

# Opinion & Analysis

## Inside Politics

### Pat Leahy



## Greens need to push on with their policy priorities

Small parties tend to have a hard time of it in Irish coalition governments. Usually – not always, but usually – they struggle to maintain their identity, struggle to implement their agendas, and struggle to hold their seats in the subsequent general election.

There have been a few impressive flameouts: the Progressive Democrats in 2007 (all but two seats gone), the Greens in 2011 (all seats gone), Labour in 2016 (lost 80 per cent of their seats) are recent examples.

All pretty ominous if you are in the Green Party, a small party accompanied by not one but two bigger parties in government, and having had a rough few weeks which saw a Minister under sustained fire and another spate of resignations from high-profile young members. But we'll come back to that.

In this year's general election the Independent Alliance followed the example of the smaller parties fed to the lions. Two of its ministers, Finian

McGrath and John Halligan, decided discretion was the better part of valour and retired from the field rather than risk the loss of their seats (probable rather than possible in both cases, would be my judgment), while Shane Ross and "Boxer" Moran were abruptly informed by the voters that their services were now surplus to requirements.

Ross has been knocking about television and radio studios in recent weeks, publicising his entertainingly indiscreet account of his time in government, In Bed with the Blueshirts.

I interviewed him this week for the Inside Politics podcast, and after the usual knockabout stuff asked him about the experience of being a smaller group in government, how to get the most out of it, and how to avoid the mistakes he and his colleagues made.

Ross, unsurprisingly, views the Independent Alliance experiment in government as a success. I am not so sure, frankly. Whatever your view, I think there are things that the Green Party can learn here.

#### Defined objectives

Ross advises smaller parties and groups to have a limited set of clearly defined objectives, and to concentrate on the pursuit of those. He might have added that they need to matter for the people who voted for you, and might vote for you again at the next election.

"You can't expect to get everything you want. But you can say, we want the following, and if we don't get the following you're not going to get your stuff either," he says.

Alongside this constant focus on the smaller parties' policy goals, he counsels amity. "Negotiate hard but don't go in with the mindset we had, which was basically that we were going in not as friends but as rivals... You've got to go in determined to be partners."

I think Eamon Ryan and the leadership of the Greens understand most of this, but it will become harder to maintain that clear-eyed focus as events – Government and party – intrude, as they always do.

There were several examples in the past difficult week for the Green Party. The Minister for Equality and Children and Several Other Things Roderic O'Gorman found himself in the middle of an almighty storm over legislation which will secure (or seal, critics said) the archive of the Commission on Mother and Baby Homes.

It is possible to imagine O'Gorman guilty of many errors, but I find it hard to see him as a puppet of a coven of shadowy mother superiors, intent on hiding their past sins through a complex legal manoeuvre.

There have been – and perhaps still are – people in the broader State apparatus who are so disposed, but, as Patsy McGarry explained in a helpful op-ed in Thursday's paper, there are good reasons for the rules about the sometimes incredibly

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### I find it hard to see him [Roderic O'Gorman] as a puppet of a coven of shadowy Mother Superiors, intent on hiding their past sins

sensitive information gathered by such inquiries.

People have been given legal guarantees of confidentiality, and these cannot be simply set aside.

Of course people have a right to their own stories, but it may take some time after the conclusion of the commission to work out how that is done. That is probably a discussion best not had on social media.

In any event, while the storm of the past week was an intense one, I don't think it has any longer-term political significance for the Greens in government. Bear in mind the lesson of many recent elections and referendums here and elsewhere: your Twitter feed is not the country.

The Greens will be judged on whether they achieve a small number of policy priorities that matter to their past and

prospective voters: climate action, transport (especially cycling and walking), affordable housing for younger people, ending direct provision.

Greens tell me that Ryan tells his troops: "stick to the knitting". Another way of putting this: O'Gorman may turn out to be a failure as a Minister, but if he does it won't be because of Mother and Baby Homes.

I think much the same applies to recent resignations from the Greens.

#### Refusniks

Last weekend the heads of the Young Greens and the Queer Greens left the party. They were followed by Cork councillor Lorna Bogue, who cited the Mother and Baby Homes as a tipping point which prompted her departure. "There's just things that we won't tolerate anymore," she told another Irish Times podcast.

Bogue and her fellow refusniks are undoubtedly sincere. But it's hard to discern a coherent and realistic alternative for the party anywhere among the minority in the Greens who opposed the coalition: we'd like to be in government without Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil and we'd like to be on the left-ish side of social media storms. Neither of these are ignoble desires. But they're hardly a programme for political action.

