



THE  
SECOND  
TERM OF  
VIKTOR  
ORBÁN

BEYOND  
PREJUDICE AND  
ENTHUSIASM

Edited by  
John O'Sullivan and Kálmán Pócsa

**The Second Term of Viktor Orbán**

**Beyond Prejudice and Enthusiasm**



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Edited by  
John O'Sullivan  
and  
Kálmán Pócza

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## INTRODUCTION

John O'Sullivan

Any attempt to judge the success or failure of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his government's policies must begin with a heroic exercise in clearing the ground. Today, it is not uncommon to meet people in Western Europe or the United States who say quite equably: "He's a dictator, isn't he, well, an authoritarian anyway? . . . I hear there's no freedom of the press in Hungary . . . the light of Democracy has gone out there, everyone tells me . . . Orbán's cozying up to Putin . . . he probably wants to be another Putin himself . . ." These things are said without any apparent expectation of disagreement, as if they are matters of common consent, obviously true in general, if possibly subject to correction on minor detail. They are voiced, moreover, not by a random cross-section of people in whom ignorance would be a valid excuse, but by those who read newspapers such as the *Guardian* or the *New York Times*, with extensive foreign coverage. They smile sadly when they express such concerns. They want Hungarians to know that they have friends.

So it comes as a shock to them when I reply that they will be glad to hear that the Hungarian political situation bears almost no relationship to their fears. There is open and vigorous debate in Hungary. The Hungarian media, for instance, are chock-full of criticisms of the government. Left-wing papers in particular have aggressively pursued stories of corruption (for instance, the denial of U.S. visas to officials and others suspected of corruption) that embarrass the government. They are eagerly read and discussed by people of all political persuasions. And far from lowering their voices in order to attack the government, ordinary Hungarians vent their discontents loudly and angrily, sometimes accosting tourists in order to do so. There is the opposite of an atmosphere of

fear and conformity in society.

As for democracy, that was celebrated last year, perhaps excessively, with no fewer than three sets of elections—national, local, and European—in all of which Fidesz candidates achieved between 45 and 51 per cent of the national total vote. Some attempt was made by the opposition to suggest that Orbán's two-thirds parliamentary majority had been achieved by “gerrymandering” the electoral system. But Orbán had achieved the same super-majority under the previous system, and if the elections had been held under the Anglo-American “first past the post” electoral system, he would have achieved an even larger one. Since Anglo-America is an important market for alarmism about Hungary, that charge was quietly dropped.

As memory of the elections faded, however, Orbán's opponents recalled that he was an authoritarian. Demonstrations erupted against his rule on a range of issues. All these protests were shepherded peacefully by police through Budapest to the square outside Parliament, where there is now a semi-permanent anti-Orbán protest tent. (It has a companion in nearby Freedom Square.) The largest of these demonstrations objected to a proposed new tax on internet usage. Orbán promptly withdrew the tax. Protests continued on other issues. In short, there has been a rolling festival of left-liberal protest in Budapest since before Christmas that the government has tolerated, and that has even changed official policy. Such things don't happen under authoritarian regimes.

Encouraged by this “resistance”, however, some opposition leaders make fiery speeches against the Prime Minister, even calling for “Europe” to take “action” against him. These calls are occasionally echoed by sympathetic socialist Euro-MPs, or by left-wing think-tanks in Brussels or Berlin. After that, nothing much happens. The reason is that no-one, inside or outside Hungary, can make a serious case that Orbán wields powers not granted him by the constitution. He may occasionally claim to be leading a “revolution”, but that is political rhetoric. It means no more than he is carrying out

extensive political change by passing laws in a thoroughly constitutional way. Hungary's executive, legislature, and court system are all still *in situ* and acting in accord with democratic and constitutional norms. It is even the case that the constitutional court sometimes overturns laws and regulations, and that Orbán accepts their judgments.

Now, some actions by the government are open to criticism. Two instances are an advertising penalty tax that is apparently aimed at a politically hostile television station, and a raid on an NGO financed by Norway's official wealth fund that the government feels is, in effect, a single-issue opposition party. Both actions have caused the government a degree of embarrassment that plainly outweighs any possible gain. Its larger reforms—for instance its press regulations—are well within the mainstream of European legislation. Supporters of America's First Amendment, like me, may believe that the entire edifice of media regulation is wrong and dangerous. Europe disagrees. And Hungary is in Europe.

