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‘The Harshest Critics of the Elks Used to Be Elks Themselves!’

In the past 16 years, conservative forces governing Hungary were incessantly criticized by leftist, left-liberal, and green circles in Germany and around Europe have criticized them incessantly for their policies. These attacks, however, usually say more about the critics themselves than about the former Hungarian government and, when viewed in perspective, are also a reflection of the soul of German society. Frequently, the opposite of the accusations is true. As is so often the case, the well-known satirical couplet applies here, too: ‘The harshest critics of the elks / used to be elks themselves!’ Much of what Hungarian conservative politics is accused of applies much more to the green and left-wing Germany of the former ‘Traffic-Light’ coalition.

It was worth closely following the government practices of this medium-sized country in East Central Europe for the last 16 years, as the Hungarians have achieved stable and resilient results, especially in economic, social, family, migration, and security policy, and can serve as a role model for many conservatives internationally. Successful conservative policy-making that is acknowledged worldwide and well received in Hungary may act as a driving force and role model for Germany’s centre-right camp, even though German politics must, of course,

take national sensibilities into account. Allowing yourself to be inspired by others, while drawing your own conclusions from their successes and failures, may also serve as a basis for a successful conservative policy in Germany. The cornerstones of centre-right politics that were first concisely verbalized in Hungary in 2023 by the former Orbán government can be an important aid in this regard. In this light, the following is meant to contribute to a clearer understanding, and to the elimination of misunderstandings in German–Hungarian relations. The following discusses ten selected points of criticism regarding the perceived differences between the two parties:

1. ANTI-SEMITISM

Accusations have frequently arisen in Europe that Hungary and its government are anti-Semitic and Jewish life is threatened. The opposite is the case. Hungary is home to the third largest Jewish community in the European Union,¹ with a great diversity of Jewish life and Jewish religious communities. Budapest is the only capital in Europe home to more Jews than Muslims. In Hungary, Jews can live safely, while Jewish culture and Jewish religious life are experiencing a renaissance. The Hungarian government in



A statue of Lady Justice,
the Roman goddess of justice
in Frankfurt, Germany,
20 March 2014

the past generously supports the renovation of synagogues and Jewish community facilities. Jewish festivals take place regularly, and the home games of Jewish football clubs—and international games of teams from Israel—are held in Hungary, because the safety of the Jewish players and fans cannot be guaranteed elsewhere in Europe.

This is not the case in Hungary: the country is traditionally deeply connected to its Judeo-Christian roots and does not have a significant Muslim population from other cultural areas. While the number of anti-Semitic crimes has gone up in Germany in recent years, to the point where it now surpasses 5,000,² in Hungary it has remained in the low two- to three-digit range for years, and even in the peak year of 2023, only a single act of violence was recorded.³ After the controversial decision of the International Criminal Court to issue an international arrest warrant against the Israeli prime minister, the previous Hungarian government stated that it would not accept this and would certainly not implement it. The fact that anti-Semitic agitation and propaganda does not

face consequences in Germany of all places—remember the protests after 7 October 2023 and the lack of criminal prosecution—and that large numbers of individuals of a migrant background are able to spread everyday anti-Semitism is a matter of grave concern.

2. DEMOCRACY AND PARTIES

In Hungary, it is not possible to have political parties banned by the Constitutional Court. Instead, it is the strength of democracy in Hungary to tolerate political groups whose opinions do not reflect the vast majority. Part of the resilience of the democratic system is not to exclude or condemn, but to integrate and thereby contain divergent views. Different opinions and policy proposals must be tolerated. This also applies to parties that criticize the government from the left or the right. One must be able to withstand criticism; it is part of the democratic process. It is unacceptable in Hungary that democratically elected parties are not allocated the positions they are entitled to in committees and similar bodies. Everyone who has made it into Parliament

has the same rights. Discussions in Germany about excluding, isolating, or even banning unwelcome parties, or to deny them state (foundation) funding would be completely unthinkable in this form, at least in Hungary.

3. INTERFERENCE

Hungary was often accused of interfering in the domestic affairs of its neighbours, including Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine. Critics view Hungary's minority policies as an attempt to exert political influence over these states. This includes granting Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living abroad, providing financial support for Hungarian educational institutions abroad, and supporting Hungarian-language media. Such measures—as in Northern Serbia or Transcarpathian Ukraine—are partly interpreted as interference in state sovereignty.

