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Homo Orbánicus

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Orbán: Hungary's Strongman

by Paul Lendvai

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Viktor Orbán; drawing by Siegfried Woldhek

Visitors to Budapest may have read somewhere that Hungary has the first autocratic regime in the European Union. The capital on the Danube does not feel like that: the atmosphere is relaxed, not repressive; no paramilitaries are marching; if anything, one might come across a small demonstration against the government, politely escorted by police. The ruling “ism” would appear to be not authoritarianism but hedonism: from the beautifully restored thermal baths to the beer gardens in the old Jewish quarter, affluent natives and an ever-growing number of tourists just seem to be enjoying themselves.

There is no personality cult around Hungary’s leader, Viktor Orbán, who has been prime minister since 2010. Orbán has understood that authoritarian populism must never evoke images familiar from twentieth-century dictatorships: no violence in the streets, no knocks on doors by the secret police late at night, no forcing citizens to profess political loyalty in public. Instead, power is secured through wide-ranging control of the judiciary and the media; behind much talk of protecting hard-pressed families from multinational corporations, there is crony capitalism, in which one has to be on the right side politically to get ahead economically.

Like all populists, Orbán has no difficulty in presenting himself as an underdog fighting “the elites”—preferably “shadowy” ones that threaten the nation with their “globalist” networks. This past fall, the government waged a vicious campaign against the Hungarian-American hedge fund manager and philanthropist George Soros, alleging that his “empire” is bent on striking a “final blow to Christian culture.” It is worth remembering that Orbán was the first major European politician to endorse Trump (whose victory he celebrated as a “return to reality” in the face of political correctness and liberal hypocrisies). Hungary is of course not the US, but the country shows clearly how populists with enough power operate when in government.

Paul Lendvai, a Hungarian-Austrian journalist who spent several decades reporting on Central Europe for the *Financial Times*, has written a highly illuminating biography of Orbán, whom he calls “the ablest and most controversial politician in modern Hungarian history.” *Orbán: Hungary’s Strongman* also serves as a useful overview of Hungarian history since the fall of communism—after all, Orbán has been central to the country’s development since at least the late-1990s, when he was first elected prime minister. Lendvai portrays him as ruthless, absolutely relentless in the pursuit of power, and, on many occasions, outright vengeful.

Orbán has long cultivated the image of a man born to fight: his passions are for soccer and spaghetti Westerns. The avenger played by Charles Bronson in *Once Upon a Time in the West* is a particular favorite; he claims to have seen the movie at least fifteen times. He likes to brandish his “plebeian” origins and values: his family lived without running water; the children had to labor in the fields during school holidays. This picture leaves out the fact that Orbán’s father was the typical *Homo Kádáricus*, the product of “goulash communism” under János Kádár, who led the country from 1956 to 1988. Kádár had struck a tacit deal with Hungarian society: politics should be left to him, and in return people would not have to pretend to believe in communism; instead, they could find happiness in family life and even run small businesses. Back then, Western accounts of the country invariably contained the cliché of the “happiest barracks in the Eastern Bloc.” Part of an upwardly mobile rural middle class that both despised and served socialism, Orbán’s father became the head of the machinery department in a local farm collective. Orbán was a good student, and in the mid-1980s he joined the István Bibó College in

the Buda hills, a kind of intellectual fraternity house for law students from the countryside. The college had been set up by the socialist regime, but some of the tutors teaching there were dissident intellectuals. Soros supported it financially.

In 1988, Orbán and other students set up the Alliance of Young Democrats (Fidesz). They took the word “young” literally: no one above the age of thirty-five was allowed to join. Their program was liberal, anticlerical, and suspicious of nationalism. Eventually, the Fidesz founders were to abandon these ideals for their exact opposites. But they never abandoned one another. Today the country’s president, the speaker of parliament, and the author of Hungary’s 2012 constitution all happen to be Orbán’s friends from university days.

