

Orbán's great power politics

Hungary's parliamentary election on 3 April is set to provide the biggest challenge to Viktor Orbán's hold on power since he became Prime Minister in 2010. Zsolt Enyedi reflects on Orbán's recent 'state of the nation' speech, which kicked off the 2022 election campaign and shed light on how the Prime Minister views Hungary's position within Europe and the world.

Orbán's 12 February ['state of the nation'](#) speech had a robust international relations aspect. In an era in which populist leaders tend to focus on domestic issues, such an emphasis deserves scrutiny. The speech launched the 2022 election campaign. Its fundamental purpose was to maximise the chances of Fidesz at the polls. By presenting himself as a statesman with a foreign policy vision, the Prime Minister drew a contrast between himself and his amateur opponents. But Hungarians vote based on domestic considerations, and Orbán knows that. Therefore, the specific statements he made on Ukraine, Brussels, Berlin and on the Balkans should be interpreted not as campaign slogans but as indications of how Orbán actually sees the world.

In terms of Hungary's relationship with the European Union, not much new was revealed, although the phrase "the most important question is whether we want to stay together" shows that he has a more open-ended approach to the future of the EU than most of his compatriots. Brussels was mentioned seventeen times, and every single time in a negative context. According to Orbán, Brussels has "imperialist tantrums", "mercenaries", and "pro-immigrant bureaucrats", as well as "agents of George Soros, the Judases who would do anything for their thirty pieces of silver, the horde of pen pushers, experts and advisors who see nation states as the enemy".

From Orbán's perspective, Brussels' climate policies and economic prescriptions are disastrous and need to be rejected. Overall, Brussels cannot be trusted, but in Orbán's view it should not be feared either as it is ultimately no more than a "speed bump". The formulations may have become more colourful than before, but Orbán's hostility has now been around for a decade. If a recent shift can be detected in his rhetoric, then it is a move from frustration and anger towards disdain and defiance.

What the speech did clearly demonstrate, however, is Orbán's new-found obsession with the Balkans. His latest project, the support of the separatist Bosnian Serb politician, Milorad Dodik, opened a new front with the EU in 2021. As a response to the EU's threats against Dodik and against his backers, Orbán demanded that "there shall be no room for sanctions, punitive measures, lectures or any other kind of arrogance from the great powers."

He added the following warning: "Hungary has grown stronger in recent years. This is why I say to you that we shall not sit back and allow wrongheaded great power politics to cause damage in our neighbourhood. Neither Berlin nor Brussels will be able to pursue Balkan policies to the detriment of the Hungarians, and they will not even be able to pursue their policies without us. We shall not accept decisions from Brussels that run counter to Hungary's interests."

Orbán is known as someone who likes to exaggerate his own influence, but his words have some undeniable relevance in the context of the Balkans. His entourage owns newspapers, banks, telecommunication companies and football clubs in the region, he has privileged access to the enlargement commissioner of the European Union, and he is a close friend of the prime ministers of both Serbia and Slovenia.

Interestingly, references to 'Central Europe' and the 'Visegrád Group' were conspicuously absent from the speech. He again contrasted the West with the nations occupied by the Soviets (i.e. the westerners inherited freedom, we fought for it), and discussed the cosmopolitan and 'godless' attitude of westerners in terms of their distinct historical experience, but the usual references to the achievements and demands of the Visegrád countries were missing. The results of the recent Czech parliamentary and Slovak presidential elections, as well as the difficulties faced by the Polish government, have forced Orbán to look elsewhere. This new direction is well indicated by the fact the Prime Minister's website has no Polish translation of the speech but does have an Italian one.

At the time of the rally, most of the world was focused on the Russian threat to Ukraine. Orbán could not avoid the topic either. The Hungarian Prime Minister is often labelled in the press as Putin's 'poodle', and given he had just returned from one of his numerous visits to Moscow, he had to show that he is an independent, sovereign actor. Right before the speech, he rejected the reception of new NATO troops in Hungary. These moves, just as Orbán's visit to see Putin, have been interpreted in the pro-government press as gestures of de-escalation.

In the speech, the Prime Minister stressed that Hungary is interested in peace for historical reasons, as Hungarians need a buffer zone between their country and Russia. His narrative did not include terms typically used in this context, like “Ukraine’s territorial integrity”, the “principle of self-determination”, or the “Russian threat”, and it was notable that no reference was made to the possibility of an “attack” or “invasion”. Orbán clearly sees no moral difference between the Russian and Ukrainian demands, and while he called for a joint European defence force, he stressed that a strong Europe requires good relations with Russia.

As in the past, Orbán spoke about the foreign policy issues from the position of a wise, pragmatic leader who is not fooled by the moralistic tone of his European and American peers. But he also revealed his sense of drama. Hinting at impending EU decisions on rule of law conditionality, he accused the West of conducting a “rule-of-law jihad” against the East. He seems to consider westerners as playing a cynical power game against governments such as his, but at the same time becoming increasingly fanatical in the pursuit of their own, bizarre norms.

What can a country such as Hungary do against such pressure? The answer was combative, with Orbán stating that “words rarely help against jihad” and claiming that “here we must show strength; so let the Reconquista begin!” It is not difficult to see why he became the hero of the counter-revolutionary right.

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