In any event, that ship has sailed. The Greens made their choice. They now have to make the best of it.



# West's failure on Covid-19 will have long-term effect



### Naomi O'Leary Opinion

Western leaders have been slow learners at every stage of the pandemic

The pandemic has not been easy anywhere. But as the citizens of the West brace for a winter largely confined to their homes, retirees in Australia through the bars, the streets of Taipei are busy and the restaurants of Seoul are full. The United States and Europe are outliers in how badly they have managed the pandemic, managing to sacrifice public health and tank their economies to an extent that may affect the global balance of power for our lifetimes.

The pandemic response has been politicised and captured by tiresome culture warriors, while restrictions are blamed for economic damage that is an inevitable as long as coronavirus roams. Contain it, and normality returns. There is no normal economy with a virus that kills and debilitates the human beings that make it up.

How did we get here? All kinds of absurd stereotypes about Asia were used to support the Western exceptionalism that underpinned our bad policies. All the successful pandemic control techniques, including mask-wearing, contact-tracing, and compulsory quarantine, were initially dismissed as authoritarian and culturally inappropriate for the West. They were categorised as

something only China would do, ignoring that these techniques were central to the successful pandemic response of democracies from Taiwan, to Japan, to South Korea. Ever-protesting Hong Kong is the example that makes particularly hilarious the idea that Asian people are just more "compliant" or "don't love freedom" like the West.

Australia and New Zealand are majority white ex-colonial societies that don't fit into this confused thinking anyway. Their practices were dismissed as "cutting themselves off from the world". Australia will soon open up with New Zealand, and Hong Kong with Singapore, gradually expanding the bubble of safety. It is we, the virus-riddled Westerners, who will be isolated indefinitely.

Rather than learning from what already worked, we chose Hail Mary technological fixes that didn't exist yet, like contact-tracing apps and vaccines, to justify business as usual.

Behind all of this was exceptionalism. Infectious diseases were viewed as a developing-world problem that the West had outgrown. We underfunded and neglected pandemic response. Many leaders and influential people had an inappropriate lack of alarm and grasped at fairytales that minimised the threat of the virus, the kind of false sense of invulnerability of people too sheltered to fear things.

#### False

This exceptionalism often took the form of the "it only kills the sick and the old" mantra. This is false: one in 10 people under 50 suffer enduring damage from the virus and it has always killed randomly. It's also cruel: it treats the lives of any happy retiree, any mother of four with ovarian cancer, any young man with cystic fibrosis as disposable.

Its iteration in policy is deciding not to eliminate the virus while telling the vulnerable to cocoon, which means confining about a third of the population to indefinite house arrest, a weird flex by

the governments of the world's oldest and sickest populations, who rely on the votes of those people to stay in power.

This false separation of the strong and the weak also misunderstands society. People share accommodation. Grandmothers raise children. And people at risk of death from the virus are the very same who run our healthcare systems.

Like 46-year-old Diego Bianco of Italy, an ambulance paramedic who died in bed after telling his wife not to worry. Or 28-year-old Dr Adeline Fagan, who died last month in Texas after working shifts in the coronavirus emergency ward. Or Boy Ettema (42) a nurse who died intubated in his own hospital in the Netherlands.

Western governments treated their

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### Enforced quarantines for a few were unthinkable for the West. So now there are blanket restrictions on us all

healthcare workers like load-bearing infrastructure, with policy aimed to "not overwhelm" hospitals. But governments are not so all-powerful as they delude themselves, that they can precisely calibrate how many people get sick at once from a highly infectious virus according to how many beds are available. When they err, they gift their much-applauded healthcare workers the trauma of choosing between patients.

Excuses could be made for ill-preparedness at the start of the pandemic. But Western leaders have been insular slow learners at every stage. And the failure to act effectively when cases were brought down to low levels during the summer – an

#### ■ Ventilating a coronavirus patient in Rome: the strategy over the summer was to get rid of the restrictions, not the virus. PHOTOGRAPH: MASSIMO PEROCCHI/PEPA

achievement hard won with sacrifices by every citizen – is hard to forgive.

Western governments now emphasise that individual responsibility will determine the course of the pandemic. "The path it takes depends on YOU," as Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris tweeted this month.

#### Self-defeating

Societal co-operation is vital. But no individual citizen has the power to put in place an effective testing and tracing system.

All the self-delusion has been self-defeating, as in a kind of tragic irony, the pursuit of each aim has led to its defeat.