Lendvai emphasizes the particular characteristics of this political brotherhood. They shared relatively humble origins in the countryside and grew resentful of the urbane intellectuals who tutored them. Some of these older liberals had formed a successful party, the Free Democrats, after the Kádár regime and, in the eyes of Orbán and friends, patronized the young firebrands as a not yet fully educated youth branch of their party. Whether the country boys split from the older liberals because they had a chip on their shoulder is debatable—after all, this story is just another version of the populist notion that the country is forever divided between “the real, rural Hungary” and the cosmopolitan (sometimes called “foreign-hearted”—i.e., Jewish) Budapest liberals. What is beyond dispute is that Orbán discovered that resentment could be turned to political advantage. As he put it in an interview, “By origin I am not a sensitive intellectual...there is in me perhaps a roughness brought up from below. That is no disadvantage as we know that the majority of people come from below.”

Orbán took up a Soros-sponsored scholarship to go to Oxford, where he set out to research the idea of civil society in the history of European political thought. But he cut his stay short to enter the fight for the leadership of Fidesz. He managed to purge all his opponents and radically altered the party’s program after Hungary’s major center-right party, which had formed the first government after the fall of communism, dramatically lost support. Orbán, nominally a Protestant, suddenly discovered religion and sought an alliance with the churches. He explained that he could not “talk to the people” if he did not understand the churches’ “important part in Hungarian life.” His party’s image utterly changed: the former long-haired student leaders began to advocate the ideal of the *polgári*, a civic-minded, patriotic bourgeois akin to the German *Bürger*, with a strong work ethic and a commitment to traditional family values. Evidently, that vision appealed to voters: in 1998, Orbán, at the age of thirty-five, became Europe’s youngest prime minister.

Hungary was then still seen as a leader in the process of “transition” from state socialism to a market economy and also as a model pupil of the European Union, which the country joined in 2004. It was the shock of Orbán’s political life when he unexpectedly lost the 2002 elections to a technocrat who had been nominated by the Hungarian Socialist Party, the successor party to the Communists. Initially Fidesz alleged election fraud. Orbán exclaimed that the nation simply could not be in opposition (thereby, like all populists, claiming that he and only he represented the people). The surprise was even greater as his government had showered welfare benefits on the electorate before election day—a practice that the new left-wing government would continue. It put Hungary on an unsustainable financial trajectory that nearly led to bankruptcy in 2008.

In 2010, power virtually fell into Orbán's lap: the left had been discredited by a disastrous economic record and corruption scandals. Lendvai describes the Hungarian Socialist Party as "a disgusting snake pit of old Communists and left-wing careerists posing as Social Democrats." Hungary's peculiar electoral system ensured that the 53 percent Fidesz won at the polls translated into a two-thirds majority in parliament. Declaring that this had been no ordinary election but a "revolution at the ballot box," Orbán proceeded to establish an Orwellian-sounding "System of National Cooperation." He also reinforced Hungary's "Trianon Trauma," the country's self-image as a great power that had been victimized by the West because of the post-World War I Treaty of Trianon, as a result of which the country lost two thirds of its territory and a third of ethnic Hungarians ended up in neighboring countries. And he had his party pass a new constitution that codified the nation's Christian character in a preamble beginning with an appeal to God.

Already in 2009 Orbán had announced that the country was in need of a "central political forcefield" that would dominate politics for fifteen to twenty years. The major check on power in the two decades after 1990 had been the constitutional court. After 2010, Fidesz first packed it and then took away most of its powers. From his defeat eight years earlier Orbán had drawn the lesson that his government's achievements had not been communicated "efficiently enough." Accordingly, Fidesz now took over the public and most of the private media. The government also started a campaign against foreign banks and supermarkets, levying special taxes on them. This economic nationalism distracted from the fact that Hungary today has both the highest value-added tax in the EU and the lowest corporate tax—hardly policy choices one would associate with "plebeian values."

Fidesz changed not only the state, the economy, and the culture; it also changed the people themselves. About a million ethnic Hungarians in neighboring states were given citizenship; meanwhile, for a variety of reasons, about 500,000 people left the country. Almost all the new citizens who participated in the 2014 elections voted for Fidesz, while the emigrants found it difficult to register at consulates in New York and London. In 2014, Fidesz received another two-thirds majority in parliament, even though its share of the vote had dropped from 53 to 45 percent. International observers, noting well-executed gerrymandering and the ruthless use of the entire state apparatus for pro-Fidesz propaganda, declared the election free but not fair.

