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THE BLACK SWAN ON LAKE BALATON

Viktor Orbán
and an Acknowledged Obsession

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD	7
THE FIRST PART:	
THE SUPPORT NETWORK	15
1.1 POLICING THE PRESS	23
1.2 THE EDITORIAL PROHIBITION	28
THE SECOND PART:	
HARKING BACK TO THE EMPIRE	45
2.1 THE FIRST INTERVIEW	49
2.2 THE SECOND INTERVIEW	73
2.3 THE THIRD INTERVIEW	96
THE THIRD PART:	
THE MOLDAVIAN WINE AND HUNGARIAN POLITICS ..	117
3.1 A STRANGE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP	122
3.2 A ONE-WAY DIPLOMACY	127
THE FOURTH PART:	
THE ARROGANCE	137
4.1 THE FIRST REJECTION	143
4.2 THE SECOND REJECTION	147
4.3 BIOGRAPHY OF A SOROS FELLOW	151

THE FIFTH PART:

A CAPTIVE DAHR.....	157
5.1 THE SURRENDER OF SOVEREIGNTY	162
5.2 SURVEYING AND MANIPULATING.....	180

THE SIXTH PART:

BUCHAREST, ABSENT WITHOUT LEAVE.....	197
6.1 THE MOSCOW – CHIȘINĂU – BUDAPEST TRIAD....	199

THE SEVENTH PART:

THE FOURTH ESTATE WITH NO ESTATE.....	221
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THE EIGHT PART:

A TWO-FACED SHEKEL.....	247
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THE NINTH PART:

THE GOVERNMENTAL PARTY OF TRANSYLVANIA	281
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THE TENTH PART:

THE BLACK SWAN.....	297
---------------------	-----

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION.....	313
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FOREWORD

20 years of strategic partnership between Romania and Hungary – the wins and losses of a bilateral relationship

The panoply of treaties and agreements regulating the diplomatic and political relations between Romania and Hungary is marked by one in particular: the Declaration concerning the cooperation and strategic partnership between Romania and Hungary in keeping with 21st century requirements in Europe. The document is as real and authentic as can be and it was signed on the 29th of November 2002 in Budapest. Such a political agreement between the two parts should have resulted in the development of a heightened bilateral relationship. The twenty years which have elapsed since that moment should have meant a good neighbourly relationship, in every sense of the word, and, why not, a relationship based on trust and a friendly attitude between Romania and Hungary.

But what led to the ratification of this “strategic partnership” between Romania and Hungary?

The political and diplomatic relations between Romania and Hungary, spanning more than a hundred years after the Treaty of

Trianon of 1920, there have only been two favourable periods of cooperation and trust, i.e. when the leaders of these two countries got along well and manifested mutual respect. Such a fruitful relationship was established between the communist leaders Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej of Romania and János Kádár of Hungary, immediately after the events of 1956 in Hungary, lasting up until Gheorghiu-Dej's death in 1965. This interval made it possible for the responsible authorities to raise the appropriate funerary monuments commemorating the fallen Romanian soldiers of the Second World War. And Hungary is strewn with such monuments reminding the passers-by of the Romanians troops who, together with the Soviet ones, rid the country of its Horthyst and fascist regime and of the yoke of Nazi Germany. The building of these monuments involved the Hungarian local authorities, while the services of commemoration were regularly attended by Hungarian officials. After Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's death this cooperation was ended. János Kádár and Nicolae Ceaușescu's relationship was one of mutual antipathy. Ceaușescu was never invited to Budapest. There were indeed meetings, but multilaterally. The two of them attended only one official meeting, held in Oradea and Debrecen in 1977.

The second flourishing moment of the Romanian-Hungarian relationship happened between 2002 and 2004, during which time socialist governments were in power both in Budapest and Bucharest. There was excellent understanding between Adrian Năstase, the Romanian prime-minister at that time, and Pèter Medgyessy, prime-minister of Hungary. Timid talks were held for the first time about a reconciliation between the Romanian and Hungarian parts; the Declaration concerning the cooperation and strategic partnership between Romania and Hungary in keeping with 21st century requirements in Europe was also signed by the two prime-ministers.

