NATO's Worrisome Authoritarian Storm Clouds

Ted Galen Carpenter

When the North Atlantic Treaty Organization was first established in 1949, the alliance's principal purpose was to provide security for Europe's noncommunist nations. Those countries, traumatized by the second massive armed conflict in a generation, were still in the early stages of recovery from World War II. They eagerly sought US protection because they worried about the possibility of another German bid for regional hegemony and the more immediate danger of the Soviet Union's imperial ambitions. As Lord Harold Ismay, NATO's secretary-general, succinctly put it, NATO was created to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down."[1]

Although Western leaders liked to portray NATO as a league of democratic nations as well as a security alliance, there were always some major exceptions to that image. Throughout the Cold War, NATO tolerated illiberal regimes and even outright dictatorships as members. Founding member Portugal was a quasi-fascist country under its long-time president, Antonio Salazar. The military was always the decisive power broker in Turkey's political system, even when civilian governments were technically in charge. On occasion, the Turkish generals were not content to be the power behind the scenes and the country lapsed into outright military rule, most notably in 1960 and again in 1971.

Another striking deviation from NATO's professed values as an association of democracies was the onset of military junta rule in Greece in April 1967.

1. Quoted in Gregory F. Treverton, *America, Germany, and the Future of Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 153.

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Mediterranean Quarterly 26:4 DOI 10.1215/10474552-3425167

Not only were pervasive censorship and the lack of free elections now the hallmark of a NATO member, the military rulers imprisoned critics, tortured political prisoners, and amassed a shocking record of other human rights abuses. Yet Greece groaned under that brutal military dictatorship until July 1974 without forfeiting its NATO membership.

It would be far more difficult in the twenty-first century for the alliance to look the other way if a member succumbs to dictatorial impulses. During the Cold War, it was widely understood that NATO's chief role was as a multilateral, anti-Soviet military organization. The professed commitment to liberal democracy, while important, was purely secondary. But in the post–Cold War era, NATO leaders have repeatedly stressed the alliance's determination to embody and promote the values of democracy and human rights. It would be more than a little embarrassing to have an outright autocracy emerge in NATO's ranks. Yet that is now a pressing concern with respect to at least two members, Hungary and Turkey, and worrisome signs have surfaced in other countries as well.

Romania's prime minister, Viktor Ponta, is the target of an ongoing probe of systemic corruption, but perhaps more troubling, former president Traian Basescu has accused Ponta of having been an undercover officer for the country's spy agency in the late 1990s.[2] That was more than a matter of academic interest because the intelligence service has not been fully purged of the personnel that trampled civil liberties and committed assorted human rights abuses when Romania was still a communist dictatorship. It was merely the latest allegation of dubious conduct by prominent officials and opinion leaders in ostensibly democratic Romania.[3]

Some of NATO's newer members, in Eastern Europe especially, seem to have inadequate respect for important Western values, including freedom of expression. Lithuania ordered a Russian-language television station, PTR Planeta, off the air for three months. The station's offense? Allegedly spreading Kremlin propaganda. A spokesperson for Lithuania's Radio and Televi-

2. Luiza Llie, "Romania President Says PM Was an Undercover Spy," Reuters, 14 October 2014, news.yahoo.com/romania-president-says-pm-undercover-spy-092339547.html.
3. Andrew Higgins, "Spy Allegations in a Presidential Race Conjure Romania's Authoritarian Past," *New York Times*, 31 October 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/11/01/world/europe/presidential-candidates-spy-allegations-in-romania-conjure-a-dystopian-past.html?_r=2.

sion Commission, the country's regulatory agency, charged that PTR Planeta was "inciting discord, warmongering, [and] spreading biased information." This action was apparently the first time that a media outlet in a European Union country was sanctioned in such a manner. To make matters worse, the commission did not even allow the station to appeal the penalty in the courts. Instead, the commission summarily ordered the station off the air for daring to express views contrary to the government's perspective and majority opinion on controversial international developments. That conduct is hardly consistent with the values of a democratic country. It was a bit much even for some Lithuanian opinion leaders who staunchly oppose Russia's behavior in Crimea and the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Lithuanian political scientist Sarunas Lickis argued, "We should not fight Russian propaganda with Russian-type restrictive means."[4]