Orbán now proclaimed his aim of creating an "illiberal state" based on the values of work, family, and nation (the very slogan that the wartime French Vichy regime had once adopted). He cleverly ran together the political and economic meanings of "liberalism," leaving open whether he was propounding economic nationalism or something politically authoritarian. The latter interpretation was ever more plausible, as Budapest sought to strengthen ties with Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and other illiberal states. Given memories of the Soviets and the Ottoman occupation, Orbán's "opening to the East" was hardly popular, but it allowed Hungary's leader to present himself as a cunning underdog who would play East and West off each other, all to the Magyars' advantage.

Domestically, Orbán's vision of a dominant central force seemed to have been realized: the major opposition parties were the post-Communists and a new far-right party, Jobbik, the only major political organization not tainted by corruption. It seemed that the two could never unite

against the government. Jobbik's rise enabled Orbán to answer EU criticisms of his undermining the rule of law by warning of a horror scenario: if an overweening Brussels weakened him, he threatened, the EU might one day have to deal with real neo-Nazis in power.

Yet in the months after his triumphant reelection things went awry for the man now often referred to as the "Viktator." Orbán fell out with one of his oldest friends from school, Lajos Simicska, a powerful oligarch and the brains behind Fidesz's party finances. Simicska switched his allegiance to Jobbik, explaining that he could not tolerate Orbán's cozying up to Putin. The two-thirds majority in parliament disappeared after an independent candidate won a by-election. And a new generation of Fidesz leaders, for whom the hard days at the Bibó College were familiar only from history books (which Fidesz now also fully controlled), made their luxury lifestyles all too conspicuous: their expensive watches screamed *nouveau riche*, as opposed to the discreet charm of the *polgári*. The party's popularity plummeted.

Then Orbán hit on the issue that not only saved him from domestic troubles, but also made him a figure of real consequence in Europe. In the spring of 2015, the government decided to build a fence on the border with Serbia to keep out refugees, and it staged a "national consultation" on immigration. An enormous campaign for "yes" accompanied this exercise in fake direct democracy, and Orbán did not hesitate to invoke conspiracy theories to generate fear of people who, according to Fidesz propaganda, had to be either economic migrants or Muslim terrorists. The exact results of the "consultation" have never been revealed, let alone checked by independent observers.

Orbán's strategy of presenting himself as the last protector of a Europe in which Christianity and the nation-state are sacred succeeded both domestically and internationally. At home, he outflanked Jobbik on the right. In the EU, Orbán managed to turn a conflict that should have been about institutions—could the EU tolerate the abolition of the rule of law in a member country?—into one about ideals: his "Christian national identity" versus what he derided as "liberal babble" from Brussels. Henceforth, critics of his attacks on the basic rules of liberal democratic governance were regularly dismissed as just having different, and subjective, values.

Few politicians outside Hungary were eager to take up Orbán's call to wage a pan-European *Kulturkampf*. But plenty on the respectable center-right were happy to use him for their own short-term purposes: Bavarian conservatives celebrated Orbán at a meeting in a monastery in the fall of 2015 to make a show of their opposition to Angela Merkel's refugee policies. The Christian Democrat Sebastian Kurz, who was sworn in as Austria's chancellor in December, praised Orbán to prove his own toughness on immigration. Surely they all know that Orbán is in effect leading a far-right government in which religion is never about ethics—what we actually believe or do—but purely about identity: who we think we are.

As with Trump's victory, Orbán's success over the years does not demonstrate that right-wing populism is an unstoppable force. Rather, his victories have been enabled by the cynicism of center-right politicians in Europe who refuse to distance themselves from what is in fact a white nationalist government. German Christian Democrats, for instance, are less concerned about the rule of law in Hungary or other supposed "European values" than about major investments by

automobile companies, such as Audi, the second-largest employer in Hungary, and Mercedes, both of which receive subsidies from the Hungarian state.

