

Hungary: Between Democracy and Authoritarianism. By PAUL LENDVAI. Pp. 288. New York: Columbia University Press. 2012. \$35. Cloth. ISBN: 978-0-231-70322-2.

The title of Paul Lendvai's most recent book gives a hint not only at the author's scope, but also at his own opinions of the current situation in Hungary. While other books by Lendvai look at climactic historical events that have changed and formed the course of Hungary, such as the 1848 and 1956 revolutions, this book focuses on the last twenty-five years of political transition.¹ Born in Hungary in 1929, Lendvai's own experience and relationship with the country and its politics is scattered throughout his writing through his extensive work as a journalist, first in his homeland and then as an émigré in Austria, where he became a foreign correspondent after the 1956 uprising.² In this book, Lendvai gives a modern history of the country through its political elite. While the book goes through a rough chronological account of post-1989 developments through the trials and errors of the political figures, allusions are made throughout the text at the ominous character of Viktor Orbán, the current Prime Minister of Hungary, a figure that could – in Lendvai's view – tip the scales of Hungary's political future towards authoritarianism.

The first chapter draws the reader in with a descriptive narrative of the symbolic reburial of Imre Nagy in 1989, the communist chairman of the Council of Ministers, executed for treason after the failed 1956 revolution. It is here that the reader is first introduced to Orbán as a young revolutionary, representing the coming generation, shattering political conventions of the time with a speech calling for the removal of Soviet forces and the downfall of Communism. Lendvai's journalistic style of writing makes the subject matter tangible for a wide readership, painting images of particular events chosen to highlight the sociopolitical mindset of Hungary in its developments since transition. Lendvai reiterates throughout the book the problematic culture left behind by the communism of the Kádár era, creating a 'condemnation of memory' (p. 3) through collective amnesia. It is this culture of forgetting and distorting key moments in history that the author points to again and again as a potential hindrance for democracy in Hungary, which romanticizes even the recent communist past. What is 'a democracy without democrats?' (p. 8), Lendvai asks.

The chapters progress through the line of elected Prime Ministers, going through the to-and-fro of Hungarian politics. Lendvai exploits explores the fickle nature of the newly democratic party system. In the course of six elections, the liberal anti-communist party Alliance of Free Democrats (SzDSz) ended up joining the reformed Socialist Party (MSZP), and the radical liberals Fidesz became right-wing nationalists. Even the first nationalist conservative party, the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), which won the first democratic elections, was only a shadow of itself by 2010 and proved unable to pass the electoral threshold. Making use of his access to personal interviews, Lendvai gives the reader an introspective look into the personalities of Prime Ministers János Kádár, József Antall, Gyula Horn, Péter Medgyessy, Ferenc Gyurcsány, Gordon Bajnai and Orbán. Stories of his

¹ Other books by Lendvai include *Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat* (2003) and *One Day That Shook the Communist World: The 1956 Hungarian Uprising and its Legacy* (2008).

² These experiences give Lendvai a mixed perspective of Hungary as a Hungarian as well as an outsider.

interview experiences give a sense of the author's own feelings towards the political leaders, illuminating his perceptions and sentiments towards the political changes in his former homeland. Through anecdotes concerning the political elites, the author also provides context to how and why decisions were made at the top, e.g. as reaction to foreign pressures or to the failing economy and social restructuring (or lack thereof).

In the backdrop of these developments, Lendvai depicts the looming inability of Hungary to come to terms with the past, facilitating a strengthening wave of nationalism and radicalizing fringe networks. Statistics that demonstrate falling voter turnouts, rising levels of xenophobia and warped knowledge of historical events are laced within the chapters to justify this depiction. Lendvai not only gives faces to the high-powered elite in Hungary but also connects them to right-wing political factions and the growing influences of privatized media exploiting how right-wing political speeches and information networks have developed the same increasingly populist nationalist rhetoric. Pointing to a failing left and increasingly autocratic right, Lendvai argues that the radical right has been granted legitimacy. Playing off the existing distortion of history and targeting key scapegoats such as the Roma and police violence, the far-right party Jobbik became a strong political force after 2006.³ The young and energetic political party has attracted a large support base particularly among younger voters and radicalized political discourse. According to Lendvai, the cause of the rebirth of populist nationalism in Hungary is ultimately to be found in the current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In the final pages of his book, the author makes clear his views on the leader's intentions for Hungary: Moving from left to right since 1993-94, he is a master tactician, a gifted populist, a radical and consummate opportunist, a ruthless power politician who believes not in ideas but in maximising his power without any compunction, giving vent to Hungarian nationalism or tapping into fear and prejudice at a moment of crisis. For him order is guaranteed not by freedom, but by a strong leader; for him, still only 49, leadership embodies the traditional, patriarchal way of thinking and the ingrained attitudes of crowds, hundreds of thousands strong, drawn from the Hungarian countryside. (p. 230)

When faced with current politics and a lens to the future, Lendvai's portrayal of Hungary is quite bleak. The author's overview of politicians, their personalities and decision-making is insightful, although little attention is paid to newer opposition movements, such as the Green Party, LMP (Politics Can Be Different) or activist movements across the political spectrum, which are mentioned only in passing. The reader is left to question where Hungary will fall between democracy and authoritarianism in the years to come.

*School of Slavonic and East European Studies,
University College London*

ERIN MARIE SALTMAN

³ In 2006 a parliamentary scandal broke out when Socialist Party Prime Minister Gyurcsány was found to have given a speech admitting to lies within the government. This led in weeks of demonstrations and protests outside of the Hungarian Parliament, some of which turned violent.