Similar examples of governmental intolerance have developed in other NATO countries. Canada barred Serbian-American scholar Srdja Trifkovic from entering the country for more than four years.[5] Trifkovic was a prominent critic of NATO's wars in both Bosnia and Kosovo. The authorities deemed that Canadian audiences should be prevented from hearing his views. The specific incident triggering the travel ban was Trifkovic's refusal to brand the killings in Srebrenica as genocide. He did consider the murder of Bosnian Muslim prisoners of war an atrocity and a war crime, and said so openly, but he dared dispute the term *genocide* because the Bosnian Serb forces had specifically spared women and children, executing only military-age males. Trifkovic may have had a point, since the indisputable perpetrators of genocide (Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot) certainly never spared women and children from the slaughter they orchestrated.

But even if Trifkovic was wrong on the substance of the issue, it is a foundational feature of democratic countries that controversial matters should be debated, not that an orthodox viewpoint be imposed. Effectively smothering one point of view is unworthy of a NATO country. And the fact that Canada

4. "Lithuania to Ban Russian TV Channel for 'Warmongering,'" *Deutsche Welle*, 8 April 2015, www.dw.com/en/lithuania-to-ban-russian-tv-channel-for-warmongering/a-18370852.
5. For his account of the legal ordeal, see Srdja Trifkovic, "Canada Entry Ban: I Have Finally Won," *Chronicles*, 18 June 2015, www.chroniclesmagazine.org/canada-entry-ban-i-have-finally-won/.

ultimately gave up the effort to bar Trifkovic (two years after he prevailed in the initial hearing) suggests just how inappropriate was the attempt. However, merely putting a foreign policy critic through such an exercise has a chilling effect on anyone who might dare question the conventional wisdom of officials currently in charge of a country's foreign policy.

Developments in Hungary are significantly more troubling than such relatively isolated episodes. US and European leaders are beginning to express alarm at the apparent authoritarianism and corruption enveloping Prime Minister Viktor Orban's government. In a September 2014 speech, President Barack Obama sharply criticized various regimes around the world for undermining civil institutions and engaging in various forms of repression. He singled out several countries by name, including China, Venezuela, and Egypt. Most of his verbal targets were unsurprising, since they were indisputably authoritarian. But observers considered it quite significant that the president included Hungary, a NATO ally, among the nations in which "endless regulations and overt intimidation increasingly target civil society."[6]

The uneasiness of Western leaders about the internal behavior of the Hungarian government continues to grow. During a June 2015 meeting of Central and Eastern European officials, the European Commission's president, Jean-Claude Juncker, greeted Orban with "Hello, dictator." And it appeared that Juncker was only half jesting with that comment. Orban's domestic supporters were furious about the incident.[7]

The reality is that Orban has shown a disturbing and growing intolerance of critics. Exploiting the unprecedented electoral success of his governing party, Fidesz, which amassed a supermajority in parliament following elections in 2010, the prime minister has steadily pursued efforts to consolidate his power. One key development was the successful campaign in 2013 to enact major changes to the country's constitution—including measures that Hungary's highest court had previously ruled unconstitutional. Some of the changes were especially ominous. One required churches receiving pub-

6. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Clinton Global Initiative: New York, New York," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 23 September 2014, www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/23/remarks-president-clinton-global-initiative.