To borrow a line from Mark Twain: the death of liberal democracy in Hungary has been greatly exaggerated.

When I say this to people outside Hungary, I can see that they are disappointed and suspicious. Disappointed because, after all, they quite enjoyed standing up to an authoritarian right-wing dictator—it flattered their mental self-image as fighters for democracy and social justice. They will rather miss not having Viktor Orbán to kick around if he turns out to be just another politician. Suspicious because my account runs counter to almost everything they have read in the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*. Surely I must be mistaken, or perhaps venal, or maybe extreme in my opinions? Some may say behind their hands: "He's a notorious conservative, you know." Or ask: "Is he religious?" After which nothing I say need be taken seriously ever again. So I should add that a similar unillusioned line of argument was advanced by the Nobel Prize-Winner Imre Kertész in the *Hungarian Quarterly*. He described the experience of being interviewed about Hungary by a *New York Times* reporter thus:

He had come with the intention of getting me to say that

Hungary is a dictatorship today, which it isn't. That only means that he has no idea what a dictatorship is. If you can write, speak openly, openly disagree, even leave the country, it is absurd to speak of dictatorship. And this is what I said. I am not pleased with everything happening in Hungary today, I do not think there was ever a time when I was pleased with everything happening here, but certainly Hungary is no dictatorship. This is empty, ideological language, to call Hungary a dictatorship today! And the interview was never published. Which a friend of mine very accurately said is a kind of censorship, if someone gives an answer you don't expect, then you don't publish it.

Notice what Mr. Kertész did *not* say in this passage. He did not praise the Orbán government or recommend its policies in some areas. Indeed, he hinted at some disagreement with it—and similar hints will pop up throughout this introduction. But Kertész did dismiss the view, widespread outside Central Europe, especially on the Left and among intellectuals, that the Orbán government is authoritarian, increasingly hostile to democracy, and in some sense, illegitimate. Though held by some indisputably intelligent people, this view is simply false. It thrives outside Hungary in large part because of ignorance—and inside Hungary because of the extreme partisanship that still pervades Hungarian political life, including its journalism and culture, as several contributors to this book document. And it constitutes a massive obstacle to any true understanding of modern Hungarian politics, of Prime Minister Orbán, and of “Orbánism” (if such a philosophy exists.) Thus it obscures the failings and contradictions of Orbánism as much as its successes and insights.

This book is an attempt to deliver a first draft of history on Orbán and Orbánism. It necessarily spends some time in helping to clear the ground of the mythic obstacle to understanding them examined above—but not much time. The great majority of its essays are concerned with the realities

of Hungarian politics in the 26 years since 1989. These include the rise of Viktor Orbán, the political experiences that shaped him and the Fidesz movement in which he was the dominant founder, their movement from a Left-liberal ideology to a national-conservative one, above all the record of Orbán's second term in government, 2010 to 2014, and, finally, some predictions about the course of his third term of office. All of the topics covered are highly controversial in Hungarian public life, not always on a conventional left-right axis. Our purpose is to produce a modestly comprehensive analysis of the man and his ideas in terms both of topics and standpoints. We have therefore invited a large variety of contributors, some who admire Orbán and some who oppose him, some who deal with domestic Orbánism and some with its foreign policy implications, some who believe him to be a conservative of some kind and some who take his assertion of "plebeian" values to be a better guide to his policies, some who see an underlying consistency in his politics and some who detect a roving unprincipled pragmatism.

All these essays are recommended to you as serious insights into Orbán and his ideas. I will not outline here the arguments advanced in each essay. It would make no sense for me to describe briefly what you can read in full by turning a few pages. Nor do I have any intention of debating with the contributors. It follows from the fact that they have a range of often conflicting views that if I agree with some, then I must disagree with others. But I invited all of them to represent the views they write down in this book. And it would be a poor return on their generosity and efforts if I were now to mount a critique of any one author's thesis when I enjoy the editorial prerogative of the last word.