The document on which this “strategic partnership” is based has as its premise the Treaty of understanding, cooperation and good neighbourliness between Romania and Hungary, signed at Timisoara on the 16th of September 1996, and which lists the responsibilities the two states have in their European and Transatlantic commitments, with a view to their integration in the European Union and NATO, as well as their intent to develop an improved relationship, as allies. The structure of the agreement follows three chapters:

The first chapter lists the principles of the bilateral cooperation between the two countries, as well as the institutional relationships within the international bodies and organizations in which the two are or will be a part of. A common course of action for the stability of South-Eastern Europe is mentioned, as well as an improved regional dialogue, with particular emphasis on the Balkans.

The second chapter establishes the objectives as concerns the economic cooperation between the two states, reciprocal investments, the improvement of the energy infrastructure, telecommunications and transport. The two signatories are in favour of a better cooperation between the countries of the Danube region, with an emphasis on protecting the environment and improved water management.

The third chapter covers the issues of national minorities – of the Romanians in Hungary and the Hungarians in Romania, respectively, as well as the expansion of the network of cultural and educational institutions. The signatories must promote religious freedom, including the free development of those denominations pertaining to national minorities, as well as undertaking concrete measures on property restitution and other method of

compensating these minorities, their churches and other legal persons.

This last point has been extensively put into practice in Romania, with its lax legislation in the matter, but not in Hungary, who has not enacted any coherent laws concerning the restitution of the property nationalised by the communist regime. Hungary's only exception is a law of 1993 applicable to religious real estate, with a predetermined validity of five years.

I have already mentioned that the document on which this "strategic partnership rests" was cordially signed at Budapest, on the 29th of November 2002. The following two days, November 30th and December 1st, were marked by an international reunion in the Hungarian capital that had to do with environmental issues and water management. It was occasioned by the great floods in Central Europe that happened that year, and initiated by the Hungarian part as a meeting between the two prime-ministers. The meeting concluded with a joint statement, signed by the heads of the delegations on December 1st, at midday. In the evening of that same day, the Romanian Embassy in Hungary held the National Day reception at the Kempinski Hotel in the Deák Ferenc Square. The two prime-ministers of that time, Adrian Năstase and Pèter Medgyessy, attended the reception, as well as Romanian government ministers and their Hungarian counterparts, and the executive board of the DAHR¹, led by Markó Béla. A right-wing and far right rally took place in front of the Kempinski Hotel; the protesters demanded that Pèter Medgyessy resign. His unforgivable mistake was taking part in the National Day reception, thus once again legitimizing the Treaty of Trianon. As a consequence, addressing the Parliament, in the February of 2003, in his state of

1. acronym which stands for the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania – Uniunea Democrată Maghiară din România (DAHR.) – Romániai Magyar Demokrata Szövetség (RMDSZ).

the nation speech, Péter Medgyessy saw it necessary to justify his attending the Romanian National Day reception, arguing that the Franco-German reconciliation followed similar steps. Thus, a real reconciliation between Hungary and Romania could be achieved mirroring the Franco-German model.

Hungary joined the European Union on May 1st 2004. There followed a period of support from both the Hungarian authorities and the public opinion, based on the aforementioned “strategic partnership” agreement, for Romania’s EU integration, a process which was finalized on January 1st 2007. Based also on this agreement, after Péter Medgyessy was replaced by Ferenc Gyurcsány, also a socialist, joint government meetings were held between 2005 and 2007, in Bucharest, Budapest, Szeged and Sibiu. Even though only slim progress was made in advancing the bilateral relationship, the fact that members of both governments met meant a great deal for this desired Romanian-Hungarian reconciliation.