7. Paul Taylor, "Despite 'Hello Dictator,' EU Struggles to Curb Hungary's Orban," Reuters, 7 June 2015, news.yahoo.com/despite-hello-dictator-eu-struggles-curb-hungarys-orban-084408441.html.

lic funding to "collaborate with the state for the public interest." Another amendment restricted political advertising during election campaigns to public (that is, government-run) media. Most of those outlets are under the secure control of Orban's political allies. Yet another amendment insisted that "free speech cannot be aimed at violating the dignity of the Hungarian nation"—a standard so vague that critics could be prosecuted virtually at will.[8]

Even before the passage of the restrictive constitutional amendments, Orban's administration had conducted a crackdown on human rights groups that was not far removed from the behavior of Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia. That trend has continued and even intensified since the 2013 vote on the amendments. One of Orban's prominent targets is the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, which had taken the lead in the campaign to oppose his efforts to constrain freedom of expression and undermine dissidents. (Ironically, the Civil Liberties Union had supported him a decade earlier, when he was under withering fire from political opponents.) Over the past few years, government harassment of media outlets, civil organizations, and other critics of Orban's rule has steadily grown.

Using rhetoric reminiscent of Putin, Orban asserts that such groups are "paid political activists attempting to assert foreign interests in Hungary." The prime minister now touts the alleged virtues of autocracy, citing China, Russia, Singapore, and Turkey as models of successful countries that Hungary should consider emulating.[9] Orban has even proposed mandatory drug testing for journalists.[10]

Budapest's authoritarian course, combined with the government's growing foreign policy flirtation with Russia, has alarmed not only officials in other NATO countries but pro-Western elements in Hungary itself. Such concerns were evident at the beginning of February 2015 when thousands of demon-

8. "Viktor Orban's Hungarian Power Grab," editorial, *Washington Post*, 15 March 2013, www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/viktor-orbans-hungarian-power-grab/2013/03/13/63ead954-8b41-11e2-b63f-f53fb9f2fcb4_story.html.

9. Pablo Gorondi, "West Alarmed at Hungarian Leader's Consolidation of Power as Country Holds Municipal Elections," Associated Press, reprinted in *US News and World Report*, 12 October 2014, www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2014/10/12/west-alarmed-at-hungarian-leaders-power-tactics.

10. Pablo Gorondi, "Hungary's Leader Wants Drug Tests for Journalists," Associated Press, 12 December 2014, news.yahoo.com/hungarys-leader-wants-drug-tests-journalists-151519650--finance.html.

strators poured into the streets of the capital to protest Orban's policies and urge visiting German chancellor Angela Merkel not to accord his regime any deference. Some signs in the crowd even begged Merkel to "save Hungary" and "deliver us from evil."[11]

The results of the June 2015 parliamentary by-elections in Hungary may act as a brake on Orban's ambitions. Fidesz lost its supermajority, which should at least postpone further constitutional changes to consolidate power in the hands of the prime minister and his allies. However, the election results did not seem to be an emphatic repudiation of the country's authoritarian drift. Fidesz remained, by a considerable margin, the largest faction in parliament. Moreover, the principal beneficiary of Fidesz's ebbing support was Jobbik, which is even more nationalistic and illiberal than Fidesz. Jobbik is now the second-largest delegation in Hungary's parliament.

Orban himself shows few signs of moderating his authoritarian impulses. Indeed, they appear to be worsening. In an early June 2015 newspaper interview, he reportedly denounced the entire concept of multiculturalism and asserted that there should be no "mass scale" intermixing of different creeds.[12] Later that month, the Hungarian government defied Brussels and unilaterally suspended the application of the EU's asylum policy, contending that Hungary's culture was being overwhelmed by an influx of refugees (primarily from the Balkans but to some extent from the Middle East and North Africa). The previous week, Budapest had announced its intention to build a fence along its frontier with Serbia to inhibit the refugee flow.[13]

These incidents were just the latest manifestation of a growing xenophobia under the Orban government. The underlying sentiment is similar to that embraced by far right "nationalist" factions in Austria, France, and some other countries, but with one important difference. In those countries, the positions are largely confined to political fringe groups; in Hungary, the attitudes seem to be part of the political mainstream and are put into practice