That said, let me sketch a general theory of Orbán that reflects my reading and reflecting on these essays. As the conventional acknowledgment always says, of course, any errors of fact or interpretation are mine alone. My broad suggestion is that Orbán's politics reflects the influence of six events, some of long duration, others single incidents, in his life and career.

The first is his life under Communism. That bred in him a fierce visceral rejection of Communism that has infused his politics until today. He believes that the political Left in Hungary is the heir of the Communist party—indeed, often not the heir but the paterfamilias himself in light democratic disguise—and that it is therefore not a fully legitimate democratic party.

Many things flow from that conviction. Along with others he feels that the social peace treaty of 1989 left the structures of the Communist state at least half-intact, and that the privatisations that transformed the communist nomenklatura into a capitalist elite completed the process of building a morally questionable semi-democracy. His attempts in his 1998-2002 administration to live within the rules of that semi-democracy—one in which the bureaucracy was fundamentally in post-Communist hands—convinced him that it would have to be massively transformed. (It also gave him a more favorable view of the first democratic Antall government.) His ambitious reform program in his second administration is the result: a comprehensive attempt to build a Hungarian state on unambiguously anti-totalitarian foundations. That may not be how the world sees it; but it is how Orbán sees it.

His fervent anti-Communism also explains why Orbán is often mis-perceived in Western Europe. Most West Europeans cannot really understand, let alone share, his view of Communism as a deeply evil phenomenon, and thus something to be utterly defeated. His willingness to devote resources, time, and reputation to memorializing the victims of communism is simply not in their political DNA. They would prefer not to be reminded of crimes in which many of them (and of their political forbears) were implicated. It makes them wary of him. It is inevitable, however, that European opinion will come round, however slowly, to Orbán's point of view. It seems to take a generation and a half for nations to take their post-revolutionary social peace for granted, and so to confront the unquiet ghosts in their history. Such a confrontation is due about now in Europe—it

may even be accelerated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

His second epiphany occurred in 1993-94, when the Alliance of Free Democrats, (SZDSZ), Hungary's main Liberal party and elder brother to Fidesz, moved towards the post-communist Socialists and eventually formed a coalition with them against the Antall conservatives. In the Fidesz internal debate Orbán led the victorious faction that rejected any cooperation with the post-communists, and broke with the Free Democrats. Under his leadership Fidesz began its gradual journey from a libertarian student radical party to a broad national civic alliance of the center-right. That journey was made easier by the weakness of the Antall party after his death, and its defeat in the 1994 election. Fidesz walked through an open door, and four years later Orbán became prime minister. What is significant, however, is that in the first great political crisis after 1989, Orbán rejected the idea that Liberals had an obligation to keep out the Right at all costs even if it meant an alliance with ex-Communists. He sensed then a weakness in Liberalism that would make him increasingly skeptical of it as time went on.

Third, Orbán's defeat in 2002, when by any normal political calculation he deserved a clear victory, was traumatic, as is generally known. He disappeared to a mountaintop, communed with nature, and returned with a new political strategy. Having been defeated because most of the institutions of society, privatized industry and media in particular, were in post-Communist hands, as he thought, he determined that Fidesz would have to build up its own institutions—think tanks, media, universities, civic bodies—to give it something like equality in the political struggle. In Balázs Szolomayer's essay the story is told that Orbán approached the former Socialist prime minister, Péter Medgyessy, with the suggestion that each of the two main political blocs should be given control of a broadcasting network. (Italy used to have such a system.) Medgyessy told him that if he wanted a television station, he would have to buy one. In effect, that is what Orbán did—and not just in television. He created an entire parallel political organization



in opposition to the post-Communists. And when he won the election, he took the same attitude to state television as Socialist prime ministers have done.

Fourth, the 2008 financial crisis had a marked effect on Orbán's broad economic philosophy. Already skeptical of social liberalism, he now began to suspect that the economic liberalism of Reagan and Thatcher had been shown to have feet of clay as well. I have not found that view elsewhere, but I believe it to be true on the basis of some private information. And it would not be surprising, since that was the almost universal view of most European politicians, left and right, in the aftermath of the financial crash. That the origins of the crisis were in government policies that systematically encouraged banks and housing associations to lend to borrowers with low credit ratings who would probably be unable to make their payments was hardly discussed at the time, and is still not given enough weight. But the consequences for Orbán were that he became more critical of "orthodox" capitalist economics, and more prepared to consider imposing direct state regulation, control, and even ownership to attain his larger objectives.