In the name of saving the economy, the strategy over the summer was to get rid of the restrictions, not the virus. The European Commission's "Reopen EU" website, with its little cocktail glass icon that allowed users to see if bars were open in their holiday destination, appears an absurd folly now that the rush to save the tourism and catering industries has bought us a crushing new wave of infection so severe it threatens to make the EU's vaunted €750 billion stimulus agreement obsolete.

In the name of "freedom", Western governments would not contemplate mandatory quarantines. Taoiseach Micheál Martin recently dismissed such practices in the Dáil as "statist". Targeted, enforced quarantines for a few were unthinkable for the West. So now there are blanket restrictions on us all. What is more free? Which is more statist?

All states involve a trade off between citizens and their rulers: taxes for services, common rules for safety. The point of a state is to create the conditions for its citizens to thrive. The West has failed.

## World View

### Ruadhán Mac Cormaic



## Rot in American democracy goes deeper than Trump

It is a peculiarity few visiting Europeans fail to notice: in the United States, the state, or at least those parts of it that you might encounter day to day, is quite often literally falling down.

Roads, bridges and railways are in disrepair. Airports can feel shabby and public transport is patchy. Some government departments feel like they were last redecorated in the 1970s. The state of public infrastructure is a running political headache, widely recognised as holding back the country's economic performance, and nearly every president pledges to put it right.

That distressed fabric of the US's public space may be a convenient metaphor for the country's ambivalence towards the state, yet it hardly denotes a weak state, still less an impoverished one. This is not a country that lacks public or industrial capacity; merely one whose priorities are elsewhere. Still, this election season in the US has shone a harsh light on another piece of decaying public infrastructure, one that really does go to the heart of the country's political culture. American democracy is under severe strain.

In its yearly country-by-country democratic health-check, Freedom House, a Washington think-tank, this summer described the US in terms more commonly associated with unstable emerging states: "pressure on electoral integrity, judicial independence, and safeguards against corruption. Fiercer rhetorical attacks on the press, the rule of law, and other pillars of democracy coming from American leaders, including the president himself."

#### Confusion and chaos

On the eve of an election that could end in confusion and chaos, with an incumbent president refusing to say if he will accept the outcome, it's tempting to blame Donald Trump for this. His contempt for the rule of law, his coddling of dictators, his embrace of white supremacists and his emasculation of the Republican Party have certainly exposed the cracks in a system expressly designed to prevent one man accumulating a lot of power and using that power to attack the checks on his authority. But the rot goes deeper than Trump.

The obvious answer when faced with a challenge such as this is: vote. The franchise is the ultimate brake on democratic drift. Yet Americans are less and less engaged; turnout since the 1970s has been less than 60 per cent, and among low-income households it's closer to 30 per cent. As individual participation has

declined, corporate influence has soared, with most successful campaigns for any office of significance now dependent on tapping the vast reservoir of private money sloshing through the political process.

The system itself compounds those distorting effects. Trump won in 2016 not because he won the most votes but because of an electoral system that gives disproportionate power to small rural conservative states over bigger, liberal ones.

Decades of gerrymandering and continuing voter suppression make a mockery of "one person, one vote". In the event of a contested result on Tuesday, the winner will be chosen by an avowedly ideological institution, the supreme court, which owes its vast power to a calcified, unamendable constitution and a political system in a state of perpetual gridlock.

#### Steady erosion

As the ancient Romans learned, and as the framers of the US constitution were aware, democracies have less to fear from sudden shocks than from the steady erosion of the pillars that hold them up: social trust, political compromise, shared information, a spirit of solidarity. Democracies can get stuck. Norms fall away. And that stalemate is an existential threat.

The now-regular spectacle of a government shutdown as a result of budgetary dispute between Democrats and Republicans is but the most egregious demonstration of an impasse that makes it all but impossible to enact the far-reaching laws needed to address the country's problems.

The process has been in train for decades but accelerated after the 2008 recession, with a shrinking middle class, widening income inequality and wealthy special interests all steadily chipping away at public faith in a system that fewer and fewer people feel looks out for them. The fraying of those social bonds has coincided with the retreat, through new technologies, into isolated camps where people are not exposed to, let alone engage with, ideas that do not fit their way of thinking.

Poisonous factionalism has produced a civic space in which even the most basic observable facts are contested. For Americans who feel the past four years has been a living nightmare, a defeat for Trump next week would bring a feeling of immediate relief. But Trump is a symptom more than a cause of democratic dysfunction. The decay in the system will outlive his presidency. Repairing it will be a far more daunting challenge than fixing those roundabout highways.