11. "Hungarians Rally against Orban, Appeal to Merkel," *Deutsche Welle*, 1 February 2015, www.dw.com/en/hungarians-rally-against-orban-appeal-to-merkel/a-18229080.
12. Marton Dunai, "Multiculturalism Doesn't Work in Hungary, Says Orban," Reuters, 3 June 2015, news.yahoo.com/multiculturalism-doesnt-hungary-says-orban-085144041.html.
13. Alastair MacDonald and Krisztina Than, "Hungary Defies EU over Migrants as Crisis Mounts," Reuters, 23 June 2015, www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/23/us-europe-migrants-italy-idUSKBN0P31T120150623.

by the current government. Indeed, a June 2015 report by the Council of Europe contended that racism and xenophobia were "rampant" in Hungary and appeared to have support across the political spectrum.[14]

The NATO member that has exhibited the most pervasive and alarming tendencies, however, is Turkey. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has conducted high-profile prosecutions of military leaders for allegedly plotting coups against the government, even when evidence for those allegations is exceedingly weak. As in Hungary, civil organizations and independent press outlets repeatedly find themselves under siege. Even former supporters of Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) are now treated as enemies of the state, not merely political opponents. At the end of October 2014, Turkey's National Security Council branded the Gulen movement, once the government's close political ally, as a threat to national security. In an unusual procedure, Erdogan personally presided over the meeting at which that charge was adopted.

The vendetta against the Gulen movement escalated over the following months. At the beginning of February 2015, the Turkish government revoked the passport of Gulen's leader, Fethullah Gulen, who resides in the United States. That decision effectively stranded him in exile without even a modicum of due process. Such actions smack of petty political retaliation against a critic of the regime, with an intent to intimidate other potential critics. In December 2014, the US State Department formally protested the arrest of more than two dozen leading Turkish media figures—all of whom appeared to be vocal opponents of the Erdogan administration.[15] But the crackdown on journalists who criticize Erdogan continued unabated in 2015. At one point, some seventy-four US senators sent a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry urging him to take a stronger stance against the Turkish government's growing attack on a free press. The letter asserted that Ankara's conduct was an "affront to the basic principles of democracy."[16]

14. Carla Bleiker, "EU Report Finds Rampant Racism, Xenophobia in Hungary," *Deutsche Welle*, 9 June 2015, www.dw.com/en/eu-report-finds-rampant-racism-xenophobia-in-hungary/a-18505689.
15. "EU, US Condemn Raids on Turkish Media Outlets," *Deutsche Welle*, 14 December 2014, www.dw.com/en/eu-us-condemn-raids-on-turkish-media-outlets/a-18128576
16. Mahir Zeynalov, "Seventy-Four US Senators Urge Kerry to Back Media Freedom in Turkey," *Today's Zaman*, 18 March 2015, www.todayszaman.com/anasayfa_74-us-senators-urge-kerry-to-back-media-freedom-in-turkey_375664.html

The government's heavy hand is evident in numerous other respects beyond the harassment and prosecution of critics in the Turkish media. When prosecutors conducted a wide-ranging probe of corruption, leading to the resignation of four government ministers, Erdogan's administration retaliated by purging hundreds of police officials and prosecutors. It pushed through laws giving the president even tighter control over the judiciary. A few weeks later, Erdogan ominously asserted that the judiciary and other state institutions must be "cleansed of traitors."[17]

Criticism of Turkey as a NATO member has become more pointed over the past two or three years, especially in the United States. Critics wonder whether Turkey is a reliable or even a tolerable ally. Seth Cropsey, a senior fellow at the conservative Hudson Institute in the United States, denounces what he terms "Turkey's contempt for NATO principles," both with respect to the internal norms expected of a Western democratic country and the foreign policy goals of the alliance. Cropsey charges that the AKP has led Turkey "on a steady drift away from democracy since Erdogan came to power in 2003." Especially damning, in his view, "Turkey now holds more journalists in its prisons than does any country in the world."[18] Cropsey is hardly the only critic to express profound disillusionment with Ankara's behavior. International media mogul Conrad Black charges that the Erdogan government has become at least an enabler, if not an ally, of Islamic terrorism, and he urges NATO members to "get tough with Turkey."[19]

Much of the anger is directed at Ankara's foreign policy, which skeptics contend often does not support important NATO objectives and sometimes even directly undermines them. Some of that criticism, especially from neoconservative luminaries like Black, is primarily in response to Turkey's increasingly frosty relationship with Israel, the favorite US ally of neoconservatives. But the discontent in the United States and other Western countries goes deeper than that issue.

