

**ORBÁNLAND: HOW I CAME TO  
UNDERSTAND VIKTOR ORBÁN'S HUNGARY  
AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPE**

(LASSE SKYTT)

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I am in an odd position with respect to Hungary. Because I'm half Hungarian, speak the language (rustily now) and two decades ago spent nearly a year there, I know much more than most Americans. In fact, the first post-Communist prime minister, József Antall, was my grandfather's first cousin. On the other hand, my knowledge of current Hungarian events is gleaned mostly from English-language media, which is almost all both grossly ignorant and grossly biased. Lasse Skytt, a Danish journalist resident in Hungary, has arrived to help me out, by offering an excellent neutral view of Hungarian politics, deliberately designed to be purely informative, rather than polemical.

From the title, the reader knows that the book revolves around the magnetar of Hungarian politics today, prime minister Viktor Orbán, whose Fidesz party commands a supermajority in Parliament. Skytt's approach is to offer several essays on related topics, both directly political and tangentially political, along with several interviews he conducted with important political figures (though not with Orbán himself, who generally does not allow interviews). In these days of rage, Skytt's goal is to "present a wider, nuanced take on the situation in Hungary and Europe. It is my hope that this approach will get readers from both camps to better understand each other. . . ." I imagine Skytt himself holds standard left-wing views; it is hard to see how he could otherwise work for a major Danish newspaper. But it's impossible to tell what his own politics are from this book, which is very much to his credit.

Skytt moved to Hungary in 2013, basically because the country was intriguing, jobs in Western Europe were shrinking, and he didn't want to work in public relations for some corporation like so many of his classmates. Although Budapest dominates Hungarian life, he wisely chose to live both there and Debrecen, which is the second-biggest city, but only ten percent the size of Budapest, with a vastly different feel. He quickly discovered, although he puts it more delicately, that all the Western journalists in Hungary were old people who had been

there since Communism fell, and that they constituted “a liberal echo chamber” ignorant of what most Hungarians actually thought. So he decided to find out the answer for himself, and to provide his readers “views and perspectives you do not necessarily come across every day.” Since, though, a Western reader about things Hungarian will indeed come across left-wing views and perspectives every day, in effect this means that the new views and perspectives offered here are ones in opposition to left-wing propaganda and certainties. Everybody gets equal time, but the only things new here to most readers are going to be facts and opinions that contradict what the BBC and the *New York Times* tell us.

If there is an overriding theme to this book, it is that Hungary, and Central Europe more generally, is simply different than Western Europe. Not merely in food, or wealth, but in attitude. These countries just don’t have the monolithic belief dominant in Western Europe in consumerism, atomized freedom, and what is the same thing, “European values,” which are really, as Ryszard Legutko has brilliantly outlined, “coercion to freedom.” Instead, majorities in Hungary (and Poland, as well as perhaps other countries) deem family, tradition, and their own culture the most important things. Why this difference exists is not particularly important; the fact is that it exists, and it is intolerable to the global elites, who require global conformity to their destructive left-wing vision.

Skytt, both in his essays and in his newspaper pieces, analyzes Hungarian politics through the lens of history and sociology (including several references to Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind*, which is a good explication of why Left and Right think as they do). Again, his main goal is to be even-handed. He covers important specific issues, such as the government’s aggressive efforts to increase the Hungarian birth rate (of ethnic Hungarians, not of Gypsies, who need no encouragement). The Fidesz government has no difficulty proclaiming loudly and proudly that marriage is between one man and one woman, and they should have children, lots of them. Most people in Hungary agree; as Skytt quotes one man on the street, “We live in a time when society tends to prefer solutions that are safe and convenient for the individual, rather than prioritizing solutions that are valuable but demanding for everyone.” Other topics include quite a bit on the Hungarian film industry,

which is thriving though under fairly strict government control, sports (including Orbán's thwarted bid to host the 2024 Olympics), and nods to history, including the controversies over how to treat Hungary's role in World War II and its dark years under Communism.

The most interesting interview is with Zoltán Kovács, generally regarded as Orbán's right-hand man. Unlike, say, Donald Trump, Orbán is a consummate politician, and part of that is maintaining a core group of loyalists on whom he can rely. He has been relying on Kovács for thirty years. The basic point that Kovács makes is that Hungary is not opposed to the EU. In fact, despite the economic boom over which Orbán has presided, Hungary can't really afford to be (as Christopher Caldwell's excellent recent article in the *Claremont Review of Books* discussed), since German companies, in particular auto companies, employ a great many people in Hungary. Rather, they want to influence the approaches taken by the EU, and ensure Hungary can meet European goals in the way Hungary feels best. "[W]e believe in a stronger and more effective Europe through stronger and more effective nation states." At least that's what Kovács says. Me, I think this is probably the best spin to put on the truth that European goals are incompatible with Hungarian goals, and since Kovács, like Orbán, explicitly rejects liberal democracy as it has developed, I see little other possibility than ultimate separation. But it's not like Kovács is going to admit that publicly.