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## Get ready for the new era of post-pandemic politics

Though the news that the supply of Johnson & Johnson vaccines may be severely constricted in June is a blow to the vaccination programme, it is still moving along at a fair old clip. We are within a few weeks of most of the country being jabbed. Alongside the reopening, there are signs that this will be transformative of the public mood. This can't but have an effect on politics, and may open up a period of intense competition as the new post-Covid politics takes shape.

The politics of the pandemic have been sort of flabby and inert, with a lack of contention on the most important issue of the day. But that will not last forever; indeed, as recent exchanges on the housing issue have shown, it is already coming to an end. More broadly, as the pandemic recedes, so will the politics that accompanied it. I think we may be approaching a restart moment and my guess is that post-pandemic politics will not be the same as what went before. But neither will it be entirely unconnected to it.

weekly survey of public opinion, carried out by independent pollsters Amárach Research, relating to the pandemic. It presents a valuable moving picture of the public mood, and shows that there have been three broad stages in that mood since the pandemic arrived over a year ago.

First there was the "We're all in this together" phase; this incidentally saw Fine Gael's, and Leo Varadkar's, ratings rebound from election day lows in February to chart-topping success by June-July of last year. Fine Gael has retained much of that strength since.

Then there was a phase of much greater uncertainty, as the second wave began to build, first slowly, then rapidly. The public was increasingly fearful of the virus and apprehensive about the measures adopted to contain it, but even by the time of the second lockdown in October, was broadly supportive of the way the Government – now the old enemy Coalition led by Micheál Martin – was managing things.

**Recrimination**  
Unsurprisingly, that approval, amid enormous public alarm, did not last past the Christmas reopening and the third wave. There has been a long period of subsequent recrimination throughout the extended lockdown.

But driven by vaccination and reopening, I think this public mood is now changing. Just look at the Amárach data. Stress, anger, fear – all have declined hugely in

recent months. Worry about the pandemic has plummeted. Massive majorities back the Government's approach to the pandemic: 65 per cent say the Government's reaction is appropriate.

Interrogate the various policy areas, and that sentiment is echoed: on social distancing, 79 per cent say it's about right; 67 per cent say there shouldn't be more restrictions (16 per cent say there should); 54 per cent say Ireland is returning to normal at about the right pace (24 per cent say too slow, 23 per cent say too quickly).

This is big-picture, quantitative data. But I think that it's important to realise how personally many people will feel the relief and security of vaccination. In the early, slow months of the programme, that was confined to people's parents and elderly relatives – now it is moving into the middle cohorts of the population. By mid-summer it's heading into the younger groups. Yes, the shortfalls will make this slower – but only by a few weeks. I am not sure that will matter much.

What does this change in the national mood do to politics? For a start, it hits up hard against the idea shared by lots of people that the Government couldn't organise the excessive consumption of beer in a brewery, if you know what I mean. For sure there are people who will remain vocally unshakable in that belief, but I think the personal experience of vaccination – a mammoth and complex task in anyone's language – will challenge for



**The personal experience of vaccination – a mammoth and complex task in anyone's language – will challenge for many people the idea that the Government can't do anything right**

many people the idea that the Government can't do anything right.

#### Delayed honeymoon

Mind you, the Coalition shouldn't get carried away. A poll in last week's Sunday Times, showing significantly higher support for the Government parties among older voters (who have been vaccinated), has fuelled hopes of a "vaccine bounce". Some people in Government talk about a delayed honeymoon for Martin.

To which I would say: forget it, fellas.

Any bounce is likely to be short term and belongs to the final phase of pandemic politics which is coming to an end, not to

the post-pandemic politics that will follow. But what a brisk rollout of the vaccination programme and the successful reopening of the country can do for the Government is get it a hearing from people about what comes next.

Martin, Varadkar and Eamon Ryan will get the opportunity to reintroduce their administration to the middle-ground voters who will decide the next election, who decide all elections.

What will they do on housing? On the repair and catch-up required in the health service? On the weaning of the economy off Covid subsidies and the inevitable repair of the public finances? How do they begin a green transition to a low-carbon economy that retains public acceptance? These will be the issues that decide the outcome of the next phase of politics.

Against the Government parties stands a main Opposition party that is better prepared, better motivated and better at politics – both in its long-term strategy and its day-to-day, hand-to-hand combat – than any I have seen.