The tide turned in 2010, when the election in Hungary was won by FiDeSz – the Federation of Young Democrats, with its leader, Viktor Orbán. They were politically perceived as being right-wing and even far-right politicians, and this meant that the positive trend in the relationship between Romania and Hungary was crushed. Viktor Orbán declared from the very start of his premiership that the plans of the socialists would be scrapped. There was to be no talk about participating in Romania’s National Day festivities. What is more, the Hungarian minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó, issued a circular letter in 2018, on the occasion of Romania’s Centenary (100 years since the union of Transylvania with Romania), stating that all Hungarian diplomats from all over the world were forbidden from taking part in the receptions held by the Romanian Embassies, an unpre-

cedented step in international relations. As a consequence, Viktor Orbán forbid all mentions of joint government meetings. While, on the one hand, the prime-ministers Adrian Năstase and Pèter Medgyessy held 13 bilateral and multilateral meetings in two years, I know not of a single official one to have happened between Viktor Orbán and the Romanians MPs, during the twelve years of his tenure! This is not to say he didn't frequently visit Transylvania to meet with the Hungarian community. He initiated and continues to initiate projects supporting this community, ranging from targeted economic, cultural and educational investments, to creating and financing football clubs! Of relevance is one remark made by the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pèter Szijjártó, in a joint press conference from January 2022, with the Romanian Minister for Youth and Sports, Eduard Novák, in which the former said that "practicing sports is one of the most important ways of building and preserving one's identity and sense of national pride", that is, one's Hungarian identity. It all points to a new form of historical revisionism, a hybrid one, undertaken by Hungarian state officials on Romanian territory.

Orbán's meetings with leaders of the DAHR cannot in fact replace the official dealings with the Romanian authorities, even though this (a)political party has a hand to play in the Romanian government. But DAHR's defensive umbrella means peace and quiet for Viktor Orbán and his colleagues from FiDeSz, as well as the Romanian authorities' inability to position themselves against such statements and provocations. Not even Viktor Orbán's racist and anti-European remarks, made on July 23rd, made at Băile Tuşnad², made them flinch.

It is interesting to note that, at a meeting between the Romanian and Hungarian ministers of foreign affairs, shortly before

2. town in Harghita County, Romania, famous for its spas and mineral water.

the “summer school” from Băile Tușnad in 2022, Mr. Bogdan Aurescu urged that Hungarian officials restrain from referring to Romania, invoking the Romanian-Hungarian agreement on strategic partnership. And indeed, in his speech, Viktor Orbán made no mention of Romania, but he referred to Transylvania. At the end of his address, he expressly stated that “what Hungary has, are community ambitions, even national. It has national ambitions, even European. That is why, in the difficult period that lies ahead, to safeguard these national ambitions, what we must do is remain united. The fatherland must stay united, and Transylvania and the other regions inhabited by the Hungarians of the Pannonian Basin must remain united.”

One should be aware of a few historical facts in order to understand this message, to be able to identify that unnamed “fatherland”, to which Transylvania should also stay true.

This desire for a national Hungarian union, clearly expressed by the Hungarian prime-minister during his political pilgrimage of Tușnad/Balványos, is in fact a reaffirming of the Hungarian irredentism of Horthyst³ roots.

I can’t but subscribe to Mr. Bedros Horașangian’s appreciation of the fact that the 25,000 tourists who took part in the Tușnad/Balványos manifestations had a wonderful time, one of “relaxation and indoctrination” (from the *Between Budapest, 1956 and Băile Tușnad, 2022* article, *Observator Cultural*, no 1.120/3-9th of August, 2022).

Alexandru Ghișa Ph.D.

3. Miklós Horthy de Nagybánya, Hungarian statesman, regent of the kingdom between 1920 and 1944.

THE FIRST PART:

THE SUPPORT NETWORK

“TVR¹ enforces a totalitarian kind of censorship. Nobody even got to see the second part of that programme. Where does this attitude stem from? There is only one answer to this – from Hungary. For this country has known censorship since 2010 – the supreme leader clearly cannot be criticised.” *(from an open letter addressed to the governing body of the TVR by the historian and diplomat Alexandru Ghişa, denouncing the abusive censorship of a programme dealing with Viktor Orbán, in which he was a guest)*

1. a well-known acronym which denotes the Romanian public television or the Romanian Television Society (Televiziunea Română – TVR).