Fifth, on coming into power in 2010, Orbán discovered that the socialist-liberal coalition had left behind a mountain of debt as a result of the over-borrowing, lies, and what Gyurcsány admitted were "tricks" employed to win the 2006 election. Antall's government had inherited a similarly disastrous debt burden from the Communists, making his government what even he called a "suicide mission." Leaving such a poisoned inheritance has almost become a conscious post-Communist strategy for winning the next election but one. Orbán's epiphany here was a realisation that he could not realistically go to the Hungarian voters and ask them to add a further instalment of austerity to those they had already swallowed twice. It would destroy his government before it had even started. He would have to find a method of paying down the debt that avoided hitting the voters (and that might even serve to lighten some of their economic burdens.) His method was borrowed from the legal ingenuity of America's

tort lawyers: like them, he would look for people and institutions with “deep pockets”, and impose some of the costs of debt repayment on them. Over the next few years the deep pockets of the banks, the owners of private pensions, foreign-owned utilities, and others were all pick-pocketed by the Orbán government in order to pay down debt without alienating the electorate. In the short term it has worked quite well; but there is a serious risk that it would deter the foreign investment Hungary needs if it were to be continued.

Sixth, when Orbán turned to the European Union for help in extending Hungary's credit and reducing the harshness of its repayment terms, he was treated brusquely. The institutions that had lent money quite recklessly to the post-communist socialists—and even concealed the extent of Hungary's debt prior to the 2010 election—suddenly started behaving like stern provincial bank managers. Orbán would have been justified in suspecting that European Union bureaucrats, even conservative ones such as Manuel Barroso, felt more comfortable dealing with the familiar post-communist officials who had been educated alongside them in Western elite schools during the long years of Communist rule, rather than with rough conservative newcomers who wanted to change things. Moreover, Orbán did change things. Despite strong resistance to his methods from both the IMF and the EU, Orbán succeeded in paying down the debt and, after a shaky start, of reviving growth. After all, Orbán's unorthodox ideas did not extend merely to finance. As a strong Hungarian patriot, he was skeptical towards ideas of supranationalism and global governance that underpin the European Union itself. He was treated therefore as a maverick in European company, and he repaid this treatment by becoming one. He is a rare example among politicians of a leader who has become more critical of elites the higher he has risen. As he next rose internationally, he became more suspicious of European and global elites too. Whether or not that skepticism is the source of the “plebeian” values he claims, it is a serious influence on his distinctive approach to international politics.

If all these experiences marked him, as I believe, they

left an impression on some very tough material. That is why the portrait of Orbán by the distinguished Anglo-Hungarian novelist (and Orbán's old friend), Tibor Fischer, is the foundation stone of this collection of essays. It shows, quite simply, a formidable character: a natural leader, determined, far-sighted, ruthless at times, charming, eloquent in a combative way, all in all a kind of human bulldozer in politics. That is the public image of Orbán as well as the private reality. Time and circumstance, however, have revealed another quality, one dangerous in a political leader. He is intellectually adventurous. He gets bored by having to stick to the same political "line" day after day. He wants to explore new ideas. He is prepared to take some risks in doing so. He likes spontaneity. He speculates in public. And, of course, he gets into trouble.

He did so last summer, when at a country rally of young supporters he threw out the idea that in a changing world "liberal democracy" might be failing to provide good and effective government, and that we might consider "illiberal democracy" instead. As soon as I heard that I knew that this phrase would be hung around his neck forever, just as "there is no such thing as society" had been hung around Mrs. Thatcher's. It fell into the category of remark of which the distinguished American political theorist, Wilmore Kendall, once said: "There's nothing wrong with that remark that couldn't be put right by a hundred thousand well-chosen words." In fact by liberal democracy Orbán meant a system of government that in modern Europe is gradually replacing old-fashioned majoritarian democracy. This system is one in which "rights", devised and enforced by courts and international agencies, are placed beyond the control of elected parliaments, so that over time the voters lose influence over how they are governed. That is indeed objectionable, but it isn't liberal democracy as the phrase would have been understood by statesmen such as Churchill and FDR. A better name for it would be "undemocratic liberalism." By this time, however, getting such points rightly understood is a lost cause. It is now an established "fact" that Orbán has admitted

to being both illiberal and undemocratic.

