

THE ECONOMICS OF FEAR

HOW ORBÁN PROFITS FROM INSECURITIES

AN INTERVIEW WITH
ZOLTÁN LAKNER
 BY **KRISZTIAN SIMON**

Orbán's rhetoric is made up of a creative combination of fears: social insecurities, loss of national identity, and threats to national security all play an important role when it comes to Orbán positioning himself as the sole protector of Hungary.

KRISZTIAN SIMON: Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán builds his politics on pre-existing fears of his society, but he doesn't shy away from creating new dangers and enemies. Where do the origins of this kind of politics lie?

ZOLTÁN LAKNER: Orbán found his way to the long existing Hungarian conservative tradition (the so-called national tradition, which claims an exclusive right to this title) in the second half of the 1990s. This is partly due to ideological changes and partly to political calculations. At this time, Hungary was governed by a Liberal-Socialist coalition, and thus, Orbán realised that in order to gain political success, he had to turn his back on liberalism and transform his party into a nationalist, anti-liberal political force. This already explains some of the fears that he is building on in his rhetoric, as this tradition is suspicious of cosmopolitanism, universal human rights, and everything it identifies as contrary to or opposing the national interest, which it traces back to some kind of foreign conspiracy.



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**ÍGY MŰKÖDIK
 A FÉLELEM
 GAZDÁLKODÁS
 – ORBÁN ESETE
 A LÉTBIZONYTA-
 LANSÁGGAL**

Interjú Lakner Zoltán politológussal arról, hogyan talál egymásra az orbáni retorikában a szociális létbizonytalanság, az identitásvesztés és a nemzetbiztonság.

Moreover, right-wing thinking is also heavily burdened by the Treaty of Trianon, signed after the end of World War I, which led to Hungary losing two-thirds of its old territory. In Hungary, this national trauma is seen as the most obvious sign that the country is constantly humiliated and the survival of the nation is in danger – and therefore

it is usually foreign actors (or their alleged accomplices, the Liberals and the Socialists) who take the blame if something is not going right in Hungary.

In the early 2000s, there was a social-populist turn in Orbán's politics: after he lost the national election in 2002, he realised that his old rhetoric, which addressed merely the well-off and the middle classes, didn't reach enough people – there was a need to speak to the marginalised parts of society as well. Although this didn't change the actual goals of his social policies (he still doesn't want to reduce social inequalities, and neither does he support the abolition of school segregation), he realised that there were widespread fears amongst the losers of post-Communist transition, which he had to incorporate into his rhetoric (combined with some national sentiments). Today, 4 million Hungarians live below the subsistence level, and even prior to the economic crisis, in the pre-Orbán years, this number was well above 3 million. So, there have been plenty of potential addressees for messages that were built around social security.

Therefore, by the time he was elected to become prime minister in 2010, Orbán's rhetoric was built around three threats: the so-called “death of the nation” (the disappearance of the nation, or at least the dissolution of national identity); social fears; and the fear of the foreign and the unknown.

All three of these fears can be found in his rhetoric on refugees: he says that foreigners and potential terrorists are crossing the country's borders; as cheap labourers they steal the jobs of locals; and with their unwillingness to integrate they are destroying our culture. Is this trinity of fears present every time he talks about a new enemy?

ZOLTÁN LAKNER: A main characteristic of Orbán's political machinery is his ability to masterfully combine different fears. The number of combinations and variations is almost endless. Due to government propaganda, almost every topic in the country is discussed along the lines of fears and threats. This doesn't necessarily mean that all three threats come up together, but it happens – for example, in the case of his ‘fight’ against Brussels. Since the EU disapproves of the Hungarian government's most prominent social policy, the so-called *rezsicsökkentés* (the government imposed price-cuts on utility providers) and would impose austerity on the country, Orbán can position himself as the saviour of Hungary, who keeps the foreigners (the EU) at bay, protects national sovereignty, and last – but not least – shields the people from austerity (even though the Hungarian government is, in fact, cutting spending on healthcare, education and social services).

Moreover, since the government presents itself as the only representative of the people, and the

only protector of their interests – where both the ‘people’ and their ‘interests’ are defined by the government – all political opponents are labelled enemies, as we have seen in the cases of activists who were collecting signatures against the planned Olympic games in Hungary, or human rights organisations who were helping refugees.

Why does the loss of identity play such a dominant role in security discourses, both in Hungary and other European countries?

ZOLTÁN LAKNER: I would mention two reasons, though there are many, which are, to some extent, interrelated. One is globalisation, which affects our cultures, lifestyles, as well as our political and economic relations: this phenomenon raises questions regarding what sovereignty means today, and can lead to a number of different responses from politicians. The right-wing critics say that the disappearance of a national framework will lead to the liquidation of the traditions that define our identity, while the left-wing critics of neoliberal globalisation decry a lack of transnational governance that could control the borderless flow of capital. Enabling transnational governance would, however, exacerbate the already existing dangers of globalisation – say the supporters of national sovereignty.