DIARY OF A REPORTER

My career as a reporter began back in 1991, at Radio Cluj. This was a romantic and effervescent period for the press, but especially for us, the novice journalists of that time. I worked as a reporter, a newscaster, hosting political shows until finally specialising in investigative TV journalism, at TVR Cluj. The sensitive topics concerning Transylvania, a highly fascinating region from all points of view, have held my interest since the 1990 Ethnic Clashes of Târgu Mureş. I think that this dramatic moment in Romania's post-1989 history marked an irreversible split between the Romanians and Hungarians from Transylvania. The relationship between the two has since been cautiously and reservedly restored; nevertheless, it hasn't been the same. Even now I feel the presence of an invisible barrier separating us – a reality glossed over by both parts. I think there still are wounds which haven't fully healed.

Taboo topics

I quickly found out after 1990 that in the post-communist Romania there were important topics for the press which were considered taboo and even forbidden altogether. These subjects were cautiously handled out of a so-called regard for the public opinion – or simply ignored. I had the feeling that, even though there were heated discussions about the March 1990 Ethnic Clashes of Târgu Mureş, for years the register

of these talks was one and the same. Any attempt to report on these events back in the day was hastily discouraged by my superiors, first of all. The lack of experience characteristic of that formative period in my career and especially the restraint with which the Hungarian community approached the idea and, I have to admit as well, the stubbornness of the Romanians directly involved in the clashes have all kept me at a distance from this particular topic. Any position you might have taken, no matter how disinterested, would have automatically placed you on one side of the barricade or the other. There were many who were of the opinion that you were digging up the past and that wasn't the way forward. And there are now those who think that the topic is no longer of relevance to the public opinion. Others say that it's too soon to seek the truth or that any discussion on the topic is futile.

The spies and the hysterical mob

At the start of the spring of 2022, some press articles talked about the boycott launched against the bookshop and kiosk release of a book called "The Bloody Dawn"¹, a volume based on CNSAS² archival documents that wanted to shed light on at least some of the issues concerning the 1989–1990 ethnic clashes from Târgu Mureș, Romania.

The book was penned by two influential intellectuals: Tudor Păcuraru – philologist, a University of Bucharest alumnus, the 1983 national valedictorian of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, former SRI³ officer (from 1996 to 2016), and Florian Bichir – with a PhD in Political Science and Theology, professor at the National Defence University, ex-member of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives, author of numerous history books. The topic

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1. *Zori însângerate*, in the original, published by Editura Evenimentul și Capital in 2021.
 2. the CNSAS, an acronym for *Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității* (The National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives).
 3. the Romanian Intelligence Service.

of the book and the prestige of its authors, and the fact that some people were trying to hamper its release were reasons enough for me to consider inviting the two as guests in the programme I was producing. The book mainly consists of archival documents. Reading it confirmed what I'd only guessed about the events from Târgu Mureş: a complex operation with Hungarian and Soviet involvement. What also drew my attention was a note on the first page by which the authors dedicated the volume to „those Romanian officers, counterspies and antiterrorists who, oppressed by their own government, chose to carry on with the duty to their Fatherland as best as they could, under constant hoots of derision from the hysterical mob.” This sounded interesting enough and I think there still are important things to be said. Maybe in a future edition, a revised and improved one.

The Soviet Fake News Model

The fresh take on those events transformed the book into an interesting topic for the press. Two episodes of the programme I was making were concerned with it: “Special Reporter – Fake News, the Hidden Pandemic”. In the approximate runtime of 50 minutes, the guests put forward, for the first time, documented details on Hungary’s ‘90s plan to seize control in Transylvania, to bring about a turbulent state of affairs necessitating the presence of international units for the preservation of peace in that region. I won’t dwell on these aspects, but I recommend that you read the book or watch the episodes on YouTube.

The discussion with my two interlocutors, which remotely tuned in thanks to on-line platforms, proved challenging. This was a topic concerning a bloody and violent ethnic conflict that took place in Romania back in the ‘90s, a turbulent time for the country. The point of view of that discussion about the book turned out to be a first for the TVR: the Soviet school of fake news and the characteristics of the Hungarian communist school of fake news, hard at work to achieve specific goals

in Transylvania. My job was to elicit clear responses to uncomfortable questions: was the Târgu Mureș conflict a veiled manipulative operation, carried out by the Hungarian and Soviet secret services, in order to break off, in one way or another, Transylvania from Romania? Was there ever a push towards the so-called yugoslavization of Romania? Or the kosovization? The ethnic clashes of Târgu Mureș have left deep scars both on the Hungarian and the Romanian communities – and yet the conflict hasn't been fully extinguished. Why is that? Was it a coincidence, the hand of fate, or an illicit foul play?

