

## PREFACE

Why should Orbán's grip on power concern anyone outside of Hungary? Why would anyone read a thick book about the modus operandi of illiberal gender politics in a small and impoverished Central European country?

Towards the end of his fourth consecutive term, Viktor Orbán and his government systematically exported the design of the illiberal state to allies in Europe and around the globe. The Orbán-regime not only financially supported the electoral campaigns of anti-liberal parties from Slovakia to France with Hungarian taxpayers' money, but also started using taxpayers' money to fund a think tank, which has a larger endowment than the University of Oxford, to create, share, and disseminate ideas and policies offering a viable political challenge to liberalism. While in the early 2010s the voices warning about the spread of the know-how for illiberal takeovers were not heard, now the whole of Europe and beyond seem to be waking up from this somnambulant state and are trying to find solutions to stop them.

Hungary has long served as a laboratory for revolutionary ideas in European history. Therefore, this book should be read as a cautionary example, as it assesses the so-called family-friendly model, initially implemented in Orbán's Hungary, and its consequences for Hungarian society.

Orbán's personal career transformation is remarkable. A once liberal and pro-European politician, Viktor Orbán became Hungary's prime minister for the first time in 1998, at the age of 35. It

took him only a decade to become a pioneer of illiberal, pro-Putin politics in Europe. Following two electoral defeats during his first four-year term and the global financial crisis of 2008, he returned to power with a decisive victory in 2010. Subsequently, he has established a new political system in Hungary that he believes will guarantee his continued electoral success. The political developments in Hungary over the past one and a half decades have confirmed the prime minister's aspirations. The party alliance of Christian conservatives under Orbán's leadership, the Fidesz-KDNP Party Alliance, secured two-thirds of the seats in the Hungarian parliament in the elections of 2014, 2018, and 2022. The electoral success that began in 2010 gave Orbán the mandate even to amend the constitution.

While the country is sliding down in terms of GDP and the consumption index, signaling its impoverishment, Viktor Orbán has succeeded in putting a demographically and economically insignificant country on the front pages of international newspapers. Like-minded leaders around the globe emphasize the very real demographic crises that link them to another global crisis: migration. Besides constantly engaging in conflict with the European Union regarding migration policies, Hungary regularly hosts international conferences "to solve the demographic crisis." A government think tank even invented, trained, and promoted female politicians who were supposed to validate and popularize the government's family-friendly model. The results of this costly social experiment remained dubious. While the EU's requirements for gender equality are at best only formal (meaning on paper), the prime minister has managed to appoint only three female ministers in a decade and a half, two of whom have fallen from power due to the government's hypocritical *modus operandi*. On the other hand, family-friendly rhetoric has proven to be a powerful propaganda tool for Fidesz. Who could openly object,

even with the slightest hope of success, to the idea that supporting families is one of the most important tasks of a government?

In our book, through clear and accessible examples, we introduce how Viktor Orbán's political system, the NER (the so-called System of National Cooperation), has influenced women's lives in Hungary over the past 15 years. Even though academics have been researching the impacts of the so-called illiberal state on specific aspects of women's lives since Fidesz-KDNP came to power in 2010, they have yet to produce a comprehensive analysis of what women generally endure in Hungary across all aspects of their lives. It is remarkable how the system that was supposed to be cooperating on a national level left half of the citizens, namely women, behind. This book aims to evaluate the past 16 years of illiberalism in Hungary through the lens of gender politics. We argue that women in Hungary have been negatively affected by the System of National Cooperation. We also argue that, facing similar political developments, women elsewhere would also suffer similar consequences.

We suggest that everyone not be misled by the cheesy-looking title of our book. This volume says nothing about the Hungarian prime minister's private life. It is remarkable, however, that when questioned by journalists about the recall of an experienced, pro-European, female diplomat, Viktor Orbán responded with a pretentiously notable lack of interest, stating, "I don't deal with women's affairs." As discussed in detail later, the phrase has become a household saying in Hungary. It is notable for its sarcastic tone and reflects the stark, painful reality of the social status women must accept in Hungary.

Structural disadvantages faced by women in Hungary are not all the result of Viktor Orbán's continuous rule. Women were subjected to significant structural disadvantages both before the collapse of state socialism in 1989 and under the left-wing gov-

ernments of Hungary since then. What the Orbán-led regime did was neither more nor less than a lack of interest in reducing the already-existing inequalities. In many respects, these inequalities were ideal for maintaining society's hierarchical order and, by extension, the power at the top.

We begin each chapter with unique cases that serve as unmistakable examples of how Hungary's social construct affects women gravely. The stories told about different walks of life and their gendered aspects harshly illustrate the extent to which women voters are provided with or denied access to resources, protection, and opportunities in the Orbán era. These cases are far from being exceptional; many similar stories could have been discussed. Some might even tell a story of advantages for women for the superficial observer. The cases we picked, however, attracted significant media attention not only in Hungary but also beyond its borders, thereby shaping public discourse. We believe these case studies can shed light on the general trends in how illiberal women's politics operates. Understanding the mechanisms of such politics is important, as the Hungarian government, as mentioned above, aims to inspire more powerful leaders worldwide.

### **The power of joint forces**

This book results from an unlikely collaboration between two intellectuals with different professional trajectories, united in the fight against the dismantling of democracy in Hungary. Zsuzsanna Balázs is a Hungarian journalist who has been investigating and writing about government policies and inequalities in Hungary for almost two decades. Andrea Pető is a historian and gender studies scholar who, as a political emigrant, relocated to Austria with her university, the Central European University. (Orbán's government had effectively forced it to leave

Hungary and move to Vienna.) She has spent decades researching and writing about global and Hungarian gender politics. The distinct approaches to data gathering, analysis, and interpretation enable us to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how the politics of the illiberal state are gendered. We are confident that our collaboration has produced an accessible, easy-to-read book on Orbán's "women's affairs." It is an analysis of Orbán's illiberal playbook for transforming human rights and gender equality policies in the European Union and beyond. By this, we mean the set of policies affecting women's lives in Hungary, even though the Hungarian prime minister denies their existence by reframing their purpose and consequences. We believe that women's politics extends far beyond women's lives. It affects both men and women regardless of their perceived identities or sexual orientation. Thus, we strongly believe that our book will be helpful to women and men, politicians and activists, academics and students in Hungary and beyond.

