

'The future of Europe - lies in the past.'



This headline summarizes the talk, originally only entitled “The future of Europe”, which we listened to on our first day in Helsinki, very well. Certainly, Orbán’s statements have to be analyzed in the context of Hungary’s very special experience within the socialist system, especially Orbán’s own role during socialism. Still, one can be irritated when seeing how laxly a current European leader is treating certain topics, and how much attention he pays to other ones.

He started his speech by painting a picture of the particular hard times Europe is apparently facing right now. Altogether, he named eight challenges he considered to be major problems, first of all mentioning the **debt** the European countries and the EU were running up every day and year. Furthermore, he didn’t skip the **demographic challenges** which worked as a trigger for the, in his opinion, third urgent problem: The bureaucracy and the **social security systems** throughout Europe which need to be **reformed** in order to get more competitive and less state-controlled. He also saw a discrepancy of personal vs. institutional leadership in contemporary Europe. In his point of view the focus should be put on **personal leadership** as it offers more guiding potential in these hard times. This being said, Orbán switched to the characteristics of European identity – a topic which would recurrently dominate the rest of his speech. He complained about a **change European values are presently undergoing**. He understands that the idea of a strong identity, such as a national or religious one, is always said to cause severe problems, whereas a weak identity seems to possess the capability of reunifying Europe. He, on the other hand, suggests that a strong Europe can only be built on strong nations with strong moral values. Thus, in his sixth

remark he admitted that certainly, the common basic values fixed in the *acquis communautaire* would be an integral part of Europe's identity, but also pointed out that Europe could only be strong if it **respected the nations** it consists of. Furthermore, he referred to the **decreasing public support** with regard to the project of European integration in most states as he thinks this is one central challenge which Europe is currently facing. His analysis – which is far from being new or original – could probably derive from the fact that the nations in contemporary Europe are not as strong and respected as they ought to be. Last but not least, he finished with a rather fatalistic forecast on the future, saying that the last challenge Europe had to deal with was the **post crisis** – ‘Nothing will be as it used to be’.

The speech itself, short and very concise, apart from some exceptions, mostly evoked already known problems and was obviously not aiming to examine them from an unusual perspective or even to suggest solutions. The following debate which was based on questions and answers was not only not proportional and exceptionally long but also rather controversial.

When asked about his opinion on the European perspective of the remaining Southeast European countries, particularly the Western Balkans, he strongly underlined that he supports the continuing EU-enlargement and integration of the Balkans. In his point of view not having integrated the Balkans after the collapse of the Socialist Bloc was a mistake not to be repeated.

Some of Orbán's emotional and not reflected statements might be more comprehensible with the help of historical background information which he himself gave triggered by some questions. When asked about his role in mediating the political cleavage in Hungary, he explained that when speaking about Central Europe, Western Europeans often tend to egalitarianism which derives from the ignorance of some historical facts. To show the different points of origins of the various Eastern and Central European countries, he claims that Hungary (apart from Bulgaria) would be the only post-socialist country in Eastern Europe where the ex-communists dominated transition politics so much that they were able to undermine basic institutional and constitutional changes, and that it is therefore still suffering from this heavy legacy. This was leading to a situation in which the uprising competing wings tried to compromise each other as “fascists” or “communists”, leaving an insuperable gap. Also, he gave some economic reasons for the poisoned political culture in Hungary, notably citing the budget cuts as one disputed point, which he defended as necessary in order to save the country. Unfortunately, he missed to really answer the original question concerning his own role in this disrupted political atmosphere.

Also, he again expressed his discontent with the communist period in his country, which he calls *occupation*, and by that re-enacts himself as a dissident once more. He underlined the illegitimacy of the Communist reign by saying that it had only consisted of the most extremist actors who never had the support of electoral majority. According to Orbán, the communist party merely represented 17 % of the people during the socialist period, which he compared to the 17 % of the votes the nationalist party supposedly got during Second

World War. He, on the other hand, would be a patriot not allowing his country to be ruled by others. Probably, he considers himself as a part of the strong moderate powers the remaining 83 % of the voters are urging for.

Being particularly interested in his perception of European or Hungarian identity one listener asked about his comparison of the *acquis communautaire* with the pillars of national identity. This question was even evoked by Orbán himself several times. The listener mainly aimed at the question why Hungary might need a Hungarian solution and if Europe was not already offering solutions which could be good enough for Hungary. Orbán himself admitted that the value and identity discussion has reached its peak, not only in a European frame, but especially in Hungary, for which Hungary's new constitution was proof. In opposition to his numerous critics who might consider this as a strange and obsolete idea in the year 2013, he justified it, again, with the legacy of the communist period and the fact that Hungary is, again, the only country that was not able to put together a new constitution when overcoming communism after 1989. Therefore, due to creating the new constitution, Hungary was also somehow institutionalizing his own process of self-discovery, since a constitution would always urge the people to deal with its values, its understanding of the common history and collective memory, its definition of what it meant to be 'Hungarian'. This whole process wouldn't have been that different from the European Union's discussion a couple of years ago. Picking up this European dimension, Orbán added that Europe itself would not really contribute to a European identity since it is divided into two different parts parallel to the Euro- and non-Euro zone. The question remaining would be if Europe really wants an economic unification as it claims on the political level.