There are signs, already becoming visible in Martin's Dáil duels with Mary Lou McDonald, and the determination of both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to weaponise Sinn Féin's local objections to housing developments against the party, that the Government knows what it is up against.

All this will give us an intensely combative and partisan politics such as we have not seen for a long time. Buckle up.



## We just don't know if it is safe to reopen the country yet



### Aoife McLysaght Opinion

With the Indian variant on our doorstep, the cost of waiting to make an informed decision means only a slight delay in reopening

I want things to open up again as much as anyone else. I want to be able to see my family and friends and give them a long-overdue hug. I want to be able to hang out and laugh and eat and drink and be merry. I'd love an overseas holiday somewhere with reliable sunshine and new places to visit. However, I don't want these things at any cost. And I especially don't want to have a repeat of the December reopening, where we exchanged three weeks of hurry-up-and-eat-your-substantial-meal for five months and counting of lockdown, and thousands of avoidable deaths.

This week the Government has been discussing plans for the reopening of hospitality for summer. The arguments appear to be exactly the same as those we heard in December – all about how important this period is for the sector, and not enough about science-based policies to make it safer. We are yet again having discussions about the distance between tables, the number of minutes you can stay and how many people can sit together. But

the virus is airborne and doesn't care about your two metres, and doesn't care that even though your tables were only one metre apart, you stayed for less than 105 minutes. To pretend otherwise is to play dumb and invite disaster. Instead of magical-thinking guidelines about numbers of adults, numbers of children and numbers of minutes, we need sensible, evidence-based standards for any reopening activities. This means proper ventilation, suitable distance (one metre is too close), and masks whenever possible.

#### High risk

The Irish Government has adopted a "wait for the vaccines" strategy. However, it wasn't upfront about how long that wait would be. We are now in a situation where we are lucky enough to have numerous very effective vaccines available, and our vaccine rollout is keeping pace with supply. Even so, many over-60s, as well as younger people with significant medical vulnerabilities, have yet to be fully vaccinated (and many within group seven – people aged 16-64 who are at high risk – have not even received their first dose).

Nonetheless, some people seem to be under the impression that we can reopen without risking a surge in hospitalisations or deaths. But even in the UK, where vaccination rollout is ahead of Ireland, a looming risk of a surge worse than January exists because of the apparently increased transmissibility of the B.1.617.2 variant, first identified in India. This is because increased transmissibility means a huge number of cases, and even in the unvaccinated younger age groups, where the percentage of negative outcomes is lower, this is a problem – a small percentage of a very large number is still a large number.

The B.1.617.2 variant has now been recognised as the dominant variant in the UK, and Matt Hancock was reported as saying that they "are in a race between the

virus and the vaccine". How did the UK end up in a neck-and-neck race, when only a matter of weeks ago things looked comparatively smooth? British prime minister Boris Johnson and his cabinet failed to heed the early warnings of the likes of the Independent Sage group and other epidemiologists and public health doctors who warned that to wait for certainty was to flirt with disaster. The only way to be certain a new variant of concern is indeed more transmissible is to observe the pattern of infection and cases. It means waiting until it is already too late. We must not make that mistake in Ireland, and we must listen to the alarm bells the world-class genomic surveillance of our nearest neighbour affords us. The variant B.1.617.2 is already here – we must not allow it to spread.

That means preventing more cases arriving from Britain, and it means ensuring our local public health units are properly resourced to stamp out and contain the cases that are already here. It's a challenge, but we did this before. Not long ago in Ireland we found cases of the P.1 variant first identified in Brazil, but this appears to have been successfully contained by a combination of mandatory



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■ We can achieve herd immunity through vaccination by getting about 80 per cent of our total population fully vaccinated. PHOTOGRAPH: CHARLES MCQUILLAN/GETTY IMAGES

hotel quarantine and the excellent work of our public health doctors. These things work. We need to extend our quarantine system to include at least all countries where variants of concern are common, including Britain. Other EU countries have already started to restrict travel from Britain, with Germany and France both planning on imposing quarantine. If we don't take action, B.1.617.2 will spread here, and Ireland could find itself on these travel restriction lists.

#### More clarity

In a matter of weeks we will have significantly more clarity about the dangers posed, or not, by B.1.617.2. The cost of waiting is only a slight delay so that we can make informed decisions. By then we will know more about its transmissibility, and the vaccines' efficacy. We can use that time to properly formulate ventilation criteria for indoor spaces, so that they can be made safer. We can safeguard our domestic summer.