We aimed to write a book easily accessible to a wide audience; we omitted footnotes and used only endnotes, with cross-references in a separate section at the very end of our volume. The academic works and journal articles we cited are listed in the bibliography following the chapters. Furthermore, we also list works that may provide additional guidance for further reading. While analyzing cases that attracted significant media attention, we also aim to understand how and why the Hungarian government can get away not only with non-cooperation but also with measures that run counter to those set by its European allies.

Assessing the design and functioning of Hungarian society under Viktor Orbán's subsequent regimes is not an easy task for several reasons. First, academic articles are too bland to be either accessible or enjoyable for an inquisitive yet external audience. Regarding information, the Hungarian press is also a tricky source.

Media products, whether directly or indirectly funded by the government through state advertising, publish only stories that portray the government in a positive light. They tend to underline the perceived benefits, desirability, and positive outcomes of what the NER calls a “conservative turn,” but it has destroyed conservatism and replaced it with illiberalism. In this book, we argue that this politics is far from being conservative. The pro-government media also rushes to present justifications for this considerable shift in politics without also presenting critical voices. In contrast, the few remaining outlets of the independent press are critical in their approach towards the politics of the illiberal government, and in return they face harsh conditions in their work environment, frequent harassment and threats.

However hard it may be to believe, in Hungary, it is very challenging to obtain reliable statistical data. The Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), a government-sponsored agency, collects and publishes minimal amounts of gender-disaggregated data. Furthermore, the existing data are regularly accompanied by misleading official explanations that have been altered under political pressure. Therefore, getting a clear picture of actual social processes is difficult even within the country’s borders, as the combination of data scarcity, conscious propaganda manipulation, intimidation, and threats produces an explosive mix. This has resulted in significant sectarian cleavage within the public sphere: those who unquestioningly accept government propaganda and are convinced that everything has gone wrong as if there were two separate countries, two “Hungarys” as illiberal politics operate through creating cleavages via hate and exclusion. Nowhere is this division more visible than in gender policy.

The lack of information also profoundly impacts gender analysis. The one reliable source, however, is the documentation regularly submitted by the Hungarian government to the UN CEDAW

Committee. The government provided its most recent report to the CEDAW Committee in February 2023. This status report is the most comprehensive account of the current conditions of women in Hungary.

This book follows the structure of the CEDAW report. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is founded upon the principle of the universal rights of women. This implies that women, or, more accurately, all women, are entitled to the same rights as men. The convention is based on the principle that women are inherently disadvantaged in society due to structural inequalities. Governments that have ratified the convention are responsible for monitoring the structural inequalities women face in their own state parties. The government of Hungary ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in late 1980; therefore, it is obliged under the convention to submit reports to the CEDAW Committee on the actions it has taken to improve the status of women in Hungary. For each report, the state must complete a comprehensive questionnaire. The data required covers the labor market, education, health, violence against women, public institutions, politics, and community life. These reports are evaluated with the assistance of international experts and compared with shadow reports created at the same time by independent actors not affiliated with government institutions. Following the comparison, the CEDAW Committee issues recommendations to the countries that have ratified the convention. In the follow-up report, the committee evaluates the government's progress in implementing its recommendations.

The chapters begin with illustrative cases and events that have attracted considerable public attention in Hungary. These case studies demonstrate that the legal framework for gender equality, which exists on paper but is frequently disregarded in practice,

does not function effectively in contemporary Hungary. We aim to analyze the significance of these events in light of their domestic consequences and the reactions of the UN CEDAW Committee to the Hungarian government. We discuss only the sections of the convention most relevant to the Hungarian context. We address everyday discrimination faced by Hungarian women, the lack of legal support, and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes by politicians, violence against women, the political representation of women, the status of women in the labor market, the potential for discrimination against women in education and the health-care system, and the conditions women face in rural communities and families. Where relevant, we will also address the war the Orbán era inflicted upon sexual minorities, emphasizing our belief that the war on “gender” is a political construct designed to polarize voters and gain political advantages.

In its 2023 evaluation of Hungary, the CEDAW Committee expressed concerns that gender equality is not promoted, even in mere rhetoric, in the country. Delegates representing Orbán’s government indicated during the previous hearing of the CEDAW Committee that the state party aims to interpret gender equality within the family framework. In other words, women are primarily, if not exclusively, defined as wives and mothers. They no longer count as autonomous actors in public life. The committee underlined that in Hungary, stereotypes about the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society are reinforced by government policies. Women’s rights are backsliding in both political and public life, as well as in legislation.

The backsliding and the perceived lack of resistance in Hungary can be explained not only by the makings of a regime drawn to authoritarian tendencies, but also by historical arguments. It is important to highlight that most Hungarian women have never encountered an alternative understanding of gender equality in

their families or broader social environments. As far as gender equality is concerned, it is of grave importance to understand the legacy of communism (1945-89) as well as the neoliberalization of Hungary until the illiberal takeover. In this book, we aim to provide a historical explanation for Fidesz's popularity and to address this enigma: Why do women support a political power that not only denies them the option to become autonomous actors in their lives but also promotes policies harmful to them and their children? The developments described in the book are not limited to Hungary; they also affect women's lives elsewhere.

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