However, from a Hungarian point of view these measures are legitimate steps that accord with international conventions on the protection of minorities. The aim is to conserve the cultural identity and mother tongue of Hungarian communities living outside the country's borders as a result of historical border changes after the First World War. The simplified nationality law serves to strengthen the ties between Hungary and its minorities without jeopardizing the territorial integrity of the neighbouring countries. The Hungarian government also points out that critics from Germany and the EU apply double standards in this regard. The German government, for example, intervened in the run-up to the Brazilian presidential elections in 2022 by indirectly supporting Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and applying environmental regulations as leverage against President Bolsonaro—a procedure that is considered internationally to be political interference. While Hungarian measures to support ethnic minorities are considered problematic interference, similar practices by Germany are seen as the legitimate promotion of democratic values. This double standard shows a fundamental discrepancy in the perception of foreign policy activities.

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4. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

There is comprehensive freedom of expression in Hungary. Restrictions are only permissible in absolutely exceptional cases (incitement to hatred, anti-Semitism, Holocaust denial, violation of human dignity, etc.). In principle, all opinions and opposing viewpoints can be found in Hungary. People will not be silenced. In Germany, on the other hand, employers can sanction opinions they do not agree with. We have witnessed, for example, the establishment of so-called 'tendency businesses', where employers can expect a submissive attitude. Not so in Hungary. The Hungarian goalkeeper coach for a German Bundesliga club underwent this painful experience after criticizing the *Willkommenskultur* policy in a newspaper interview: he was dismissed without notice. It is inconceivable in Hungary that the police would arrive early in the morning and interrogate innocent citizens on charges of 'lèse-majesté'⁴ and confiscate their equipment.

5. FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

In Hungary, there is a wide variety of media of diverse political persuasions. They are, however, polarized and divided just like the whole country and its public dialogue. Each political side has its own media, its own public spaces, and its own dialogues. The strength of democracy lies in its ability to accept unpleasant things, which distinguishes it from dictatorship. For a Hungarian it is difficult to grasp that a newspaper can be banned by the minister of the interior, as was the case with the magazine *Compact* in Germany. Instead, diverse political media exists in Hungary without them being harassed, marginalized,

or banned in any way—including those that are highly critical of the government.

6. THE RULE OF LAW

In the past few years, there have been many international debates about the state of the rule of law in Hungary. In the opinion of the former Hungarian government, the specific questions about the new EU conditionality mechanism have been answered with comprehensive measures. The expected release of previously frozen EU funds was followed by a statement from the Commission that the measures introduced by the Orbán government would first have to be put to the test in practice.⁵

This means that the disbursement of EU funds has been postponed indefinitely. In contrast, the new left-liberal Polish government was awarded the suspended funds immediately, without having implemented a single change in law. In Hungary, such EU decisions based on double standards are registered meticulously. It is also noted that German law has some weaknesses in the field of crime prevention, especially concerning the deportation of illegal immigrants or the prosecution of anti-Semitic, pro-Hamas protesters, who, with their inflammatory statements against Israel, may have violated the provisions of the German Criminal Code (StGB).⁶

In contrast, in Hungary the state follows a zero-tolerance policy regarding anti-Semitism and crime. The crime numbers have dropped immensely. The rule of law also means that law-abiding citizens can live in peace and security, and that the state guarantees their rights in this regard, such as the right to physical integrity. The German and Italian Antifa thugs who aimlessly beat up passers-by on the streets of Budapest, leaving them hospitalized, will not get away with their crimes, but must prepare themselves for harsh prison sentences. An exception to this is the Italian Ilaria Salis, who was elected to the European Parliament in 2024 on the Italian Green Party ticket and has enjoyed immunity ever since. She had to be released and the proceedings were dropped.

7. THE ROMA

A popular accusation, particularly in left-liberal German media, is that the Roma minority in Hungary is segregated, marginalized, and disenfranchised. The exact opposite is true. The successful EU Roma Strategy, which was promoted by the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU in 2011, laid important groundwork for the sustainable integration of this vulnerable group. Furthermore, around one million new jobs have been created through work-based employment and social policies. This has benefited the economically inactive Roma population in particular, who are among the main beneficiaries of this new social pact. During the years of conservative government, the employment rate as well as the social situation of the Roma has improved noticeably. There is positive progress in their integration. Therefore, the Roma are among the supporters of this work-based society and express their opinion at the ballot box. In Hungary, there is no citizen's benefit (*Bürgergeld*), but work for all in accordance to the old CDU slogan '*Sozial ist, was Arbeit schafft*' (Social policy is what creates jobs). Hungarian society accepts this model with great enthusiasm and has a hard time understanding why it cannot work equally well in Germany.

8. CITIZENSHIP LAW

The first measure of the conservative parliamentary majority in 2010 sought to liberalize the citizenship law in order to offer Hungarians abroad a low-threshold option for acquiring citizenship. For this move, designed to help its citizens living abroad, the previous Hungarian government was heavily criticized, especially abroad. To date, approximately 1.2 million people have received Hungarian citizenship.⁷ Incidentally, many other countries recognize the institution of citizenship for their own compatriots living abroad. In Germany, however, this move was vigorously attacked by politicians and the media. A few years later, the 'Traffic-Light' government passed a law that made it possible for migrants

The Dohány Street Synagogue, the largest synagogue in Europe, is a Neolog Jewish congregation and synagogue in Budapest, Hungary



to acquire German citizenship after just five years. According to estimates, millions of people who are not indigenous Germans will receive a German passport and thus the right to vote.

