

Balázs Orbán:

THE HUNGARIAN WAY OF STRATEGY

Budapest: MCC Press. 2021, 216 pages.

DOI: 10.5817/PC2023-2-155

This is an important book, although probably unknown to the majority of political scientists as well as politicians/diplomats who deal with politics in Hungary. It should be stated that the book's political impact and (misguided) analytical importance does not necessarily correlate with its academic quality. Neither does the book bring surprisingly new ideas. Nonetheless, the book reveals more about current and future (in the making) politics in Hungary than many other books and articles on this subject. It was written by Balázs Orbán, who is the Political Director to the Prime Minister of Hungary, and he is also a political scientist. In short, Balázs Orbán is the key political strategist of Hungary (a position more or less identical with that of Steve Bannon, the former White House chief strategist in the administration of Donald Trump during the first seven months of Trump's term). There is no family relation between Balázs Orbán and Viktor Orbán.

One should put this information and the current analytical review (essay) into context. According to the European Parliament 2022 Report: 'The situation has deteriorated such that Hungary has emerged to become a 'hybrid regime of electoral autocracy', i.e. a constitutional system in which elections occur, but respect for democratic norms and standards is absent' (European Parliament, 2022).

RSF's 2022 World Press Freedom Index put Hungary in 85th place (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Among the five indicators,

the most serious one was economic context ('very serious'), followed by political context ('difficult'), and then by legal and sociocultural context (both seen as 'problematic'). Only the safety of journalists was seen as 'good' (meaning reaching the top). Since there a new methodology was used, it is complicated to compare the 2022 rankings and scores with those from 2021. Nonetheless, it is revealing that Hungary was among the worst achievers among the EU member states in this ranking. It was almost on par with Bulgaria but still performing better than Greece (based on global ranking).

The 2022 Corruption Perception Index put Hungary at 77th place with score of 42 (out of a 100 maximum score). There was a minor but still negative trend noticed (Transparency International, 2023). Moreover, Hungary fared as the worst EU member state, closely followed by Bulgaria and Romania.

Hungary is the only EU member state that officially embraced a conservative vision of the world as its national strategy. This can be seen in the return of the Conservative Political Action Conference to Budapest in May 2023. The motto of the second annual CPAC Hungary was 'United We Stand' (CPAC Hungary, n.d.). Again, this conservative strategy has consequences: fifteen EU governments, as well as the European Parliament, have joined the European Commission's lawsuit against Hungary over a controversial anti-LGBTQ law (Fox, 2023). To be precise, it is the law that regulates how education about LGBTQ+ people should be performed. Some argue that there is a new conservative agenda even in green politics there (Antal, 2021). Undoubtedly, there are ongoing culture wars that can be defined 'as polarizing conflicts in the arenas of the politics of memory, politics of identity and politics of morality' (Hesová, 2021).

Indeed, sometimes it is more revealing to ask a person or a politician directly to get an

answer to a challenging issue than to attempt complex analyses of certain issues. Academic articles, normally with 20-page limits, are usually too short for in-depth analyses of political developments. In contrast, books need a year or more to write, if one wants to produce something insightful.

In the case of Hungary's last decade of political developments, scores of articles and dozens of books have been written. Their explanations of what is happening in Hungary, and in particular why it is happening, differ. However, probably only a few of authors – if any – interviewed or cited Balázs Orbán. Thus, it should be welcomed that we have a first-hand living political testament or statement written directly by this grey figure in Hungarian politics. As mentioned, Balázs Orbán is the key governmental strategist in Hungary. Moreover, a foreword to his book was written by the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán. Balázs Orbán and his ideas play important role in current Hungarian politics. For example, Balázs Orbán accompanied Viktor Orbán to some important meetings and his strategic ideas seemed to be further disseminated there publicly by Viktor Orbán (Pappin, 2023).