The other group of problems is that of inequalities: today, it is not only the developmental differences between different countries or regions of the world that are problematic, as there are also growing differences within the so-called developed countries, both in terms of wealth and in terms of income. It is becoming more and more questionable how there could be a sense of shared belonging between all those people who might live in the same country, but may face very different hardships. A possible response by governments is the newly rediscovered mobilising power of national sentiments, which can also absolve governments from tackling inequalities, as they can claim that social injustices can be traced back to national grievances and are thus the faults of foreign forces.

There is an imminent danger in this situation: those governments that try to remedy the experienced uncertainty of the world by referring to the nation are, in fact, camouflaging their authoritarian experiments as the embodiment of the national will. And thus, they extort an authorisation from the voters to concentrate power in their hands.

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Not so long ago, Orbán branded the foundation of Hungarian-born American billionaire George Soros, as well as the NGOs that receive funding from him, his new enemies. The vice-president of Orbán's Fidesz party, Szilárd Németh, even said that these organisations should be wiped out of the country. Why was it so important for him to declare Soros an enemy?

ZOLTÁN LAKNER: The attack on Soros started somewhat earlier. Its roots can be traced back to the times before the refugee crisis, when the government started to attack the NGOs who received funding from the Norway Grants, right after the election in 2014.¹

At the time, parts of the public expected that, following his dynamic and arrogant first term, his second term would be about consolidation. Instead, he decided to attack civil society, even at the price of a diplomatic conflict. The reason for this behaviour was most likely that, following the weakening of the power-sharing system, and the capturing of the media, the government wanted to abolish the control-functions of an independent civil society. Since civil society organisations receive most of their funding from the state – and the decisions regarding the group of organisations that deserve funding are made by those loyal to Fidesz – independent NGOs are more and more reliant on foreign funding (mainly from the Norway Grants and George Soros' Open Society Foundations). If foreign funds are taken away from them, they won't be able to operate anymore, as fundraising is still not a viable alternative to donor activity in the region. The Hungarian government is presenting these NGOs as agents of foreign forces, which are said to pose a threat to national sovereignty.

¹ The grant programme was set up by the governments of Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein to support the 13 EU member countries that joined the EU in 2004 or after. Its civil society branch has funded a number of civil rights organisations in Hungary (just as it did in other countries in the region), but the Hungarian government would have preferred to have a say in who the money goes to. The Hungarian authorities therefore started investigating those local organisations that were tasked with evaluating the project proposals of the NGOs, and even raided some of their offices, which led to tensions between Hungary and the donor countries.

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Of course, the demonisation of George Soros is not merely a Hungarian phenomenon: he is often accused by the U.S. right-wing of manipulating politics from behind the scenes, and Russia has even banned the Open Society Foundations. In this sense, Orbán is a talented politician, at least if we define political talent as the ability to acquire and keep power. He is able to think in the context of world politics, and he uses this ability to create threats and enemies that fit into international political trends.

Why can't progressive political forces explain to voters that the fears the government is planting in them are unreal?

ZOLTÁN LAKNER: Partly because it is hard to reach the people. My experience in many small and middle-sized cities is that people are reluctant to attend opposition political events. And even if they do attend, they often ask us not to take pictures, because they don't want others to find out that they were there – people are afraid that they might lose their jobs or that they would have it harder in life. This is very troublesome. I wouldn't have thought that in my adult life I would see these conditions returning to Hungary.

This fear makes it hard to start political initiatives. Moreover, the existing political offers are also not satisfying. It would be important to have a competition of visions and trustworthy politicians, so that the messages can reach the people. We can't expect of people to go out onto the streets, join campaigns, hand out leaflets and fight for a cause that is obviously lost. If there were an opposition which combined a political vision with a competence in policy, and thus, had at least some chance of becoming a real opponent to Fidesz, that would change a lot. If this were the case, voters would be more willing to take risks.

So, you are saying that the people have real, existing fears (in part, due to the politics and the omissions of the government), and in the meantime, the government is planting in them a range of different fears to divert attention?

ZOLTÁN LAKNER: In Hungarian politics, you can witness the economics of fear, which defines the directions and targets of the existing or emerging fears of the electorate: since there are existing fears in society, and thus, existing demands for protection, the government will create an extra supply of fears so that it can itself decide which ones to protect from. I have the impression that Orbán's advisors know a lot about social psychology, and this knowledge finds its way into Orbán's speeches. The Fidesz party has recognised that there is not sufficient awareness among the people about their interests, advocacy is weak, and there is no trust. Moreover, the longing for egalitarianism is not rooted in solidarity, but in jealousy. Thus, even though there is discontent, there is no one to organise a resistance – the only resistance fighter is Orbán, who fights against the threats that he himself invented.



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