Such are the penalties of spontaneous thought in an age of instant communication. Orbán may be more cautious in future or he may not. It scarcely matters. He has translated the six experiences examined above into a series of broad policy objectives—a society based on work and workfare, the construction of a broad Hungarian middle class as an engine of stable growth, the defense of national sovereignty against the creeping domination of global bureaucracies, an opening to the East in trade policy and (perhaps) in strategic direction, the subordination of the logic of classical economics to the national interest—that are controversial in themselves, but that open up other questions too.

Both Orbán and Orbánism are therefore embarking on a road that proceeds by way of numerous forks and crossroads in his third term. Among the choices they will confront along the way are the following:

1. Are the government's "unorthodox" fiscal and economic policies in the nature of emergency measures taken to deal with the specific inheritance of debt and repayments in 2010—and therefore likely to be gradually phased out if and when the Hungarian budget and economy return to a more stable path? Or are they expressions of a new and distinct economic philosophy, relying on greater state intervention than classical liberal economics would recommend, but doing so on nationalist rather than on social or egalitarian grounds? The temptation to make economic unorthodoxy into a new ideology is a strong one. Among other reasons it allows a government to ignore the irksome restraints that both "neo-liberalism" and EU membership impose on government policy. But these restraints are there for a purpose: to reduce the economic risks that tempt *all* governments to overspend. And where is the stopping point of a philosophy of unorthodoxy? At one point the discussion between András Láncki and Gyula Tellér suggests that it could go quite a long way towards making an enemy of international capital. That,

too, would have serious risks. For instance, where would Hungary get the external investment it needs if it made foreign investors fear that their property rights were insecure?

2. What is the purpose of seeking particular levels of domestic ownership in particular industries such as banking and energy utilities? How far should such a policy go? For it is hard to see who benefits from it. If the state is the domestic investor, the industry will be subject to all the vagaries of loss, misdirected investment, and lack of innovation that flourished under Communism. If the owner is a domestic capitalist rather than foreign one, that will not change much for other Hungarians. And if he has secured his investment as a result of political influence, then all the costs associated with crony capitalism, notably corruption, are likely to emerge and thereby raise prices for the domestic consumer. Neither taxpayer profits, nor strategic control are advanced by a policy of artificially promoting domestic ownership. The British have a saying that a nationalised industry is not owned by the nation; rather the industry owns the nation. Its losses have to be met by the taxpayer; its market share has to be defended against rival companies (thus reducing competition and raising prices); its appetite for fresh investment greatly complicates national budgeting; its profits (if any) tend to disappear into privileges for the management and unions; and, finally, it very often becomes politically unpopular and damages the reputation of the government. It is hard to see how any of these things are in the national interest. But if a government nonetheless wishes (for ideological reasons) to increase national ownership in a way that minimises such risks, then as Jack Hollihan, a US specialist in privatised industries, has explained, the way forward is to combine public ownership with service contracts for multinational utilities that would actually manage the businesses. But why pursue a highly questionable policy because there is a way of making it less damaging?

3. How will the Orbán government set about building up the great Hungarian middle class that almost everyone agrees is needed as an instrument of growth? There are basically two methods. The first is to establish a framework of economic stability, offer general incentives for work, saving, and human capital growth (tax cuts, apprenticeships, etc.), and then stand back and allow people to make use of what opportunities exist. The second is to give out monopolies to government supporters, protect native industries with tariffs, etc., and increase government employment. The first rewards energy, ability and newcomers; the second rewards established interests, political connections, and those looking for an easy life. Both may produce a middle class, but one will be a class of workers and entrepreneurs, the other a class of parasites (some called oligarchs) reliant on various kinds of subsidy. Only the first middle class is likely to be an engine of growth; the second is certain to be an engine of covert re-distribution. It should be a no-brainer; it never is.
4. How will an Orbán government reconcile its resistance to governance by supra-national elites with its considerable dependence on European Union subsidies? Despite its fiscal vulnerability on this issue, the Orbán government has a good case: Euro-elites and their fellows in the UN and other global institutions have silently acquired a great deal of unaccountable power without many people noticing. Orbán is one of the few politicians who has challenged this unaccountable power both practically and in principle. The prolonged crisis over the Euro, however, has both revealed their failure and created the circumstances for its correction. Whether or not we see a “Grexit”, there will have to be a re-distribution of powers between Brussels and national parliaments in the next few years in order to achieve fiscal order at a European level. Orbán will have important allies in his campaign to protect Hungary’s national sovereignty within a reformed EU.