Let me start with the most important conclusion that comes to mind after reading this book. The strategy of the Hungarian government, as outlined by Balázs Orbán, will sooner or later result in Hungary leaving the EU – unless something fundamentally changes. This exit will occur most likely following the Hungarian government's decision and it will be facilitated by the logic of a chain of events, speeches and policies inspired by the 'Hungarian Way of Strategy'. This can be seen in the formulation that 'the cornerstones of post-2010 governance' are 'the preservation of freedom, independence and national sovereignty is Hungary's single most important, permanent goal' (p. 179). Clearly, this strategic goal is incompatible with the necessary

consensual and compromise-based political decision making at the EU level. This strategic goal is also in permanent conflict with the quasi-confederal structure of the EU and its prevailing values. Indeed, Balázs Orbán's ideological historical analysis comes to the conclusion that Hungary prospers when left alone. It should be noted that this thesis also explains that Hungary was incorrectly perceived to be under the strong influence of Russia. Within this context, related analyses on the roles disinformation and misinformation played here got it wrong (Školkay, 2023).

Fundamentally, the applied strategy makes impossible and certainly unwelcome the existence of other policies and, in effect, forms of government (e.g. liberal, social democratic). This, in turn, supports not only conservative thinking and policies, but, ultimately, also a sort of authoritarian regime ('hybrid democracy', 'hybrid regime' or 'competitive authoritarianism') as a form of government. It is well-known (and it was much discussed) that Viktor Orbán announced the goal of abandoning *liberal* democracy in favour of an '*illiberal* state', citing Russia and Turkey as examples, already in 2014.*

In other words, ideas have consequences. I am just not sure whether Balázs Orbán or Viktor Orbán are aware of all these political consequences. There are obviously unanticipated, but logically following, developments. In any case, both Orbáns are sending their message clearly and openly. As put by the reviewer Tamás Orbán, 'the book's very purpose is to present the perspective of the government in an unprecedentedly in-depth way' (Orbán, 2022).

Therefore, the thorough review of this political manifesto (that is the correct interpre-

* See the full text here: <https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/>.

tation of this book) should be of paramount interest not only to political scientists but also to politicians and diplomats within the EU and beyond.

The book was written in 2020 in Hungarian and translated in English in 2021. The author shows a great knowledge of Hungarian history, with particular focus on Hungarian late medieval common/constitutional law. The book includes 30 pages of citations, which is a good indication of a generally well-researched book.

It would be strange if there were no other review of this book already; indeed, it is possible to find a review written by another, already mentioned, Orbán (2022). It seems useful to assess critically some ideas from this review and at the same time critically re-examine the reviewer's, as it turns out, rather hilarious perspective on the book.

Reviewer Tamás Orbán looks at this book from a local conservative angle (Orbán, 2022). No wonder that for him, the book is a 'penetrative exegesis of the unique success of Hungarian statecraft in the past decade as well as an astute guide for all nation-states of similar stature'. Well, one can think that perhaps a more modest assessment would be appropriate. We do not know the final results of this 'grand' strategy yet. More down-to-earth, Tamás Orbán is right that: 'The premise of Orbán's book is that (there is) ... a brief, once-in-a-lifetime moment when small states like Hungary have enough room for manoeuvre to construct their own strategy'. In that sense, Balázs Orbán's book and strategy is, naturally and paradoxically, not conservative but, geo-strategically speaking, far-reaching.

The reviewer Tamás Orbán further writes: 'The structure of the book makes reading it feel like going through the steps of solving a math problem: it is precise, logical and common-sensical at every turn'. Later on, however, Tamás Orbán admits that '*The Hungarian*

Way of Strategy is not a strictly academic work, nor is it just a political manifesto. It is somewhere between the two...'

Strangely, my own impressions are exactly opposite – the book is fundamentally magical or mythological, and it lacks hard data for making any strategy.

For the former, Balázs Orbán dedicates a lot of room to explaining aspects of medieval Hungary's unique constitutional principles, including the somehow mythological 'Holy Crown Precept'. There also is a long discussion about the 'unique character of the Hungarian nation'. The reviewer Tamás Orbán refers to Balázs Orbán's text in which he specifies that: 'all policies are fundamentally based on eternal social values distilled from a thousand years of historical experience'. Does it sound scientific or, rather, as I believe, mythological?

