

# In Hungary, a worrisome trend toward repression

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Canadian Hungarian Democratic Charter. He has served as an adviser to a number of national and local governments in Hungary over the past 20 years, and organized visits to Canada by both the former mayor of Budapest and Viktor Orbán, the country's current prime minister.

On Oct. 23, the 55th anniversary of the ruthless suppression of Hungary's rebellion against its one-time Communist dictators, 100,000 people were out in the wind-swept, rainy streets of Budapest protesting against the growing authoritarianism of their democratically elected government. They accused the government of Viktor Orbán of marching backward into the future, and trying to redesign Hungary's democratic system into an increasingly closer replica of such authoritarian states as China.

On the same day, a group of blue-ribbon academics on the other side of the world, in Montreal, issued a worldwide indictment against the Orbán government ([hungariancharter.com](http://hungariancharter.com)). Addressed to the international court of public opinion, the indictment charges that Hungary is the first European Union member state to cross the line separating democratic from autocratic governance.

The unrest that is sweep-

ing through Hungary today was forecast three years ago by Vaclav Havel, one of the most admired and respected anti-Communist warriors of eastern Europe, and the first president of the post-Communist democratic Czech Republic. In a 2009 interview with the editors of the German daily *Die Zeit*, Havel said that a new type of autocracy is emerging in central and eastern Europe. "I am referring to governments that utilize very refined techniques of control," he said. "Everything seems to follow the rules of democracy. There

are parliaments, there are elections, and there are political parties. But there are also highly worrisome and unnaturally close ties between elected officials, the judiciary, the police and the secret services." As an example, Havel cited Russia, a nation where journalists critical of the government have been murdered under mysterious and unresolved circumstances.

At the beginning of 2011, Havel, with former Polish Solidarity leader Adam Michnik and hundreds of others who had fought against one-party Communist dicta-

torships in the region, sent a passionate appeal to the leaders of the European Union ([iprotect.hu](http://iprotect.hu)). It said, in part:

"We are members and supporters of the democratic movements that fought against the Communist regimes in central and eastern Europe, fought for our nations to join the community of European democracies ... This time the destruction of democracy's guarantees is unfolding right before the eyes of the European Union ... inside its own borders – in Hungary, an EU member state since 2004.

"In just 20 years after Communism collapsed, Hungary's government, though elected democratically, is misusing its legislative majority to methodically dismantle democracy's checks and balances, to remove constitutional constraints, and to subordinate to the will of the ruling party all branches of power, independent institutions and the media."

Viktor Orbán's government was elected to office in May 2010 with a large majority, promising to provide economic prosperity. The socialist-liberal coalition

government that had been in power for the previous eight years had clearly lost the confidence of the people due to its political shortcomings and inability to master Hungary's increasingly difficult economic challenges.

But instead of implementing badly needed reforms, the Orbán government opted for a bizarre mix of predatory economic policies that penalize the less fortunate and those who can offer little resistance to governmental excess. Instead of strengthening the country's democratic foundations and providing a broader base for reasonable debate and discourse, the government has opted for a Chinese-style approach to tension management, silencing and condemning its critics at home and abroad.

As a consequence of these predatory actions, Hungary's economic and political stability have been seriously compromised.

The Canadian and U.S. scholars who penned the indictment against the Orbán government are blunt in their warnings: "The virus of autocracy does not recognize international borders and is capable of setting off an international pandemic that may even reach the shores of North America. Tolerance of rogue governments, such as Orbán's, within the confines of the European Union will simply demonstrate to other would-be autocrats that the road is open toward autocracy in Europe and the rest of the world. We must not allow this to happen."



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On Sunday, the 55th anniversary of the Hungarian uprising, tens of thousands of citizens took to the streets of Budapest to protest the autocratic nature of the current government.