

**Magyar, Bálint:**

**POST-COMMUNIST MAFIA STATE.  
THE CASE OF HUNGARY.**

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An unequivocal condemnation of the Fidesz-controlled Hungary, Bálint Magyar's *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* could not be timelier. This book explores the deceitful mechanisms by which the hybrid regime installed by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his fellow Fidesz officials has systematically stripped Hungarians of civil liberties (p. 255) with impunity, ironically owing to its control over the rule of law. While this text specifically investigates democratic backsliding in Hungary, its framework will surely prove crucial for understanding any former Communist states undergoing autocratic rule (e.g. Poland).

Magyar had formulated his own conception of the 'post-communist mafia state' in the early 2000s. His formulation enriches recent studies of kleptocracy and mafia states, marked by texts such as Karen Dawisha's *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* (2014) and Luke Harding's *Mafia State: How One Reporter Became an Enemy of the Brutal New Russia* (2011), particularly because he expands the scope of the traditional mafia state. Magyar stresses that more mafia states exist than just Vladimir Putin's Russia, and that a mafia state can infiltrate all aspects of society, from the public to the private. Most significantly, he reveals that a mafia state can be more than just a country run by corrupt, kleptocratic leaders who take advantage of their privileged positions to seize the na-

tion's wealth for themselves: rather, as is the case in Hungary, it could be a country whose corrupt, kleptocratic leaders also go out of their way to actively control illicit societal activities and organized crime. These leaders do not simply steal from the state: they rot it and create a society of thieves dependent upon the elites who sanction their crimes (pp. 81–82). It is a vicious cycle that makes everyone complicit in the state's corruption.

Magyar's latest text successfully tests his expanded theory of the mafia state, concretizing it and demonstrating how Hungary's authoritarian government can masquerade as a 'good' state whilst eroding civil society and democratic institutions – even without exerting any physical mass violence (see Levitsky, Lucan 2010). It argues that Hungary is a corrupt, parasitic state (p. 13). The book begins with the premise that upon its accession to the European Union in 2004, Hungary was *the* model of liberal democratic consolidation for other former Communist states. It enjoyed free and fair elections, a revitalizing amount of foreign direct investment, and a pro-democratic population – 84% of which voted in favor of Hungary joining the EU (Nohlen, Stöver 2010: 902). Ten years later, however, Hungary is proud to call itself an 'illiberal democracy', as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has so eagerly announced.

This book would be an enticing read on this irony alone. How could Hungary, the bright star of post-Communist states looking to the West, defy the commitment it made to the European Union while acting as a full-fledged member of this very institution? But actually, the text tackles an even deeper problem: the Western community does not even realize how bad the situation truly is in Hungary, allowing Orbán's regime to drive the country further into a downward, anti-democratic spiral. Magyar reveals

how Hungary cunningly distracts its critics by calling itself an ‘illiberal democracy’, when in reality critics should be questioning whether or not Hungary even is a democracy at this point (p. 59). If the EU continues to evaluate Hungary in the context of traditional democracy, then it will miss the truth that Hungary is a mafia state – a different political beast altogether – and cannot be righted through traditional enforcement mechanisms.

In just over 300 pages, Magyar manages to break through the multitudinous layers of rhetoric, excuses, and unfulfilled promises that obscure the truth of what is *really* happening in Hungary. *Post-Communist Mafia State* first traces the fall of the democratic Hungarian state. Anti-democratic currents, of course, stem from the Communist era, but it was not until the populist conservative party Fidesz gained a supermajority in parliament in the 2010 elections, and took advantage of their numbers to rewrite the Hungarian Constitution, that Hungary’s democracy was destroyed. From this point on, the Hungarian government’s top priority has been the expansion of power and the accumulation of wealth for its elites, rather than the interests of the nation or its population. Hungary, in this manner, became a post-communist mafia state.

The book then delineates the features and mechanisms of the post-communist mafia state, beginning with the roles of every member of society. Orbán is the ‘godfather’; the ‘family’ is comprised of his closest allies, be they politicians, media magnates, or oligarchs; and all other members of society share a mixture of titles, all of which are subordinated to the family and the godfather (p. 94). All of the mafia’s actions and rules are aimed at one goal: raking in as much profit for themselves as they can while pretending it is all for the good of the nation-state. This

political family makes for the most dangerous kind of mafia because they have the tools to legalize their otherwise illegal, anti-democratic actions: they can pass legislation, threaten exorbitant taxes and fines, control the judiciary, ‘tip off’ the police (or, conversely, discard investigations), and terrorize individuals via secret police.

