

Hungary's Dangerous Slide

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The government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban of Hungary is sliding toward authoritarianism and defying the fundamental values of the European Union — and getting away with it. On Oct. 22, the European Parliament bolstered the prestige of the Orban government by approving the slate of nominees for the new European Commission that included Hungary's former justice minister, Tibor Navracsics, as Europe's new commissioner of education, culture, youth and sport.

Mr. Orban's government has waged a full-bore assault on the rights of Hungary's citizens protected under the European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Treaty on European Union. Article 2 of the treaty obliges member states to respect democracy, freedom and human rights. Article 11 in the charter guarantees the right of all Europeans to a free press and to freedom of expression “without interference by public authority.”

In July, Mr. Orban said he would mold Hungary into an “illiberal” state, citing Russia, Turkey and China as models. His government has promoted a Magyar ethnic nationalism that helps foster anti-Semitism and anti-Roma prejudices.

In 2010, the Orban government introduced media laws that require “balanced” reporting by journalists who work under the watch of a government-appointed Media Council. Last year, the government made controversial changes to the Constitution that curtailed media freedom and civil rights. Last month, the government floated the idea of a tax on Internet access, which drew widespread outrage. Mr. Orban put the tax on hold, “for now,” after tens of thousands of Hungarians marched in protest last week.

Hungary's most recent expression of contempt for the European Union is its passage of a law on Monday that clears the way for Russia's South Stream natural gas pipeline to traverse Hungary. The new law is in clear violation of the European Parliament's call in September for member states to cancel South Stream and of the economic sanctions against Russia imposed by the European Union and the United States after Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Instead of issuing tepid expressions of concern over antidemocratic policies, the European Union should be moving to sanction Hungary. Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, should exercise his power to force Mr. Navracsics to resign. Failure to take steps against the Orban government would be abdicating the values that form the foundation of the European Union.