those kids in the streets of Budapest last month — and learn from them.

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