‘The Most Dangerous Man in the European Union’

One summer day in 1989, I saw an unshaven, long-haired young man approach a microphone to address 250,000 people in Budapest. They had gathered in Heroes’ Square for the ceremonial reburial of the leaders of a 1956 anti-communist uprising crushed by the Soviet army, and I was there reporting it live for television. The unknown speaker was a 26-year-old representing a tiny youth group called Fidesz and, with a speech lasting six-and-half minutes, he roused the crowd in the square and viewers at home, calling for free elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Almost overnight, he became famous in Hungary and abroad.

That young man was Viktor Orbán. Now the prime minister—a position he has held since 2010, as well as from 1998 to 2002—he is up for reelection on April 8. And he is expected to win. Under his right-wing, populist leadership, Hungary has seen the return of many past demons, including ethnic nationalism and deep-rooted corruption. Orbán has embarked on a sweeping concentration of power, eliminating constitutional safeguards, successfully reshaping the state in his own image, and posing a potential threat to even the future of the European Union. A multimillionaire, he’s presented himself as the standard-bearer for Hungary’s Christian identity and an architect of what he describes as an “illiberal democracy.”

It’s a remarkable metamorphosis for a man who was once a student champion of democracy, a fiery left-wing atheist, and a youth so poor he says he was 15 years old before he turned on a tap and enjoyed warm water for the first time. How did he change, and change his country, so drastically? And why is the leader of a small landlocked Danubian country now being described, to quote the chairman of the European Stability Initiative think tank Gerald Knaus, as the “most dangerous man in the European Union”?

After graduating from university in 1987, Orbán worked part-time for the financier George Soros’s Open Society Foundation. Two years later he moved with his wife and baby daughter to Oxford, intending to complete a nine-month research project, also financed by Soros’s foundation, on the idea of civil society in European political philosophy. But barely four months later the family returned

to Budapest, and Orbán made the fateful decision to become a career politician. He threw himself into the campaign for Hungary's first free parliamentary elections in 1990, and placed first on the list of candidates for Fidesz, the "party of youth." Although the party ended up winning only 22 seats, making it the second-smallest group, its MPs had a youthful image—beards, long hair, jeans, open-neck shirts—that helped endear them to the public. They advocated liberal economic, educational, and social policies, and were quick to condemn nationalist and anti-Semitic undertones in the government coalition parties.

Full of ambition, charisma, and tactical skill, Orbán, not yet 30, soon seized total control over Fidesz. After the party's disappointing performance in the 1994 elections, which saw the triumph of the Socialists (the old communist party), he moved his party to the right. The populist nationalist option seemed to offer the only realistic chance for future success against the left. In the 1998 parliamentary election, Fidesz won more seats than any other party, and Orbán, now clean-shaven and wearing a business suit, became the youngest freely elected prime minister in the history of Hungary.

Fidesz has gradually become the main political force in Hungary by exploiting the highly explosive "national question," which concerns the trauma caused by the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, through which Hungary lost two-thirds of its historic territory and over 3 million Hungarians found themselves living in foreign states. The national humiliation, and the fate of ethnic Hungarians now living in bordering states, have filled generations with bitterness. Since his lurch to the right, Orbán's rhetoric has been characterized by professions of faith in the nation, in the homeland, and in Christian values.

Under Orbán, Fidesz suffered two surprising consecutive electoral defeats, in 2002 and 2006. But it went on to score two epochal triumphs in 2010 and 2014, winning a two-thirds parliamentary majority. Faced with a divided and discredited opposition, Orbán proceeded to fill all positions of state power with trusted supporters.