When he was asked whether he thinks a ‘nation’ is an ethnic or rather political community, he stated that no matter what ‘nation’ meant, Hungary had it as a fact, and that no clear definition of the term ‘nation’ would either be needed or existent, since one would recognize it as soon as it is seen anyways. Contradicting his earlier statement, he says that due to the historic development – Hungary lost two thirds of its territory and one third of its population due to World War I and thereby came from being a multi-ethnic state to a rather homogenous community – the discussion of what the Hungarian nation is about would never have been necessary but rather self-explanatory. The ‘nation’ as such has never been a problem in Hungary and still wouldn’t be seen as one when his inhabitants prefer to call themselves German, Hungarian or even ‘Gipsy’. Just by literally using this word instead of ‘Roma’ he actually gives insights into his way of thinking, even though he claims that minorities are fully accepted in Hungary and enjoy full autonomy.

On the other hand, there are hints in his speech as well as in Hungary’s new constitution that lead to the conclusion that Orbán’s idea of the Hungarian identity and ‘nation’ is far less wide and inclusive as it claims to be. This was mainly pointed out by the question why there was such a strong emphasis on Christian values and Christianity in the current discussion about identity in Hungary, although these two seem to be in essence pretty divisive values.

Orbán again defended this with the nature of constitutions, which would always urge the subject giving itself a constitution to get an overview of its own history and try to find combining elements. This frame would be defined by Christianity, the predominant role of which would be a fact that could not be denied. According to Orbán, Hungary would not have survived throughout history without Christianity since the “Hungarians are strong fighters by blood”. In this rhetoric, one could determine Orbán’s perception of Hungary as the “antemurale christianitatis”. In order to underline his point of view, he also emphasized that it would rather be questionable to state multicultural values which are of younger origin as trend-setting for the future, which would correspond the current mainstream within the European Union. In his opinion, due to its important role in the past, Christianity must be a part of the future as well and for this a “spiritual impetus” would be needed. On the other hand, he didn’t miss the opportunity to outline that it is always difficult to talk about European trends as such, since the member states are very diverse. He stated that he doesn’t believe the world to be en route towards a post-national order, but that nations could create a variety of values as well, and that it is not always necessary to let them be fixed by the supranational orders. In opposition to this multicultural supranational European “threat”, he became very defensive and again set the tone of “antemurale-christianitatis”-rhetoric. Even though people who share the same values as Orbán – Christian-based, nation-based, and family-based - might be a minority nowadays, they still are European though, and it wouldn’t be fair to say that those conservative values are not European anymore.

Drawing an even wider picture, he postulated that one of the reasons why Asia is apparently more successful than Europe would be its ability to create a wide value-history-background for their economic philosophy. Thus, since Europe lost its value basis, the

European economy lost its spiritual value basis and, therefore, decreased as well. Quod erat demonstrandum. His message was unmistakable: “I don’t want to preach, but I think we strongly need spiritual values.”

Another topic was about Hungary’s and Europe’s economic situation. At this point, Orbán mainly criticized the fact that Hungary only possessed 800.000 active workers and thereby tax payers, who could not possibly maintain a country with a population of 10 million people. As logic as this statement might be, we strongly question that those are the correct figures. Anyway, this didn’t seem to bother Orbán to continue his polemic. As another basic problem, he determined the communist welfare tradition, which urges him to react by encouraging those who would be willing to work, and by not tolerating unemployment for over three months. When hearing that whose house was not in order, this person couldn’t possibly benefit from the social welfare system, one can hardly avoid thinking that he might be speaking about Roma above all. Orbán immediately tried to dissolve this impression by adding that his government would also try to integrate “Gypsy ladies into the working market”, though.

Also, he blamed European leaders for being arrogant when speaking of a world’s economic crisis, since this simply wasn’t true, not at all for the Asian market, and still less for America than for Europe. After 2010, when he was elected Prime Minister, his first task would have been to rescue the country as it was the first country that collapsed in the EU. Today, he stated, the Hungarian economy is going quite well; at least their percentage of the debt on their GDP would still be manageable. He outlined that Hungary would not depend on Finnish, German or anybody’s money for this matter, but is able and wants to stand on its own. Although, he did not miss the chance to incite the people to invest in his country – Hungary wouldn’t need help, but capital would be more than welcome.

Last but not least, when he explained the lack of women in Hungarian politics, he admitted that they wouldn’t be involved enough even though, thanks to their nature-given feminine characteristics, they might even be able of healing the divided political culture in Hungary. Also, his government is trying to set up a program that helps women to get back on the labor market after pregnancy. On the other hand, Orbán immediately revised his statement by saying that politics is a tough field, probably not made for women. This as well as other statements were not a proof of being very diplomatic or rhetorically tactful.



One question about Orbán's opinion with regard to the large number of young people urging to leave his country unfortunately stayed unanswered as well, even though this is one of the most pressing ones.

To Orbán, it seemed to be more important to put an emphasis on a strong Hungarian identity with the claim that the Hungarian nation is to be understood as an inclusive one, even though mainly Christian values should be taken as a basis. For Eastern European countries, including Hungary, it is not surprising to use history and / or religion as a political argument in order to give its population an individual frame within the European Union. The legacy of the communist period has left its traces with regard to self-perception and the perception by others. It seems as if Orbán was arguing in a very essentialistic way: As if values and social roles were fixed by higher spirit and not by power politics. On the other hand he presented himself as an incorporation of the strong Hungarians 'by blood'. He gives the strong leader, who he probably is, defending Hungary against the threat of the communist cadre, maybe even against the European 'lack' of ideology. But, is Orbán perhaps using these higher principles in order to not only justify, but to hide his drive for power? With this speech, he tried to convince the listeners how strong Hungary is supposed to be. It stays questionable on which layers of society this 'strength' is built upon and who is still excluded from it, as it could be sensed when he was, for example, speaking about the situation of women or Roma.