17. Ayla Jean Yackley, "Erdogan Says Turkish Judiciary, Other State Bodies Must be 'Cleansed of Traitors,'" Reuters, 15 December 2014, www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/15/turkey-media-institutions-idUSL6N0TZ2S320141215.

18. Seth Cropsey, "Turkey's Contempt for NATO Principles," *Real Clear World*, 29 October 2014, www.realclearworld.com/articles/2014/10/29/turkeys_contempt_for_nato_principles_110771.html.

19. Conrad Black, "Get Tough with Turkey," *National Review Online*, 30 October 2014, www.nationalreview.com/article/391337/get-tough-turkey-conrad-black.

Critics note that Turkey, like Hungary, seems to be conducting an ongoing flirtation with Russia. Certainly, Russian-Turkish relations have grown noticeably closer over the past two or three years. Not only has Ankara dragged its feet regarding Western efforts to tighten economic sanctions against Moscow in response to the Ukraine crisis but commercial ties between the two countries continue to grow. Annual bilateral trade is now in excess of $32 billion, and Turkey has emerged as Russia's number one trading partner in services. In October 2014, Umit Yardim, Turkey's ambassador to Russia, stated flatly that his government would not impose further sanctions on that country, even if asked to do so by the NATO allies.[20]

It is Ankara's murky, ambivalent stance toward ISIS and Sunni extremist movements in general that has provoked the greatest annoyance among fellow NATO members. A March 2015 *New York Times* editorial epitomized the nature and extent of the complaints. "For months, the Western allies have pressured Turkey to close its porous border, which has allowed thousands of jihadists to cross into Syria to join the Islamic State," the *Times* editors charged. Ankara's lack of action "has enabled ISIS to smuggle in weapons and smuggle out oil on which it relies for revenue." The *Times* conceded that completely sealing the long border between Turkey and Syria might be impossible, "but given [Ankara's] "large military and well-regarded intelligence service, it is inexcusable that Turkey is not doing a better job."[21]

The reality is that Turkey's conduct had previously reflected poorly on NATO's official reputation as a defensive alliance. Ankara's forces invaded Cyprus and amputated some 37 percent of that country's territory in 1974. Turkey subsequently established a client state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which even today enjoys virtually no international recognition. Since Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, it has become increasingly awkward for countries that are part of both that organization and NATO to ignore the ongoing occupation of a fellow EU member's territory.

But recent developments have made Turkey's stance on the Cyprus issue even more of an embarrassment, especially to the United States as NATO's

20. Paul J. Saunders, "Russia, Turkey Inch toward Improved Relations," *US News and World Report*, 17 November 2014, www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/11/17/russia-turkey-inch-toward-improved-relations.

21. "Turkey's Drift from NATO," editorial, *New York Times*, 13 March 2015, www.nytimes.com/2015/03/14/opinion/turkeys-drift-from-nato.html?_r=0.

leader. It is rather difficult for Washington to condemn Putin's regime for annexing Crimea or setting up puppet states in the occupied Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia when a NATO member is guilty of similar behavior.

Ankara's mounting authoritarianism at home is also setting off alarm bells in other NATO capitals. Civil organizations and independent press outlets repeatedly find themselves under siege. Steven A. Cook, a senior fellow for Middle Eastern Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, documents the extent of Erdogan's consolidation of power, contending, "He has become the sun around which all Turkish politics revolve."[22] Cook notes that most of the Turkish press now exhibits support bordering on adoration for the president and his policies. He writes that the dominance of that view is largely the result of "forced sales of newspapers and television stations to Erdogan cronies." Perhaps even more unsettling than the transformation of an independent Turkish press into cogs in a partisan political machine is the media's participation in the president's growing cult of personality. Prominent media outlets routinely refer to Erdogan as "Buyuk Usta, or Great Master." Cook notes that the atmosphere and imagery is sometimes "positively North Korean-esque."[23]

