

From the desk of Steven Hill

Dateline: Toulouse, France

Dear friends and colleagues,

I am now blogging on the [Washington Monthly](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/) website about my 12 nation, 20 city speaking tour in Europe. During my peregrinations across the continent, from Paris to Istanbul, I am assessing the impact of the economic crisis, including what the political elites are saying, as well as what the average person is experiencing. Is the highly vaunted European social capitalism, which provides so well for families and workers, in danger of erosion? The varied venues in which I will travel and speak will put me in contact with people in many different countries, and should be a good vantage point for hearing a range of viewpoints.

You can access the blog at www.washingtonmonthly.com/ (see the "How's Europe Doing?" button on the lower right) or www.washingtonmonthly.com/howeurope.doing.

During my tour, I also will give presentations at the European Commission (which is like President Obama's cabinet for the European Union), as well as to a host of think tanks, policy institutes and NGOs in Europe. I also have been invited to speak to some local chapters of Democrats Abroad, which is the international wing of the Democratic Party. In Vienna I will observe the Austrian national election which is occurring on October 10. I will arrive in Stockholm just after the Swedish national election, in which an anti-immigration party is predicted to win a few legislative seats for the first time in Sweden's history. And I will spend considerable time in Greece, where the recent sovereign debt crisis threatened not only Greece but the other so-called PIIGS countries (Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Spain), as well as the euro zone itself.

The Dispatches from Europe blog already is up and running and below are a few excerpts. If you have time, please weigh in with your own comments on the blog (link [here](#)).

September 27, 2010

I just arrived in Budapest, Hungary as the first stop in a five-week speaking tour in Europe.

I am participating in and speaking at a two-day, invitation-only conference, "The Crisis in Europe: Re-inventing EU Policies Delivering Growth and Fighting Poverty." This conference is hosted by the [European Ideas Network](#), a think tank associated with the center-right [European People's Party](#) (which holds the largest number of seats in the European Parliament). Speakers at the conference include two prime ministers (from Hungary and Belgium), the president of the European Parliament, various Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament, various former European Commissioners (like Obama's cabinet members at the EU level), national ministers, and leaders of a host of NGOs and think tanks. In other words, these are some of the leading conservatives in Europe. Yet interestingly these conservatives do not sound much like the Republican Party in the United States. Whether the issue is health care, social spending in general, the economy and the current crisis, military interventions, immigration, security or virtually any other major issue with which governments deal today, these "conservatives"... in most ways [are] to the LEFT of the Democratic Party. That's why these "left-right" terminologies don't translate well across the Atlantic.

Hungary's local elections are on October 3, and campaign posters are visible in the streets. The big question/fear on everyone's minds is whether the nationalist anti-immigrant party, known as [Jobbik](#), will make gains. I expect that they will, since that's what typically happens at this point in an economic downturn. That's true not only in Hungary but also in Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Austria, possibly Sweden, and even the United States (e.g. Tea Party, Ground Zero mosque, Arizona profiling). Due to the insecurities of the age, and the anger of the populace that arises from the insecurities, the right wing populists are able to find a more willing audience, i.e. voters looking to give a thumb in the eye to the system. While this is alarming, it also is to be expected. These right wing populists raise issues that the mainstream parties have been either unwilling or incapable of addressing. While the ideologues are noisy, provocative and offensive, I believe they also play a role in a democracy. Better to have their perspective in the legislature, I say, and to show that they don't really have any policy solutions; they just make a lot of noise. It's also important to keep in mind that typically the populists and/or their parties disappear from the political landscape within an election or two. Witness Jorg Haider in Austria, Pim Fortuyn in the Netherlands, Pat Buchanan and Marilyn Quayle at the podium during the Republican National Convention in 1992 -- at the height of a recession -- spewing their right-wing populism (I confess to remembering Buchanan's "peasants with pitchforks" speeches with a degree of nostalgia -- they were so over-the-top as to be amusing, the way the Village People was over-the-top. You have to admit, the man was not bland)...They burst on the scene like a Roman candle, and then fizz away just as quickly, having shed more heat than light.

The view from my hotel balcony is stunning. I'm looking across the impressive [Szechenyi Chain Bridge](#), with its imperial arches and massive lion guardians, which spans the wide Danube. Boats are chugging to and fro, and visible on the other side of the river is the massive [Buda Castle](#), set high on a hill and looming over the passage of commerce and time as it has done since its first construction nearly 800 years ago. Hungary's impressive [Parliament building](#) also sits astride the river, and not only is it one of Europe's oldest legislative buildings it also is the most stunning I've ever seen, similar in its Gothic Revival style to Westminster in London. [Budapest](#) long has been this region's political, cultural and commercial hub, and today it is a beautiful, quintessentially European metropolis. Decked out in castles, Roman ruins and architectural styles that range from Gothic to Bauhaus to Art Deco and Classicist residential blocks along the wide boulevards, it is a place where Western Europe long has met Eastern Europe, and not always peacefully. It is easy to forget that Hungary itself once was an empire, ruling over vast stretches of Europe; it also was subjugated and occupied for 140 years by the Ottoman Empire that arrived from Turkey; and it was the scene of a brief but heroic uprising in 1956 against the Soviet empire. As I stand on my balcony looking at the Danube and the scene before me, I realize this is history itself flowing downriver.