



# Across Eurasia: All Liberal Bets Off?

**Autor: Chris Hann**

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Präsident Xi Jinping, 2013

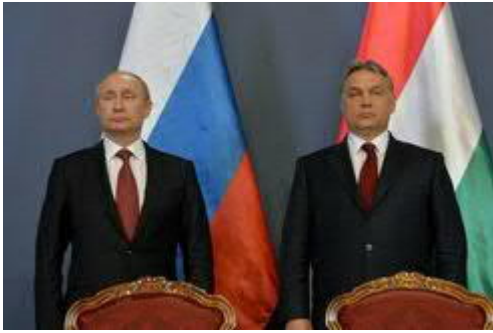
There is general agreement that, contrary to assumptions in Europe and America since the beginning of the reform era in the 1980s, the rise of China is not being accompanied by political democratization. On the contrary, the consolidation of power by President Xi Jinping has been marked by the ostentatious reassertion of elements of Marxist-Leninist ideology which, in the eyes of most observers (and many Chinese citizens too), had been consigned to the past under Xi's predecessors. Economic controls are being tightened to reign in indebtedness, party discipline is being strengthened, the supreme leader can retain power for life, and the rhetoric of national unity has never been more prominent. In the words of *The Economist*, a momentous “bet” has not come off: that allowing China to join the World Trade Organization and participate “normally” in neoliberal globalization processes would facilitate liberalization and pluralism in the Middle Kingdom.[i]

While journalists naturally focus on the geopolitical and global economic implications of

China's new "one belt one road" policy (which embraces almost the whole of Eurasia), anthropologists will be just as interested in the internal implications of recent policies. For ethnographers of Xinjiang, in particular of the titular ethnic group of the vast Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region in China's north-west, this is a return to a very dark age. Under the harsh regime of Chen Quanguo, formerly Party secretary in Tibet, during the last year many if not most Uyghur academics have been taken away to re-education camps. The individuals who have cooperated for many years with Ildikó Bellér-Hann and myself, along with other foreign anthropologists, cannot be contacted, and so all our research ties are currently severed. According to the scarce information available, securitization has reached unprecedented levels for all segments of the Uyghur population. President Xi declared in his closing speech to the Congress that no threat to national unity will be tolerated. The current harsh measures against the Uyghurs are justified on the grounds that many harbor secessionist aspirations, sometimes in the form of "Islamic terrorism". Foreign researchers dispute these arguments but they are currently unable to access the region. Foreign statesmen who receive red carpet treatment in Beijing hardly dare to raise these or any other human rights issues: everyone knows that China is the principal purchaser of American aircraft and German cars, and no one can afford to destabilize these economic links.

The situation is somewhat different in the case of the superpower next door, the postsocialist Russian Federation. Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia is currently remote from Euro-American ideals of democracy and the *Rechtsstaat*. The main difference to China is that Western leaders have fewer inhibitions in giving vent to their contempt for the Kremlin. The image of Russia has been targeted for many years.<sup>[i][j]</sup> Yet in the recent presidential election, Vladimir Putin received 77% of the votes. His success, as even many Western correspondents acknowledge, derives to a large extent from the priority he attaches to the existential issues that matter to ordinary Russians, who suffered so harshly from the financial crises of the 1990s. He has done much to reduce indebtedness and to insulate the country from the vagaries of globalization. He has not, however, significantly managed to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon resources. Nor has he bumped up securitization or placed large regions out of bounds for foreign anthropologists (though access has certainly become more difficult in recent years).

The man hailed as a reformer when he came to power in 2000 is now portrayed in the West and by opposition intellectuals at home as someone decisively formed by his years in the KGB, and thus incapable of fulfilling Western hopes for more far-reaching democratization and economic reform. But is it not possible that the reformist intentions of Putin were genuine, and that what the West perceives as a degeneration into authoritarianism at home and aggression abroad is better understood as a consequence of misguided Euro-American policies towards Russia in the last two decades?



Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán in Hungary, February 2015

Constitutional principles and the separation of powers are coming under pressure elsewhere in Eurasia, even within the European Union, most notably (in the eyes of Brussels monitors) in Warsaw and Budapest. In the run-up to Hungary's parliamentary elections on 8<sup>th</sup> April 2018, it is instructive to take a closer look at the ways in which negative images of "populist" power holders are shaped by Euro-American political leaders and media, and to attend to contextual, structural conditions. To adapt the metaphor of *The Economist*, here too a wager was struck some 20 years ago, when negotiations to admit large portions of postsocialist Eastern Europe to the European Union were launched. It was assumed that accelerating economic integration would intensify sentiments of solidarity and a common European identity. Yet today the Visegrád countries are pilloried for rejecting not merely refugee quotas but, more generally, for betraying the "European values" to which they formally signed up in 2004.

That Poland and Hungary are nowadays much more closely incorporated into pan-European economic flows of capital, consumer goods, and, not least, persons, can hardly be doubted. Yet only in the capital cities is there a genuine convergence of living standards. Most provincial regions have fallen on hard times, especially if one considers the exodus of migrant labour toward the west and the impact this has on families. The gulf separating these "new EU" states from neighbouring "old EU" states is as great as ever. Under these circumstances, it is unsurprising that further measures to liberalize economies and to "Europeanize" institutions are resented. It is claimed by some that the sums that flow into the country in the form of transfers from the old-EU are lower than the sums which flow in the opposite direction, in the form of profits to transnational corporations based in the west.<sup>[iii]</sup> This is the climate in which Viktor Orbán can feel confident of re-election to the top job next month. Compared to 100% of delegates voting for Xi Jinping at the Congress, and 77% of Russian voters nationwide for Vladimir Putin, Orbán's percentage might seem unimpressive; but even if it comes out below 50%, it may well suffice once again for a two thirds majority in parliament and a deepening of the illiberal democracy he has implemented since 2010.<sup>[iv]</sup>

## Conclusion

What do China, Russia and Hungary have in common? First and foremost there is a very

strong sense, inculcated by regimes that in other respects differ significantly, that national identity is their most precious asset, the *sacra*. The free movement of capital, goods and persons in this neoliberal age makes it simultaneously a populist age, in which the fine balance maintained by liberal democracies until the recent past is hard if not impossible to sustain. Of course, there is abundant evidence that xenophobic tensions are rising in most countries of the Old West too. In this depressing climate, it is important to pinpoint the causes of these processes in political economy. Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, the success of the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, are not the result of Kremlin games with voter profiles in the internet, but the predictable political consequences of capitalist processes that have run out of control on a global scale. Since China is the most important player, it is here that new forms of engagement are most urgently needed in the interests of all (not least the Uyghurs). Manifestations of populism and protectionism elsewhere should be analyzed in this wider structural context, rather than attributed in mediatized distortions to the foibles of individual leaders.

## Notes

[i] See leading article (unsigned) on 1st March 2018 (No. 9081), "What the West got wrong".

[ii] The most recent episode of diplomatic expulsions following a vile assassination attempt in rural England is reminiscent of a Cold War James Bond film. The extraordinary way in which British conservatives have run with the story in Salisbury can only be explained by their urgent need to divert attention from the countless problems they face at home. As so often, those claiming to uphold law and order have little time for due procedure and verification of facts before rushing to enact reprisals.

[iii] For references on this point and others made in this paragraph, see my previous post, "Reply to Theo Waigel", 7th February 2018.

Foreign anthropologists in Hungary have not the least difficulty gaining research access in provincial Hungary. Despite this, so far not much has been done to document moods and practices among those large sections of the population to whom populist politicians appeal. See my article: 'Against Fences; for example, between socio-cultural anthropology and *néprajz*' in Veronika Lajos, István Povedák and Tamás Régi (eds.), 2017. *The Anthropology of Encounters. A találkozások antropológiája*. Budapest: Magyar Kulturális Antropológia Társaság, pp. 163-75.

[iv] In 2012 the Hungarian electoral system was amended to suit the interests of Fidesz. Opposition parties complain (e.g. to neutral OSCE election observers) that the principle of proportional representation has been watered down in favour of a "first past the post" constituency principle. But if strict PR were to be a precondition of liberal democracy in the EU,

then Britain could never have been admitted in the first place; and if the votes of all the individual citizens of a democracy should carry equal weight, then Donald Trump would not have become President of the USA.

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