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This Is the Dark, Unspoken Promise of Trump's Return

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For those bewildered by why so many Americans apparently voted against the values of liberal democracy, Balint Magyar has a useful formulation. “Liberal democracy,” he says, “offers moral constraints without problem-solving” — a lot of rules, not a lot of change — while “populism offers problem-solving without moral constraints.” Magyar, a scholar of autocracy, isn’t interested in calling Donald Trump a fascist. He sees the president-elect’s appeal in terms of something more primal: “Trump promises that you don’t have to think about other people.”

Around the world, populist autocrats have leveraged the thrilling power of that promise to transform their countries into vehicles for their own singular will. Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orban vowed to restore a simpler, more orderly past, in which men were men and in charge. What they delivered was permission to abandon societal inhibitions, to amplify the grievances of one’s own group and heap hate on assorted others, particularly on groups that cannot speak up for themselves. Magyar calls this “morally unconstrained collective egoism.”

Trump’s first term, and his actions in the four years since, tracked the early record of Putin and Orban in important ways. Looking closely at their trajectories, through the lens of Magyar’s theories, gives a chillingly clear sense of where Trump’s second term may lead.

I called Magyar to ask about this pattern in the late winter of 2021, when it became clear to me that Trump would run for re-election. Magyar is Hungarian, and has extensively studied the autocracy of Orban. Like Trump, Orban had been cast out of office (in 2002, in a vote his supporters said had been fraudulent); he didn’t regain power until eight years later. In the interim, he consolidated his movement, positioning himself and his party as the only true representatives of the Hungarian people. It followed that the sitting government was illegitimate and that anyone who supported it was not part of the nation. When Orban was re-elected, he carried out what Magyar calls an “autocratic breakthrough,” changing laws and practices so that he could not be dislodged again. It helped that he had a supermajority in parliament. Trump, similarly, spent four years attacking the Biden administration, and the vote that brought it to the White House, as fraudulent, and positioning himself as the only true voice of the people. He is also returning with a power trifecta — the presidency and both houses of Congress. He too can quickly reshape American government in his image. Trump and his supporters have shown tremendous hostility to civic institutions — the judiciary, the media, universities, many nonprofits, some religious groups — that seek to define and enforce our obligations to one another. Autocrats such as Orban and Putin reject that deliberative process, claiming for themselves the exclusive right to define those obligations. If those two leaders, and Trump’s own first term, are any indication, he will likely begin by getting rid of experts, regulators and other civil servants he sees as superfluous, eliminating jobs that he thinks simply shouldn’t exist. Expect asylum officers to be high on that list.

A major target outside of government will be [universities](#). In Hungary, the Central European University, a pioneering research and educational institution (and Magyar's academic home), was forced into exile. To understand what can happen to public universities in the United States, look at Florida, where the administration of Gov. Ron DeSantis has effectively turned the state university system into [a highly policed arm of his government](#). The MAGA movement's attack on private universities has been underway for some time; most recently it drove the congressional hearings on antisemitism, in the wake of which half a dozen college presidents no longer have their jobs. Watch for moves to strip private universities of federal funding and tax breaks. Under this kind of financial pressure, even the largest and wealthiest universities will cut jobs and shutter departments; smaller liberal arts colleges will go out of business. Civil society groups — especially those that serve or advocate for immigrants, formerly incarcerated people, L.G.B.T.Q. people, women and vulnerable groups — will be attacked. Then they may come for the unions.

In an [Opinion article](#) in The Washington Post, the publisher of The Times, A.G. Sulzberger, laid out some probable scenarios for a Trump administration's war on the media. I would add that, like Orban — and like the first Trump administration — this president will reward loyal media with privileged access and will attack critical media by targeting its owners' other businesses. That is a particularly effective tactic, one that we may have seen at work even before Trump was re-elected, when the billionaire owners of The Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post decided to nix their publications' presidential endorsements. (Explaining their decision, the owners cited reasons not related to deference to Trump.)

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Kamala Harris's campaign, of course, tried to warn Americans about this and a lot more, labeling Trump a fascist. But Magyar describes fascist movements as "ideology-driven" in a way Trump is not. Take, for comparison, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the former prime minister of Poland, who pursued severe abortion restrictions even when polls showed that those policies could cost him his office. Trump, on the other hand, campaigned against abortion rights when it suited his ends and then positioned himself as a champion of reproductive rights when the context shifted.