Another notable discussion partner is Daniel Friberg, a right-wing Swede who moved to Budapest as more congenial, because it does not have the aggressive censorship and extreme political correctness found in Western Europe. Orbán invited such political refugees, and then had to backtrack when too many came and American white supremacists started trying to organize conferences in Budapest (Orbán had them thrown out). Friberg founded Arktos Press, which publishes European-centered (far) right-wing books in English (such as Guillaume Faye's *Archeofuturism*), but is also associated with AltRight.com, an apparently dormant website run by the American Richard Spencer, known for his clownish white supremacist antics.

A good portion of the book is taken up with two topics—the first being the migrant invasion of 2015, when Orbán built a wall to keep immigrants out, in his view fulfilling his treaty obligations to the EU. As it happens, he was technically correct, but the rest of the EU, led by

Angela Merkel, decided that “European values” superseded the actual treaties, and that Orbán was a bad, bad man for wanting to keep alien invaders out of Europe. This controversy has defined probably half of what the average person in America has heard about Orbán. The other half is taken up by the other major topic of this book—whether Orbán is some kind of proto-dictator exercising undue power and influence over Hungarian media and culture, something Skytt also covers in detail from both sides.

Because, however, I have treated both these topics at length elsewhere (in particular, in my review of Steven Levitsky’s *How Democracies Die*), and nothing here on those topics is new (although it is well presented), I do not intend to repeat myself. Nobody will be surprised that I think Orbán’s attitude toward migrants is correct, although not adequately stringent, and that whatever political foibles or corner cutting Orbán may engage in, the real objection to his influence over Hungary’s structures is that he uses it to right-wing, rather than left-wing, ends.

But what I’d like to focus on is two other topics to which Skytt repeatedly refers—Hungary’s Gypsies, and Hungary’s relationship with Russia. As to Gypsies (who prefer to be called Roma, but I’ll call Gypsies), they are a favorite sympathy target of American do-gooder liberals, who imagine that by inserting themselves into affairs between Hungarians and Gypsies, they are Martin Luther King reborn. Hungary does indeed have a significant Gypsy problem—projections suggest that Gypsies, now around ten percent of the Hungarian population, will at least double that percentage within a few decades, although of course that depends on whether Orbán’s policies trying to increase the Hungarian birthrate succeed. By “problem,” I mean that Gypsies are dirt poor and hardly at all integrated into Hungarian society, something on which both Hungarians and Gypsies agree. They disagree on why that is, at least publicly, with the Gypsies ascribing it to discrimination and the Hungarians ascribing it to Gypsy culture.

You will note that I suggest that Gypsies are not Hungarians. This is both false and true. It is false in that Gypsies who live in Hungary are Hungarian citizens, and have lived in Hungary for centuries (although since Gypsies are traditionally nomads it would be more accurate to say they have lived in Central Europe for centuries). It is also false in that Gypsies have more in common with other Hungarians than, say,

Japanese do. It is true in that Gypsy culture does, and always has, deliberately set itself apart from Hungarian culture, and that it is a grossly inferior culture. This is not to say that Gypsies are necessarily bad people. Many are just trying to get by and improve their lives, and the lives of their families. It's how they choose to do that, and the amount of effort they are willing to put into honest ways to do that, which is the problem.

The difficulty in dealing with any such culture, one that lives as a largely separate group in a country whose majority culture is obviously superior and more successful, is that a tension exists between Christian charity and kindness, and resolving conflicts. This is especially true in a democracy, and even more true in a modern welfare democracy, since those can be and are gamed by unproductive but cohesive groups, whereas traditionally the problem was addressed through an understood and implemented natural hierarchy with responsibilities on both sides. Gypsies used to be the only such European group; in much of Western Europe they have now been superseded in numbers and aggressiveness of their demands by invading Muslim migrants, but the basic conflicts are similar (though Gypsy culture is far more opposed to productive work). Few migrants stayed in Hungary, so that is not an immediate Hungarian problem. Orbán prevented more from coming, and those who made it in before he built a wall were more interested in the freebies offered by Germany and Sweden, anyway, and not that interested in staying in Hungary when better offers were being made by virtue-signaling childless Germans.

