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# Review: Orbán: Europe's New Strongman by Paul Lendvai

Roger Boyes

*Is Viktor Orbán the strongman father of 'Führer democracy' asks Roger Boyes*

Viktor Orbán is the bugbear of Brussels, the power-crazed champion of what he calls illiberal democracy, a fierce opponent of Angela Merkel's policy of open borders, a fan of Vladimir Putin — and in spite of, or because of this, one of the most successful leaders in Europe. The riddle is posed, but not entirely solved in a new biography of the Hungarian prime minister.

Paul Lendvai, a veteran eastern Europe watcher, tracks the career of a man who started out as an anti-communist rebel and gradually turned into an autocrat. In a moving early passage he describes how in June 1989 the remains of the reformer Imre Nagy, executed after a secret trial 31 years earlier, were transferred from an unmarked grave to a place of honour in Budapest's Heroes' Square. The communists were still in power, and tens of thousands of Soviet troops were stationed in Hungary, but the event, an act of protest, was staged before a huge crowd who had lost their fear.

Suddenly a 26-year-old student stepped forward and with the kind of clarity rarely heard during the communist decades declared: "If we trust our own strength, then we will be able to put an end to the communist dictatorship. If we are determined enough, then we can compel the ruling party to face free elections . . . we will vote for a government which will at once enter into negotiations on the immediate beginning of the withdrawal of Russian troops."

That was Orbán's arrival on the political stage and it had quite an impact. He had been a founding member of Fidesz, a youth organisation that aimed to stick pins in the communists, but until then he wasn't in the front line of the revolution. Since the days of the 1981 military crackdown in Poland, foreign correspondents travelled frequently to Budapest and Prague to get a sense of where communism was going. When the Soviet-backed regime put tanks on the streets of Warsaw, it had become clear that there was no such thing as reformist communism, only a system that was ready to use force against its own people.

In Hungary we found a "liberal communist" country where most people were ready to muddle through and keep their heads down. We met dissidents such as Miklos Haraszti and Laszlo Rajk, who were frustrated with the conformism of the Hungarians and were hungry for the modern world. Yet the young Orbán, in 1989, was a new voice for a new era. Within months the Iron Curtain had been breached and for me the penny dropped: it was free spirits such as Orbán who were about to become the new political class.

Orbán came from a modest background — he was 15 before he used a bathroom for the first time, marvelling at warm-water plumbing; he was a turbulent, argumentative pupil who was capable of switching on the charm. There was no hint of privilege about him, just a raw physicality. He needed to win: at football, and in politics. The bearded and bejeaned Fidesz was transformed into an efficient vote-

winning machine. At the first free elections in 1990, it won 22 of the 386 seats. At fast pace Orban and a close band of brothers turned it into a party that now dominates the Hungarian political scene. “Untroubled by any sense of scruple,” writes Lendvai, “Viktor Orban, not yet 30, single-mindedly and quite openly pursued his goal of seizing total control over Fidesz.” In 1990 he was elected to the national assembly and has served as prime minister from 1998 to 2002 and then from 2010.

Vienna after the bloody Soviet-led crushing of the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Since then, writing for the British and Austrian press, he has become the doyen of central European analysis; his book *Eagles in Cobwebs* on nationalist currents in the Balkans was particularly prescient.

Lendvai is no fan of Orban. In this political biography Orban ticks all the boxes to qualify as a proto-dictator: Fidesz controls a media committee with wide press powers; the independence of the judiciary has been undermined, judges are hired and fired. Lendvai leaves no doubt as to where he thinks this is going; he borrows the sinister term “Führer democracy”, authoritarian rule that renews its mandate at the ballot box with large majorities and low turnouts. And that is largely the view of the European Commission and the western liberal consensus. The commission tries to threaten and punish Orban, but he surfs each crisis and with the help of uncritical local media depicts himself as a plucky David facing down Goliath.

The closing of the Hungarian borders in autumn 2015 was for Lendvai proof positive that Orban had turned his back on western European values. In 1956 200,000 refugees left Hungary for the West. In 1989 Hungary helped to bring down communist rule on the Continent by allowing thousands of East Germans to cross the country and the barbed-wire border to freedom.

In Orban’s Hungary in 2015, however, those fleeing war in the Middle East were turned back or thrown out. Lendvai claims that his biography is dispassionate, but in Orban’s treatment of refugees it is anything but. It was the moment when Orban’s strongman pose, when his accumulated domestic powers, turned him into Europe’s pariah.

Yet large chunks of Orban’s policy on refugees — reinforcing the EU’s external borders, faster processing of asylum requests followed by speedy deportation — have been adopted by the rest of the EU. His readiness to take the argument to Brussels and fight his corner has won the respect of other central Europeans. In Orban they see not a Putin or an Erdogan, but simply a practitioner of *realpolitik*. Many Britons too would agree on Orban’s view of the right balance between the nation state and the EU.