Are there limits to what Orbán can do? For years, there have seemed to be three red lines: conflicts with neighboring countries over their large Hungarian minorities, violence on the streets, and open displays of anti-Semitism. Orbán has by and large eschewed conflict with successor states to the Habsburg Empire. In fact, the more he has been criticized by Brussels, the more he has tried to build up the Visegrád Four (or V-4)—Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic—as a bloc that protects the supposedly real European values of Christianity and nationalism by refusing to take in refugees.

At home, Fidesz has been extremely careful to avoid anything that could look like serious human rights violations. When tens of thousands demonstrated in the spring of 2017 against the threatened closure of the Central European University (founded and endowed by Soros), the police were restrained. Free speech is not suppressed in Hungary, at least not openly; bloggers are free to criticize the government, and all kinds of debates can be staged in Budapest coffeehouses. The government seems to use other means to control speech. In 2015, Hungary's largest left-leaning newspaper was bought by a dubious Austrian investor and, a year later, abruptly closed down, supposedly for financial reasons.

As my colleague Kim Lane Scheppele has emphasized, the very instruments that the West once considered crucial for a transition from socialism to liberal democracy—law and the market—have been used to establish a soft autocracy: after all, the creation of a new Hungarian constitution and Orbán's capture of the judiciary were done in a procedurally correct manner, as one would expect from a party of clever lawyers. And the closing of the liberal newspaper was, ostensibly, caused by the market, not politics.

Without a functioning media, a government's missteps, corruption, and embarrassments will not show up at all on screen or paper. Consider, for example, the mayor of Orbán's hometown and one of his friends from primary school, Lőrinc Mészáros, who was an unemployed pipefitter a decade ago. He is now the fifth-richest man in the country, and his business has grown faster than Mark Zuckerberg's. With disarming frankness, Mészáros once explained that “the good Lord, good luck and the person of Viktor Orbán have certainly all played a role” in his success. Orbán's own family is listed in a *Forbes* report as being worth €23 million.

One reason for Orbán's opening to the East—and his enthusiasm for strongmen from Azerbaijan to China—is that standards of transparency in business transactions are decidedly lower there than in the West. Construction in the beautiful new Budapest, often funded by the EU, also provides excellent opportunities for submitting inflated bills. But since 90 percent of the media is effectively controlled by Fidesz or its allies, most people will not be aware of these abuses. Local newspapers are now all owned by oligarchs close to the government—a situation that recently prompted the US State Department to make a grant available to support “fact-based” reporting in rural Hungary.

As Lendvai emphasizes, Orbán relishes conflict and positively needs enemies. While populist leaders use the pompous rhetoric of “National Cooperation,” what they really do is relentlessly

create and recreate divisions in society. This partly explains the latest campaign against what Fidesz calls the “Soros Plan.” This plan, Fidesz has informed all eight million voters, mandates the transportation of a million migrants into the EU each year and would force states to be soft on crime committed by migrants. In billboards and TV ads, Soros has been portrayed as a grinning puppet master controlling not just left-liberal parties in Hungary but also the major EU institutions. This imagery evokes the worst anti-Semitic stereotypes from European history, drawing from conspiracy theories favored by the Nazis: the Jewish financier as the evil genius behind Bolshevism. Orbán has compared the “Soros Empire” to the Soviet Union and alleges that, together with “Brussels bureaucrats,” this evil empire is forging an alliance “against the European people,” as “Europe is currently being prepared to hand its territory over to a new mixed, Islamized Europe.” A faithful Fidesz deputy felt compelled to attribute the “Soros Plan” to Satan himself.

Once again, the campaign is designed to outflank Jobbik on the right, since it is perceived as the most significant threat to Fidesz in the spring 2018 elections. But it also serves to justify an attack on the remnants of civil society. NGOs that have benefited from grants given by Soros’s foundations have exposed government scandals. A law passed earlier this year forces all NGOs that receive more than €24,000 from abroad to declare themselves as “foreign-supported.” Orbán also ordered the secret services to investigate these NGOs, claiming that they could pose a threat to “national security.” In Orbán’s rhetoric, Hungary is locked in a fight with Soros for nothing less than its national existence.