5. How will Orbán exit from his present extraordinary balancing act between Russia and the U.S.? This apparent equidistance between Moscow and Washington is a 180-degree turn from the policy of his first administration, when he led Hungary into NATO and during the Balkan crisis denied Russian troops passage through Hungary. How do we explain it? Almost everyone who has worked closely with Orbán, including ex-Ministers now free to speak, regards the idea that he would be an ideological or strategic ally of a Chekist as absurd. They attribute his strengthening of economic and energy links with Russia to the pursuit of Hungary's national interests and, furthermore, point out that Hungary has abided by the NATO and EU sanctions even though they plainly damage its economy. His (economic) nationalism and his anti-Communism pull him in different directions in the Ukraine crisis, they argue, but so far he has managed to stay on the tightrope. Even if that is so, however, it seems inadequate in explaining a diplomacy that contradicts so much else in Orbán's political character. The explanation must be sought at a deeper level: perhaps he has lost faith in the U.S. as a guarantor of Hungary's security and as a friend. If so, that would not be altogether surprising. Radek Sikorski, another strong Atlanticist, was recently overheard (in a leaked conversation) describing the American alliance as "worthless" for Poland. Both men have strategic and personal reasons for losing faith in Washington. They were disturbed by the psychological withdrawal of America from Central Europe under President Obama—evidenced by the cancellation of the U.S. anti-missile installations in Poland and the Czech Republic, the lack of response to the historic letter from 22 regional leaders (including Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel) appealing for America's re-commitment, and the Obama administration's Russian reset policy. Sikorski was also personally affronted by America's refusal to ease visa conditions for Poles for which he had campaigned vigorously, just as Orbán has been wounded by personal

insults from both Senator John McCain and President Obama against a background of ideological hectoring from the American Embassy in Budapest. There the resemblance ends, however. Sikorski led European resistance to Russia and Putin over Ukraine; Orbán, while sticking to his NATO and EU obligations, has hosted Putin in Budapest even as Russian troops crossed into Ukraine. This Janus-faced policy seems unsustainable. If the personal factor is important, then both Orbán and Obama should seek to heal relations in the much wider interest of Western solidarity. If Orbán has lost faith in America as an ally, however, things are much more serious. Orbán will need to take many hard decisions in the next few years even if he hopes that 2016 might bring a stronger American President credibly committed to the defense of the whole of Europe.

All of the decisions outlined above are fraught with risk. Nor do they exhaust the difficult choices facing Viktor Orbán in his third term of office. None of them can be avoided, however, even if Orbán wished to avoid them—which he plainly does not. Joseph Chamberlain was once asked to define the difference between himself and his great rival Arthur Balfour. He replied: “Arthur hates difficulties. I love ‘em.” Orbán belongs very clearly in the Chamberlain camp. But a relish for taking hard decisions does not guarantee reaching the right ones. So a statesman faced with a range of dilemmas should bear two cautionary principles in mind, especially if he has a taste for intellectual adventure. The first such principle is to distrust novelty, especially novelty in ideas. Properly speaking, there are no new ideas in ethics, politics, or social theory, merely what Chesterton called “broken fragments of the old ideas.” If they seem new, that is probably because we have forgotten why we discarded them. The second such principle is to set aside the fact that a particular policies are popular and concentrate instead on whether they have worked in the past and look likely to work in the future. For, even on the most cynical calculation, what



matters in the end is not the popularity of a policy but the popularity of its consequences.

Viktor Orbán has three full years before he must submit his government to the judgment of the voters. He can take the long view, and they must do so. Until April 2018, however, the essays in this book will remain the best available guide to where Orbán and Hungary are both heading.

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