The Budapest Offensive

This is how I met the retired SRI colonel Tudor Păcuraru, an intellectual with a typically Transylvanian sense of humour, from the Bistrița–Năsăud county, who became one of the main contributors to the book. He's a well-informed intelligence analyst, which is of no surprise considering his time working for the secret services. His well-thought-out technique of presenting you with all the relevant pieces of information, clearly arranged, leads to a pertinent analysis with logical conclusions. The ideal situation for any journalist with a knack for more sensitive topics who also needs a well-prepared and well-informed interlocutor.

This was the year in which Victor Orbán was re-elected and Hungary saw its first woman president, Katalin Novák, who from the onset of her term seemed ready to change the dynamics of the relationship between Romania and Hungary.

The new political context in Hungary was of interest to Romania as well, so I set out to create a series of episodes dealing with this generous and exciting topic: Viktor Orbán and the control over Transylvania. I thought about selecting my guests in such a way as to cover a wide range of subjects: an intelligence analyst, a diplomat with particular expertise on Hungary and a foreign affairs expert. So, my choices were: Tudor

Păcuraru, a well-read and popular editorialist across media outlets, his analyses for the EVZ newspaper being especially pertinent; Alexandru Ghișa, historian and diplomat, a refined connoisseur of the political climate in Hungary and analyst of Viktor Orbán's regime. The third was also a specialist in his domain, an excellent foreign affairs analyst, Dan Dungaciu, professor and director of the ISPRI institute of the Romanian Academy. I read his LARICS⁴ analyses on the Republic of Moldova, Hungary and Orbán's regime. These were well-documented; what he came to the table with were novel points of view, with which the Romanian society was not entirely accustomed, probably because these were also critical of the important decision makers from Bucharest. I was convinced that these three guests would make the programme more interesting and elevate its editorial quality as well. On one condition, though: that I would formulate a set of questions that would prove challenging for my guests.

Simulating the freedom of speech through censorship

After rigorous research, we agreed on the following topics: 1. Has the Hungarian state come to replace the Romanian one in its inability to act in favour of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania? 2. Why are 95% of the Transylvanian Hungarians laying emphasis on their attachment to Transylvania, while only 10% consider Romania to be their fatherland? 3. Is Viktor Orbán an agent of the Russian secret services? 4. What place does Bucharest occupy in the relationship with Budapest?

The meeting, which took place in the TVR Cluj studio, where we filmed it, turned out rather well. So did the discussion with prof. Dan

4. Romanian acronym which stands for the Informational Warfare and Strategic Communication Laboratory (*Laborator pentru analiza războiului informațional și comunicare strategică*)

Dungaciu, with whom I recorded separately. There were pertinent points being raised, with arguments that painted Viktor Orbán as a close friend of Russia's, with a profoundly Eurosceptic discourse, a political product imbued in controversies, suspected by the independent press from Hungary and the international press to have close links with the Hungarian communist-era police, the Soviet KGB and the Russian mafia. At the end of the show, Alexandru Ghișa and Tudor Păcuraru's conclusion was that Budapest's strategy towards Romania continues to be outside the boundaries of a normal bilateral relationship and which has in time been reduced, at the behest of the Hungarian prime-minister, to the mere obsession for Transylvania. The recorded shows were to be aired at a later date on TVR Cluj and TVR 3. But shortly after the recording was done, I was made aware that these episodes would not be aired, being judged as lacking in professionalism. A day before the air date, which would have been on a Saturday, I believe, an e-mail was sent informing me of these things. It had been Laura Pașca's decision. She was also the executive producer at TVR Cluj and so my own superior after an "algorithm of local politics" got her into that position. But I do believe that the order came from the "centre". I'm well aware of the public broadcaster's internal machinery and have no doubts that the decision was taken at the highest level, out of reasons which to this day aren't clear to me.