I was not convinced by this distinction. To use George Orwell's formulation, a politician's face grows to fit his ideological mask. There is perhaps no better example of this than Vladimir Putin, once a cynic with no political convictions, who is now waging a costly, disastrous war in the name of an ideology (incoherent though it may be) of his own invention. And it's only in hindsight that the European fascists of the 20th century appear to have been driven by coherent ideology: Many of their contemporaries described their beliefs as a hodgepodge. The Yale philosopher Jason Stanley, author of the book "How Fascism Works," has argued that fascists are defined less by political beliefs than by the way they *do* politics: by trafficking in fear and hatred of the "other," by affirming the supremacy of "us" over "them." All of which describes Trump, doesn't it?

I made that case to Magyar, unsuccessfully. Look at the Trump family's appetite for profiting from his political office, he said. That's not something fascists are known for. The Nazis, for example — "when they took away property from the Jews, they didn't put it in their own pockets," he said. "They put it in the state budget." Orban, on the other hand, is understood to be extraordinarily wealthy; Putin is rumored to be the richest man in Russia. To become the wealthiest man in America, Trump would have to amass more capital than Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, which seems all but impossible.

Putin solved this exact problem by extorting his wealthy allies and robbing his rich enemies.

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Orban used the fear and hatred of immigrants to declare a state of emergency when refugees from the Middle East started coming to Europe in 2015. (He later used the Covid-19 pandemic and then the Russia-Ukraine war as pretexts to adopt emergency powers.) Trump, during his first term, similarly declared a national emergency in connection with the arrival of asylum seekers at the southern border of the United States. President Biden lifted this national emergency in 2021. But the United States has been under a permanent national emergency since Sept. 14, 2001, when President George W. Bush declared it in response to the 9/11 attacks. Every subsequent president, including Barack Obama and Joe Biden, has renewed this national emergency on an annual basis. That is only one of dozens of [national emergencies](#) currently in effect, most of them having lasted years.

In Orban's case, emergency powers have given him expanded control over the armed forces, including the option of deploying the military domestically. In the United States, the president, under certain circumstances, already has this power. But a state of emergency offers an additional slew of "extraordinary powers." These include the ability to redirect federal funds, as Trump did to finance the construction of the border wall. And the arsenal of power extends to curtailing electronic communications and — perhaps of particular interest to Trump — ways of exerting pressure on private business. Orban has used similar provisions of Hungarian law to exercise "state supervision" over private companies. In Hungary, Orban *is* the state.

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Magyar describes autocratic breakthrough as the transition from [the rule of law to the law of rule](#). When Putin campaigned for president in 2000, his slogan was "Dictatorship of the Law." I remember a banner with that phrase decorating a polling station in besieged Chechnya. He proceeded to rule by decree, as Orban does now and as Trump did in his first term — and has said he intends to do in his second.

Reading Magyar's writing about that period, I was struck most of all by the mood that seemed to accompany Orban's actions. We all remember it from Trump's first term, this sense of everything happening all at once and the utter impossibility of focusing on the existentially threatening, or distinguishing it from the trivial — if that distinction even exists. It's not just what the autocrats do to stage their breakthrough, it's how they do it: passing legislation (or signing executive orders) fast, without any discussion, sometimes late at night, in batches, all the while denigrating and delegitimizing any opposition.

As to the specifics, we know less than we may think we know. Had Trump been elected to a second term in 2020, Magyar says he would have expected him to try to repeal the 22nd Amendment, which established a two-term limit for presidents. I think he may still try to do it, clearing the way to run again at the age of 82. Much has been written about Project 2025 as a sort of legislative blueprint for the second Trump presidency. The historian Rick Perlstein, in a series of articles in *The American Prospect*, has argued that some of this coverage is misleading. Project 2025 is a vast, complicated document full of contradictory recommendations apparently made by people with different beliefs and agendas. Consistent with Magyar's theory of autocracy, the document is more a reflection of the clan of people who empower Trump and are empowered by him than an ideological document. It is not a blueprint for coherent legislative change, but it is a blueprint still: a blueprint for trampling the system of government as it is currently constituted, a blueprint of destruction.