To be fair, on the issue of hard data, some statistical data are presented, but these tend to support the success of Hungary in particular fields.

Yet one can wonder on what data are the key strategic ideas as expressed in the sub-chapter 'The Hungarian Guide' based? The reviewer Tamás Orbán calls them 'nineteen points-values, truths and basic tenets'. Maybe background data are available elsewhere. In any case, it is not transparent how the author came to all those fundamental strategic ideas as expressed in this final sub-chapter. This weakness was also pointed at by the reviewer Tamás Orbán – '... geopolitics... is only briefly touched upon in the last chapter in relation to Hungary's foreign policy'.

It is also telling that the reader faces difficulty when attempting to find studies written by Hungarian experts in future studies in the book's extensive bibliography (Nováky & Kristóf, 2022). In short, all this strategic thinking appears to come out of the blue – or, at best, from historical experience and analysis only. Yet historical memory, or extensive

discussion of ‘the Holy Crown Precept’ alone, should not guide any modern state or its political leadership into the future. At the minimum, the author as well as political leaders should be aware that this future is going to be a conservative and authoritarian solitude (at least seen regionally, i.e. within, and later outside the EU). As we can see in the recent developments described at the beginning of this review, this future has already started. Moreover, it is Hungary’s own choice. As mentioned, the ideas (the strategy) have empirically observable consequences – sometimes including those not really originally anticipated.

References:

- Antal, A. (2021). Authoritarian Populism, Environmentalism and Exceptional Governance in Hungary. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 28(3), 209–228.
- Hesová, Z. (2021). Three Types of Culture Wars and the Populist Strategies in Central Europe. *Czech Journal of Political Science*, 28(2), 130–150.
- Nováky, E., & Kristóf, T. (2022). A comprehensive review of Hungarian futures studies in light of international journal articles. *European Journal of Futures Research*, 10. Retrieved from: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40309-022-00201-x>.
- Reporters Without Borders. (2023). RSF’s 2022 World Press Freedom Index: A new era of polarisation. *Reporters Without Borders*. Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-s-2022-world-press-freedom-index-new-era-polarisation>.
- Transparency International. (2023). 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index—Explore Hungary’s results. *Transparency International*. Retrieved from <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2022>
- CPAC Hungary. (n.d.). CPAC RETURNS TO HUNGARY IN MAY! *CPAC Hungary*. Retrieved from <https://www.cpachungary.com/en/>
- European Parliament. (2022, September 15). MEPs: Hungary can no longer be considered a full democracy. *News – European Parliament*. Retrieved from <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20220909IPR40137/meps-hungary-can-no-longer-be-considered-a-full-democracy>.
- Orbán, T. (2022, November 25). The Flight of the Bumblebee: A Review of ‘The Hungarian Way of Strategy’. *Hungarian Conservative*. Retrieved from <https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/reviews/the-flight-of-the-bumblebee-a-review-of-the-hungarian-way-of-strategy/>.
- Pappin, G. (2023, February 2). Orbán: Is There a Path to Peace?. *Postliberal Order*. Retrieved from <https://postliberalorder.substack.com/p/orban-is-there-a-path-to-peace>.
- Fox, B. (2023, April 11). 15 governments join EU lawsuit against Orbán’s anti-LGBT law. *EUractiv*. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-institutions/news/15-governments-join-eu-lawsuit-against-orbans-anti-lgbt-law/>.
- Školkay, A. (2023, April 13). Vulnerable „Vulnerability Index“ – or What We Got Wrong with Analysis of Hungary’s Foreign and Domestic Policies. *Denník N*. Retrieved from <https://dennikn.sk/blog/3324338/vulnerable-vulnerability-index-or-what-we-got-wrong-with-analysis-of-hungarys-foreign-and-domestic-policies/>.

Andrej Školkay

The School of Communication and Media,
Bratislava, Slovakia