Having established the cast of characters, Magyar’s book goes on to explain the functionings, guiding principles, and specific features of the mafia state. These sections of *Post-Communist Mafia State* are horrifying, as the author describes how the mafia state has infiltrated nearly all aspects of society. This means the Fidesz regime has taken not just the public sphere, but the private sphere as well. Small businesses, multinational businesses, churches, schools, media outlets, NGOs, bureaucrats, and state institutions such as the judiciary, the parliament, etc. – all have been coerced into complicity within the mafia state’s vision. This complicity could directly involve the elites, e.g. an intellectual praises the Hungarian leadership in order to keep his position at a university, or it could simply seep into everyday life, e.g. a policeman seeking a bribe from a business that has violated tax laws. Through tactics of censorship, extortion, and blackmail, the mafia state is able to ‘legalize’ and normalize criminality.

Such a capture of an entire society requires an ideological campaign to convince the population that their state is ‘good’ and ‘just’ (p. 235). Orbán and his media moguls constantly use aggressive rhetoric, creating the illusion that ‘enemies’ to the Hungarian state are everywhere and fostering ultranationalist desires that place Hungary above international law in the minds of its citizens. Anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia – all of these nasty ‘isms’ are employed not because the Fidesz regime believes them, but because they help to unify

a target population of Hungarians committed to their nation (synonymous with the ruling mafia elites).

Reading Magyar's thoroughly researched book, it becomes clear that the author is not just an analyst of Hungarian politics. He is an experienced opposition politician himself. He had long served as a Member of Parliament for the Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ) between 1990 and 2010, and as the Minister of Education and Science between 2002 and 2006. This accounts for the book's greatest strength: it is imbued with credibility, passion, and technical detail on the local, national, and supranational levels. To do this, Magyar had to break Western traditional political understandings, which he achieved via his creative reading of the mafia state concept. Thus, *Post-Communist Mafia State* is a fresh, comprehensive study that touches upon all sectors of Hungarian society, convincing readers that Orbán's Hungary is an abomination that cannot be tolerated any longer.

Of course, the fact that Magyar has such an involved, personal history with the Hungarian government might give pause to some readers. Perhaps they would be comforted to consider the fact that Magyar recently co-edited with Júlia Vásárhelyi a volume entitled *Twenty-Five Sides of a Post-Communist Mafia State* (2017) that expands upon Magyar's reviewed text from 2016. This larger publication comprises essays by dozens of Hungarians from diverse backgrounds – professors, sociologists, lawyers, economists, art historians, journalists, etc. – whose contributions from their specific areas of expertise harmonize with the overall message that Hungary under Fidesz is a fundamentally and systematically illiberal state. Furthermore, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* features meticulous citations and vast amounts of empirical data that skeptical

readers can examine for themselves, should they wish to be doubly sure about Magyar's analysis.

Another notable achievement is that the book reminds readers to keep a global perspective and to consider international connections with the case of Russia, the epitome of anti-democratic policies and manipulative ideology. Unfortunately, the quick, unexplained mentions of Putinism might diminish the author's message of Hungary's unique criminality. Without elaborating upon the Russian example, readers might fail to comprehend a pivotal point: Russia never enjoyed a liberal democracy (apart from the few short months in 1917 of the Kerensky Provisional Government), whereas Hungary astoundingly managed to turn its back on a well-founded democracy. Thus, it is important to recognize that Hungary offers a similar yet crucially different understanding of authoritarianism. The Russian context – devoid of true democracy – reveals insights on human psychology, but the Hungarian case – owing to the fact that it was once an established liberal democracy – is capable of revealing lesser-known insights as to the failures of democracy and the European Union's structure.

Despite all of *Post-Communist Mafia State's* crucial insights, the source(s) of Hungary's anti-democratic spiral is not altogether clear: how much do Communist legacies factor into the kind of populist illiberalism seen in Hungary? It does not seem likely that they are to blame entirely. After all, some of the most Western states in the world, which have never carried a Communist legacy of their own, have exhibited similar populist trends against democracy: the Brexit-ing United Kingdom has rejected the EU in practice and in principle, and Donald Trump's United States has rejected democratic values more generally.

All three of the aforementioned states have been lauded at one point or another for their commitment to Western liberalism; it is odd enough that one of those states maintains a bloody Communist past – and even more so that all three have also dramatically denied their democratic commitments in recent years. Could it be that neoliberal economics, wealthy leaders, and a general taking-for-granted of democracy's benefits are causes of the populist reactionism observed globally, from Orbán's Hungary to Trump's America? How much does the post-Communist element affect the Hungarian case of democratic backsliding? Or can these countries and their sources of democratic failures even be compared in the first place? Further studies on this mammoth dilemma would be welcomed (although not envied).

No matter the exact causes of Hungary's illiberal regression, Magyar's *Post-Communist Mafia State* is a much-needed wake-up call for the Western world as a whole. It is

an implicit plea for the Western community to realize that Hungary has *chosen* to reject its values; in order to restore them, both democratic activists within Hungary and the policymakers of the EU must prioritize new avenues for promoting liberal principals at grassroots levels. In the process, maybe the democratic spirit across the EU and the West, in general, could be rejuvenated, for we are living in dark times, indeed.

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