But by early 2015, the Orbán government had lost its supermajority, and the prime minister was using immigration as a wedge issue to regain support. The migrant and refugee crisis, which hit its zenith that year, proved a godsend for that project. Hungary received 174,000 asylum applications in 2015 alone—or 1,770 applicants per 100,000 residents, the highest rate of any European country. Voicing sharp opposition to the influx of migrants, Orbán built a 110-mile-long fence along the border with Serbia to keep them out, and later one along the border with Croatia. He was able to dictate the narrative about migrants—initially in Hungary and subsequently across the post-communist states of Central and

Eastern Europe—by exploiting two predominant elements of Hungarians' self-image both byproducts of the Treaty of Trianon: the victim myth and the will to survive.

Between June and September 2015, Fidesz's poll ratings and Orbán's popularity rose sharply. He achieved international notoriety as a sort of trailblazer and role model for nationalists. Even critics of the government's harsh treatment of asylum seekers admitted that Orbán saw earlier than most of his EU colleagues that borders had to be controlled before a relocation plan for migrants could be agreed upon. The left-leaning German weekly *Der Spiegel* declared him "the political victor of the refugee crisis." It was the failure of European leaders to adequately deal with the refugee crisis (as well as the Eurozone crisis) that arguably enabled Orbán's success and, more broadly, the rise of populist and nationalist parties across Europe.

Opinion polls leave little doubt that Orbán successfully won back support by weaponizing the immigration issue. In a September 2015 poll, two-thirds of respondents in Hungary supported the building of the fence along the Serbian border. A 2016 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center in 10 European countries ascertained that Hungarians were the most likely to believe that refugees would increase the chances of terrorism in their country: 76 percent of Hungarians questioned said they believed this, compared with a median of 59 percent for the 10 polled countries. Even stronger was the belief that refugees are a burden because they take a country's jobs and social benefits: 82 percent of Hungarians polled identified with this belief, as against a median of 50 percent.

Some observers have dismissed as absurd the idea that Orbán, the ferociously nationalistic leader of a landlocked country with a population of less than 10 million, could reshape European politics and seriously challenge German Chancellor Angela Merkel's dominant position on the continent. Although Orbán has avoided openly attacking Merkel, his speeches and interviews, riddled with sarcasm, have often contained venomous references to her. One of the many examples was reported in *Weltwoche*, a Swiss weekly, in 2015: "To put it bluntly, what dominates in European public life is liberal blah blah about nice, but second-rank issues," Orbán said. "Germany is the key. If tomorrow the Germans were to say 'We are full up, it's over,' then the flood would immediately ebb away. It is so simple, just a single sentence from Angela Merkel."

Yet the effects of Orbán's rabble-rousing in Central and Eastern Europe should not be underestimated. It's primarily due to his influence that the four post-communist EU states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) have

emerged as a nationalistic group, blocking European integration, and thereby also assisting Russia's expansive strategy. Meanwhile, in Western Europe, Orbán boasts numerous admirers in Germany, Austria, France, and the Netherlands.

It would be a mistake to compare the Hungarian regime to, say, Vladimir Putin's Russia. Opposition politicians are not jailed, and antigovernment demonstrations are not subject to police brutality. But over the past eight years, Orbán has pioneered a new model of what some Hungarian scholars describe as a "half democracy in decline" or a "soft autocracy," merging crony capitalism with right-wing rhetoric. He has flatly rejected accusations about the alleged impropriety of the sources of his allies' enrichment, but opposition speakers in parliament repeatedly complain that he has become not only the most powerful but also the richest man in Hungary. On the Corruption Perception Index compiled by Transparency International and released this February, Hungary is ranked as the second most corrupt EU country after Bulgaria. By gerrymandering the electoral system, subjugating the free press, and curbing the judiciary, Hungary has also achieved the dubious distinction of being named by Freedom House the "least democratic country" among the EU's 28 members.

Nearly three decades after I first saw him galvanize a crowd in Budapest, Orbán remains a fighter who thrives on confrontation. Now, neither the weak and split opposition nor the warnings of the EU and human-rights organizations threaten his grip on power. On the eve of the general elections on April 8, the odds are still in his favor.

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