One can take this Orban, a stubborn resistance fighter against the mush of globalised politics, and declare him a success. There is little doubt that he will be re-elected next year. But I share Lendvai’s judgment that in his rush to increase his power, Orban has trampled on too much. There is a darkness to a government that singles out the philanthropist George Soros for a propaganda campaign, as fierce and as misguided as the two-minute hate sessions against Goldstein in Nineteen Eighty-Four.

If Orban were truly a strong leader, he would find the courage to put an end to such venomous nonsense among his supporters. The younger Orban, the man who denounced the Russian troop presence in Hungary, would never have put up with it.

# Orban: Europe's New Strongman, by Paul Lendvai

**A thoughtful and entertaining biography of the head of an illiberal regime**

Review by Tony Barber

No EU national leader reigns supreme in the way that **Viktor Orban is lord and master of Hungary**. Having tasted power as prime minister from 1998 to 2002, he reclaimed office in 2010 after a landslide election victory. Over the past seven years, he has cocked a snook at the EU and systematically dismantled the checks and balances built into Hungary's political system after the end of communism in 1989.

It is scarcely imaginable that Mr Orban, 54, will lose next year's parliamentary elections. The opposition is divided and demoralised. In any case, Mr Orban amended the electoral law in 2012 in a manner blatantly favourable to his ruling Fidesz party. This secured Fidesz an overwhelming majority of seats in the 2014 elections and will surely produce much the same outcome in 2018.

As Paul Lendvai observes in *Orban: Europe's New Strongman*, his thoughtful, entertaining biography, Hungarian political scientists wrestle over how to define Mr Orban's proudly illiberal regime.

One brands it a "**fascistoid mutation**". Another calls it a "**neo-collectivist, neo-communist experiment**". Such labels seem exaggerated or wide of the mark.

More accurate, arguably, are the words of two men with experience of government in Budapest. Balint Magyar, a former education minister, known for having coined the term "**Hungarian mafia state**", says that Mr Orban's regime is "the privatised form of a parasite state, an economic undertaking run by the family of the Godfather exploiting the political and public instruments of power".

Andras Bozoki, a former culture minister, says Mr Orban presides over a "hybrid regime [in which] the features of an authoritarian system are stronger than those of a democracy".

If this seems too mild a description, it nonetheless captures an important point, identified also by Jan-Werner Müller, a Princeton University professor. **Unlike in Vladimir Putin's Russia, Mr Orban's opponents are not bumped off**. Critics hold demonstrations in Budapest. They occupy niches in the media. However, real power, from 2010 on, has seemed unlikely to change hands.

Lendvai, an 88-year-old Hungarian-born author and journalist, left his native land for Austria after the 1956 anticommunist uprising. In recent years he has been a persistent thorn in Mr Orban's side and a target for smear campaigns in the Fidesz media. In his view, Mr Orban "has contributed more than any other Hungarian politician since 1989 to the disastrous political, moral, economic and cultural polarisation of Hungarian society".

The value of Lendvai's book lies in his penetrating explanation of why Hungary's post-1989 institutions have proved so vulnerable to Mr Orbán's assault.

**Four factors stand out. The first is Mr Orbán's dark talents.** "There is not a single politician in Budapest or Brussels who has been able to hold a candle to Orbán with regard to his political cynicism, his gifts as an orator and his talent for intrigue," Lendvai writes.

The **second factor is the Hungarian left**, which the author dismisses contemptuously as **"a disgusting snake pit of old communists and leftwing careerists posing as social democrats"**. It was the left's moral bankruptcy and economic incompetence in power that paved the way for Mr Orbán's election victory in 2010 and his swift creation of "a skilfully veiled authoritarian system", Lendvai says.

**Thirdly, many Hungarians felt let down by the switch from communism to free-market capitalism after 1989.** Nostalgia rose for the era of Janos Kadar, Hungary's relatively restrained communist ruler from 1956 to 1988. **Last and not least, there is the Trianon factor:** Hungary's inability to draw a line under the harsh 1920 treaty which left several million ethnic Hungarians, to this day, outside the post-first world war state. Most Hungarian politicians are tempted to play on a sense of national loss. Mr Orbán does it best.

Because Poland is bigger, the EU tends to regard the ruling conservative nationalists in Warsaw as a more serious threat than Mr Orbán to the bloc's future. But if the twin themes of modern Hungarian history are fulfilment of the national idea and aspirations to a liberal political order, there can be no doubt where Mr Orbán has nailed his colours.