Now, true, I can't claim to be an expert in Gypsy culture. But I know a lot more than nearly any American, and I've lived for a time in a Hungarian town with a sizeable Gypsy population. Originally the Gypsies came from India (actually mostly from one Indian family, as genetic research has shown), and spread out into Eastern and Central Europe more than a thousand years ago. Different Gypsy groups have variations in culture, and have adopted different religions, but all share an extreme clannishness and a hostile attitude toward non-Gypsies. This has led to the most often noted characteristic of Gypsies, their willingness to steal from non-Gypsies. Wage work, or hard work in general, is not honored among Gypsies, which is the major reason they are, in most places, extremely poor and live in squalor. I imagine this is probably connected to the same attitude toward work that has kept

most Indians poor, despite the blessings of British colonialism, and which was well covered in Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* and Gregory Clark's *A Farewell To Alms*. No doubt Hungarians do discriminate against Gypsies, as well, though most of the discrimination is rational, but even were it not, that alone would not explain more than a tiny fraction of the difference in outcomes between Gypsies and Hungarians.

There are always exceptions and outriders. Some Gypsies are successful in certain lines of work. The British television series *Peaky Blinders*, before it jumped the shark, was an interesting and generally honest look at Gypsy culture in Birmingham immediately after World War I (centering around a Gypsy family that graduates from petty crime to organized crime). Traditionally, Gypsy musicians were very popular in Hungary and Europe more generally. But those are exceptions; it is no surprise that you have never heard of a famous Gypsy (though a few famous people have some Gypsy ancestry).

Skytt spends much time talking to János Szűcs, a Gypsy activist, one of the few who has been successful in the wider world (although in what manner is opaque). He returned to his home area, northeastern Hungary, where Gypsies are concentrated, with a plan to turn it into an autonomous province nominally under Hungarian governance. While this seems like a pie-in-the-sky plan, even less likely in Hungary because of its dismemberment after World War I than it would be in another country, Szűcs insists it is necessary to avoid civil war. In his telling, the Gypsies cannot be "politically represented on a national level" and cannot get education or healthcare, though why any of things are the result of anything other than the result of Gypsy passivity and inertia is not made clear. Szűcs does not strengthen his arguments when he says explicitly "[Gypsies] are forced to steal, to commit crimes, there is no other way," thus admitting the main criticisms made of Gypsies, although he ascribes their willingness to commit crimes to there being "no money or jobs." He also says "The European Union sends a huge amount of money to improve Roma integration, but unfortunately, more than 70-80 percent of this support just disappears." He doesn't elaborate, so I can only assume it reaches the Gypsies, but is dissipated among Gypsy corruption, never being spent for earmarked infrastructure improvements and the like. In Szűcs's new province, every Gypsy would be given three hundred euros a month, and Gypsy paradise

achieved. I imagine to many Gypsies that would be paradise, for a little while, until it devolved into Somalia. I'm not sure what the solution to the Gypsy problem is, but this isn't it.

As to Russia, there is a pretty clear divide among Skytt's interlocutors, between those who look to Western Europe as the future and those who look to Russia. Both Orbán supporters and opponents can be found in the first group, but the second group is dominated by Orbán supporters. Orbán himself steers a middle path, and in fact it seems odd that any Hungarian would look to Russia, since Russia has historically been involved in Hungarian repression. But changing times lead to changing ways, and if you are a conservative or post-liberal who cannot stand the nasty dead end of Western Europe, but your small country needs allies, Russia is the obvious choice. Who else, after all?

A Hungarian entrepreneur analyzes it thus. European multinationals now provide quite a bit of employment, which is good for now. But European investment ignores Hungarian-grown businesses, and eventually automation will make the jobs that exist now go away. Moreover, Europe has its own problems and a highly uncertain future. Putin is more popular among Hungarians than Merkel (and Trump, for that matter) because "since we are a small country, we must hold on to someone. . . . The Orbán government knows that we need a strong partner, and if it's not the West, it should be the East." Another man says "I think that Russia has a better future of growing than the European Union has. If I need to choose which way Hungary should go, then I think that two hundred years into the future, Russia will still be a flower in the vase, but no one will remember the EU."

I suspect this is a too-rosy picture. Russia has its own very significant problems, and Putin is not a nice man. On the other hand, Putin's attitude toward the future is not dissimilar to Orbán's, and it is not only far superior to the attitude that dominates the ruling classes in Western Europe, but it is the only attitude that may get Europe, or part of Europe, out of the hole it has dug for itself, trapped between, on the one hand, a total failure of cultural nerve, shown most notably by its lack of children, and on the other hand, alien, triumphalist migrant hordes. Whether Orbán will succeed in leading Hungary to thread the needle into a decent future is very much in doubt. But after reading this

book, I'm confirmed in what has been my opinion for some time—he's doing what's necessary to make that even a possibility.