The EU has reacted helplessly to such Putin-like measures. Orbán has gloated that in response to criticisms from Brussels, he has performed a “peacock dance”: pretending to listen, making cosmetic adjustments to laws, and then proceeding as planned with the consolidation of power. His regime has been possible not despite but because of the EU. When measured in relation to GDP, Hungary is the top recipient of EU funds, which have contributed decisively to the country’s economic growth and which are to the regime what oil money is to Arab despots: a free resource that can be distributed at will to buy political support and strengthen Fidesz oligarchs. In effect, the EU finances its most vocal internal enemy, an enemy who says he feels more at home with politicians in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, than in Brussels. Open borders for one’s own citizens and closed borders for refugees are an ideal combination for Orbán: the former ensures that frustrated citizens can just leave (and probably will have no time or energy left to organize political opposition after waitressing in London or Berlin for ten hours a day).

Lendvai is unsure of how to classify Orbán’s regime. Like any successful political movement, Fidesz has produced ideologues. But its right-wing think tanks have contributed little more than statements such as, “If something is done in the national interest, then it is not corruption.” Meanwhile, Orbán has become a hero of the far right all over the world, with fans such as the Republican US congressman Steve King, who tweeted that “Orban has uttered an axiom of history and of humanity. Western Civilization is the target of George Soros and the Left.” A conference about the future of Europe, organized and financed by the Hungarian foreign ministry to mark the country’s presidency of the V-4 in 2017–2018, featured among the invitees Milo Yiannopoulos and Götz Kubitschek, a leading figure of the German far right whom even Bavarian conservatives would not touch with a barge pole. Fidesz’s vision of the V-4 appears to

be a kind of Disneyland of the far right: Christianity reigns supreme, no Muslims are allowed, the traditional family triumphs. (Orbán's cabinet contains exactly zero women; according to the prime minister, females are just not tough enough for politics.)

Like other populist leaders, Orbán presents his government as being based on direct democracy (on account of the frequent, highly manipulative “national consultations”) in contrast to what he dismisses as “liberal nondemocracy.” Some critics have called Hungary fascist, but the system is clearly not—after all, the government does not seek to mobilize people, encourage mass violence, or demand total ideological conformity; in that regard, it actually resembles Kádárism (under which the discontented were also readily given passports).

In the end, Lendvai settles on the term “Führer democracy” to emphasize the extraordinary centralization of power in the Viktor's hands. And he endorses the idea of the “mafia state,” a term coined by the Hungarian sociologist Bálint Magyar to suggest that the reign of Fidesz has little to do with political ideas, but is simply a means for a “political family” to plunder the country under the protection of its godfather. Lendvai's characterization of Orbán as capable of adopting any belief according to political expediency chimes with that interpretation.

The last chapter of Lendvai's book is entitled “The End of the Regime Cannot Be Foreseen.” What seems foreseeable is another victory for Fidesz in 2018. The opposition remains divided and largely demoralized. Apart from Fidesz, the successor party to the Communists still has the best political infrastructure, but not much moral credibility. Lendvai observes that socialists are the only Hungarian politicians who appear in the Panama Papers. This certainly helps to make the common Fidesz claim that “all sides steal” more believable.

Surprisingly, Fidesz lost a by-election in a stronghold in southern Hungary at the end of February, after all opposition parties had effectively backed an independent candidate. If Orbán were to lose a national vote, would he really go quietly, or is he, like Putin, determined to die in office? Many of his cronies, apparently wishing to live like nineteenth-century magnates, have acquired huge landed estates. Hungary now has, according to Lendvai, a concentration of land ownership unprecedented in modern Europe. As far as a peaceful transition to democracy is concerned, this is worse than money stashed away in the Caribbean. But however the story ends, a country that already has a deeply tragic view of its own history will one day have to come to terms with the years lost to a kleptocracy veiled in national colors.