9. THE RIGHT TO VOTE

Hungarian electoral reforms between 2011 and 2013 were loudly criticized by observers in many areas. But these were minor changes in a system in need of reform. Hungarian electoral law was and remains a first-past-the-post system with strong majority elements—as was already the case before the reform. According to a recent, detailed study, the much-criticized right to vote for Hungarians living abroad has, on average, only resulted in a single parliamentary seat for the ruling majority in recent years. In contrast, the compensatory elements in Hungarian electoral law traditionally

favour the opposition. Hungarian electoral law is a model for international discussions on electoral law in terms of its transparency and structure. In Germany, even parts of the CDU Party are calling for a comparable electoral system. The former ‘Traffic Light’ coalition in Germany, however, passed an amendment to the electoral law that clearly disadvantages certain political parties. Even if they are elected, directly elected members of Parliament in Germany cannot be sure that they will be able to enter the Bundestag if their party does not receive enough list votes—an innovation that is questionable in terms of constitutional law, electoral law theory, and politics. Interestingly, regarding the German electoral reform, there is no heated international debate on the governing parties’ understanding of democracy. Neither the EU Commission nor the Venice Commission are intervening—the concept that something may not be quite ‘right’

in Germany evidently seems too far-fetched. The Federal Constitutional Court merely overturned the intended abolition of the basic mandate clause but allowed the discrimination of the direct mandate over the list mandate to remain in place.

10. TURNING POINT

A frequent accusation against Hungary was that the Orbán government missed the supposed turning point of 2022, cooperates with Russia, and has ‘disassociated’ itself from Ukraine. This accusation also does not necessarily correspond to the facts. Hungary provides Ukraine with generous humanitarian, infrastructural, and financial assistance, and supports all sanctions packages, albeit hesitantly. Moreover, the country is the biggest power supplier to the attacked country. Beyond that, Ukrainians work legally in Hungary without paying the necessary social security contributions. Hungary has shown solidarity with the neighbouring country under attack and has let the most Ukrainians per capita into the country, leading to the establishment of a corresponding number of Ukrainian schools.

In reality, there has never been a turning point in Hungary, as the former government has always been aware of the danger that comes from Russia and has gradually prepared itself accordingly and with foresight. Already in 2016, a comprehensive military training programme was launched, which is bearing remarkable fruit, in cooperation, among others, with the German defence industry. Their own history has always been a warning for the Hungarians not

to rely on simple solutions; instead, they have a seismographic sense for threats and dangers—especially from the outside. ‘Militarily, we are hawks; economically we are doves’ was the slogan of Hungarian decision-makers with regard to Russia. Many Hungarians are watching in amazement as Germany undertakes a rapid change of course in its policy towards Russia and, with sanctions, decoupling, and increasing bloc formation, seems increasingly willing to restrict its own political, economic, and cultural scope of action.

CONCLUSION

Contrary to what many media and political debates in Germany would have us believe, the accusations against Hungarian politics are exaggerated, disproportionate, and often do not correspond to the facts. They very often reflect their own sensitivities, are not detached from identity politics, and originate from a particular German mindset with an information radius that largely exists within a bubble: what must not be, must not be. Often, the reality on site is exactly the opposite of what remote diagnosticians in the media want to convey to the German public. Very often, Hungary is criticized for issues that are also not ideal in Germany and other countries. A good international example for the bias and delusion of the German media and political elites were the expectations and the reactions regarding the presidential elections in the United States. A similar pattern can be observed in the case of the attacks on Hungary. The old realization applies: disputes in Germany about Hungary are for the most part also domestic German debates.

NOTES

¹ *Report of the Jewish Agency for Israel* (Jewish Agency for Israel, 2023), www.jewishagency.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-Jewish-Agency-Impact-Report-Federations-Core-Dollars.pdf.

² Thomas Escritt, ‘Antisemitic Incidents in Germany Almost Double in 2024, Report Says’, *Reuters* (4 June 2025).

³ ‘Hate Crime Reporting of Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe’, *OSCE* (2023), <https://hatecrime.osce.org/>.

⁴ German Criminal Code, Section 188 (§ 188 StGB).

⁵ Answer given by Mr Reynders on behalf of the European Commission (2024), E-001595/2024, www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2024-001595-ASW_EN.pdf.

⁶ German Criminal Code, Sections 86a, 104, 130, 140.

⁷ Hungarian National Assembly, ‘Official Reply to Written Question No. K/7670/1.’, 20 March 2024.