While holidaying within our own beautiful country, we can celebrate the good news of increasing numbers of our friends and family getting vaccinated. We can achieve herd immunity through vaccination by getting about 80 per cent of our total population fully vaccinated. We are lucky in Ireland that we have such enthusiastic vaccine uptake that this is a realistic prospect. When we get to that stage the virus will find itself in a hostile environment. We shouldn't spoil this hard-won chance with impatience.

Aoife McLysaght is professor of genetics at TCD

## World View

### Ruadhán Mac Cormaic



## New authoritarianism is a real threat to EU

Even as Alexander Lukashenko finds ever more brutal ways to repress his own people and aggravate his European neighbours, the Belarusian leader can seem like a throwback to another time.

Overseeing a sclerotic state and an economy modelled on the Soviet system from which he emerged, the macho former collective-farm boss is easily lampooned as the sort of dim-witted but ruthless party man that featured in Armando Iannucci's satire *The Death of Stalin*.

Western media frame Lukashenko as a 20th-century figure; for more than two decades he has been routinely described as "Europe's last dictator", as if his political lineage could be traced directly to the homicidal despots of the 1920s and 1930s.

Casting the regime in Minsk in this way, as an anachronistic remnant of another era, risks trivialising the brutality that Lukashenko's one-party state uses against those who disagree with it – like Roman Protasevich, the opposition activist who was detained after Belarus forced his Ryanair flight to land on its soil.

But arguably it also makes it easier for Europe to grasp the threat Lukashenko poses and to respond to that threat. To anyone who has watched the glacial and often inconclusive process by which the European Union decides on its foreign policy positions, it was remarkable to witness the speed with which it moved to act against Minsk after the outrageous arrests of Protasevich and his partner, Sofia Sapega.

In addition to calling for their release, EU leaders urged the union's airlines not to use Belarus's airspace and banned Belarusian airlines from flying in its skies or landing at its airports. The leaders called on ministers to move quickly to adopt new "targeted economic sanctions" and to accelerate a package of measures that was already under discussion. The sanctions will target oligarchs and companies believed to offer funding to Lukashenko's system, thereby – the thinking goes – increasing pressure on the regime by weakening its domestic support structures.

#### Political mobilisation

The EU's swift and decisive political mobilisation against the dictatorship on its doorstep contrasts starkly with its chronic inability to muster a coherent response to threats to democracy inside the club.

It's not that the two problems are directly comparable – Lukashenko runs a one-party state that detains and tortures its opponents, and the spark that moved the EU to act against it was not the crushing of internal dissent per se but the prospect of European airspace being weaponised.

Yet the creeping authoritarianism inside the bloc is arguably a greater threat to the EU itself

and to its founding values – if one that is more difficult to confront.

The union's failure so far to act in defence of democracy in Hungary and Poland is not merely a failure to grasp what is happening. The bloc's treaties failed to anticipate such a grave situation arising within the club, and Budapest and Warsaw have been adept at blocking collective action against them.

Other member states are divided between those who would punish and exclude the authoritarians and those who believe they must be persuaded to rein in their worst instincts.

For others, there are commercial reasons not to alienate errant neighbours. Just yesterday, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán was received at Downing Street by Boris Johnson.

#### Demonising minorities

It complicates matters that, in Hungary and Poland, the EU is grappling with a new form of authoritarianism that resists easy categorisation. Those countries' leaders are in a vanguard of a nationalist counter-revolution that arose through existing democratic structures.

They work those structures while gradually tightening their control over the public space that democracy needs to flourish – by restricting non-governmental organisations, threatening activists, demonising minorities, removing bureaucratic checks, limiting academic freedom and strengthening political control over the judiciary.

Like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro and in contrast to a straight-up dictator such as Lukashenko, Europe's new authoritarians do not ban opposition parties, cancel elections or attempt to dismantle parliamentary structures.

Instead they seek to empower a democratically-elected majority. And because it happens gradually, the broader pattern is harder to discern. But the long-term erosion of democracy is real.

There is no preordained outcome to the authoritarian drift in Poland and Hungary. Trump was constrained in important ways by a combination of resilient institutions and his own ineptitude. Other nationalist demagogues will be ejected from power, preventing true mafia states from taking hold before it is too late.

But the longer the new authoritarians remain in office – assuming more control and diverting more public resources towards their own propaganda – the more difficult it becomes for a democratic transfer of power to occur.

The most dangerous assumption for the EU to make is that modern democracies are self-renewing. They have always demanded things of citizens: participation, argument, struggle. And when the space in which those things occur shrinks beyond a certain point, as Europeans know well, the entire political order is in peril.