Erdogan's arrogance in building a new presidential palace that set impressive standards for ostentatious opulence has served to confirm mounting fears in both Turkey and the West about a growing cult of personality centered around the president. The White House would be merely a small wing in Erdogan's eleven-hundred-room edifice. According to official figures, the palace has cost $615 million—although critics contend that the actual cost is much higher. Turkish architect Tezcan Karakus Candan is appalled at the grandiose scale and contends the building is reminiscent of "Hitler-era fascist architecture."[24]

As in the case of Hungary, June parliamentary elections in Turkey appear to have created an obstacle to Erdogan's growing political dominance. The

22. Steven A. Cook, "Emperor Erdogan: Why an Increasingly Authoritarian Turkey Poses a Danger to the Region," *Politico*, 3 February 2015, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/02/turkey-emperor-erdogan-114835_full.html?print%20-%20.VNI-JJ3nZLN#.VYnE4J0o5LM.
23. Ibid.
24. Peter Kenyon, "Turkey's President and His 1,100-Room 'White Palace,'" Parallels (blog), National Public Radio, 24 December 2014, www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/12/24/370931835/turkeys-president-and-his-1-100-room-white-palace.

AKP garnered only 40.9 percent of the vote and captured 258 seats in the 550-seat parliament, giving the party only a plurality. That modest total contrasted sharply with the comfortable majority (327 seats) that the AKP enjoyed in the outgoing parliament.[25] It was also the weakest showing by far that the AKP has had since it originally came to power in 2002. Indeed, weeks after the most recent balloting, Erdogan had still been unable to assemble a working majority, which led to new elections being called for on 1 November 2015.

It remains to be seen, however, how much the AKP's electoral slippage will restrain Erdogan. Optimists believe that the rebuke will curb his worst excesses and at least significantly retard his drive toward creating a Putin-style autocracy.[26] Perhaps, but that outcome is far from certain. Over the past decade, Erdogan has shown a willingness to engage in actions that violate the spirit, and in some cases even the letter, of Turkey's supposedly democratic political system. It is not unthinkable that he might try to bypass parliament and rule by decree or perhaps hold new elections under conditions, including pervasive censorship, that would make an opposition victory nearly impossible. The other NATO governments certainly cannot yet assume that Erdogan's abuses of power have come to an end.

The authoritarian impulses that have surfaced in Turkey and Hungary, and to a more limited extent in other NATO countries, should lead to some sober thinking in Washington. It is questionable enough whether the United States should put its own safety at risk to defend other democratic nations that, in many cases, are of only modest strategic and economic relevance to the United States. That is especially true when recent polling data indicates that majorities in numerous European members of NATO seem unwilling to come to the aid of an alliance partner if it is attacked.[27] They apparently expect the

25. Desmond Butler and Suzan Fraser, "Erdogan's Ambitions Dashed after Ruling Party Loses Majority," Associated Press, 8 June 2015, news.yahoo.com/erdogans-party-likely-struggle-forming-government-062810191.html.

26. Doug Bandow, "Turkish Vote Shatters Erdogan's Putinesque Dream," *Forbes*, 9 June 2015, www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2015/06/09/turkish-vote-shatters-erdogans-putinesque-dream-death-of-erdoganism-and-kemalism-in-turkey/.

27. Jacob Poushter, "Key Findings from Our Poll on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict," Pew Research Center, Washington, DC, 10 June 2015, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/06/10/key-findings-from-our-poll-on-the-russia-ukraine-conflict/.

United States to continue protecting them even if they are unwilling to make a serious contribution to the defense of their own region.

Incurring risks, including a possible confrontation with a nuclear-armed Russia, to protect such free-riding "allies" is bad enough, even if they are bona fide democracies. But it would be far worse to incur such risks on behalf of autocratic allies masquerading as democracies. Yet that is now a danger with respect to at least some NATO members. Washington needs to make a drastic reassessment of its defense commitment toward such countries if those trends continue.