



How I Got Stung by Viktor Orbán

The bizarre experience of being dragged into a Hungarian propaganda campaign.

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In July 2020, I received an email from an Alexander Werner, who introduced himself as a managing partner at Wilson Energy Consultants, an “experienced investment fund and asset management firm, specializing in renewable energy, based both in London and Doha.” His company, he wrote, was interested in renewable-energy projects in Eastern Europe. Yet, before moving ahead, they sought to gain “a deeper understanding of the current geopolitical and economical status of the region.”

I am not asked to do consulting work often, but there was nothing extraordinary about the request since I had written and spoken a lot about the region. Somewhat confusingly, search results for “Wilson Energy Consultants” overlapped with the similarly named but unrelated, Wilson Energy Group based in New York City. Werner’s company had a seemingly legitimate though not overly informative website. Perhaps my two Skype calls with my new acquaintance should have struck me as a bit off. Speaking with a noticeable German accent, Werner insisted from the outset that I turn on my camera. Unshaven, working from home on a somewhat lazy July day, I was reluctant. “I’m old-school,” he quipped. “I like to talk to people face to face.”

The conversation that ensued did not tip me off, either. The talk turned quickly to Hungary and my interlocutor kept asking suggestively phrased questions—about the EU’s double standards in treating the Hungarian government, about how reality must surely be different from the picture presented in Western liberal media, and so forth. I did wonder about Werner’s own media diet; I suspected I had on my hands a reader of Germany’s right-wing *Junge Freiheit*, but I engaged with him patiently. Some weeks after another unmemorable (to me, anyway) Skype call to clarify the outline of my presentation, I checked in with Werner as we had not agreed on an exact date for my talk. He apologized, saying that they had to put their Eastern European projects on hold due to the pandemic, and I promptly forgot about the whole affair.

Fast-forward to last Monday, when I woke up to some rumpus in my Twitter mentions and messages. With the help of Google Translate, I saw Hungary’s largest pro-government newspaper, *Magyar Nemzet*, had published an article about the shocking double standards of Viktor Orbán’s critics, quoting me, of all people, and displaying two short webcam-recorded clips of me. In one, I was talking about problems of rule of law plaguing other Eastern European

countries, such as Slovakia or Bulgaria, which attract less attention in Brussels. In the other, I said that if Orbán is defeated in the 2022 election, there will be a sigh of relief in Brussels. These two banal observations were a proof of “unjustified discrimination” against Hungary, the paper noted. After a moment of confusion, everything clicked. Oh Werner, you cheeky monkey, you didn’t tell me you were recording!

Shortly thereafter—if I may borrow a turn of phrase from Steve Bannon—the zone was flooded with shit. Orbán’s spokesman, Zoltán Kovács was tweeting away, and even published a post of his own on a government website. The same day, *Magyar Nemzet* ran another piece, titled “Dalibor Rohac and what is behind him,” which tried, strangely, to link my previous employer, the libertarian Cato Institute, with George Soros. Elsewhere the paper noted that that “not one stone in America was left untouched in [my] effort to overthrow the Hungarian government.” The English-language *Budapest Times* piled on, claiming the videos were “irrefutable evidence” of double standards against Hungary.

On the evening news, the pro-government Hír TV, the leading news channel in the country, dedicated an 8-minute segment to me, with a member of the Hungarian parliament from Orbán’s coalition, Hajnalka Juhász, commenting in the studio on my supposed transgressions. Over the weekend, the opposition’s leader, Péter Márki-Zay, who also stated that the EU would be relieved to see Orbán go, was accused of “echoing” my views, supposedly tarnishing him by the connection with a reprobate like me.

The “Wilson Energy Consultants” homepage has disappeared from the internet—though Google still has a cached version—and its U.K. phone number directs one to a Sky TV subscription center.

In a way, the joke is on those who concocted this elaborate scheme. While I have been a consistent critic of Viktor Orbán for a very long time, I have also strived for a sense of perspective. Some of the international pushback against Orbán’s Hungarian government strikes me as over-the-top or unhelpful. Hungary, furthermore, is not alone in facing challenges to its democracy. In the 27-second-long snippet of my second conversation with Werner, which was published by *Magyar Nemzet* later in the week, I make the groundbreaking admission that, from the perspective of foreign investors, Hungary is a normal, “civilized” country, where contracts are enforced. Well, congratulations! Without much effort, one could have cherry-picked a very similar selection of my quotes as the one presented in Hungary’s pro-government media by simply combing through my many articles, briefs, and other written work on the subject.

It turns out that I am far from the only or the most prominent person targeted by this sting operation. A fake recruitment process for a nonprofit management role lured a number of Hungary’s civil-society figures into conversations that were recorded, edited, and then “leaked” as somehow revelatory of an international plot against Hungary, supposedly organized by Soros, who gets mentioned frequently in such stories.

Also in 2020, Szabolcs Panyi, a well-known investigative journalist, was approached by a supposed Middle Eastern philanthropist seeking to establish a new NGO—but Panyi ignored the request. That was probably because he had already gone through the experience of being targeted by the government’s Pegasus surveillance software. I genuinely doubt that my work would warrant the \$500k license fee for that software but maybe I should have my phone checked. And the “revelations” currently percolating through Hungary’s pro-government press (apparently, more individuals were targeted) is not the first of its kind. Ahead of the 2018 election, the Israeli intelligence company Black Cube was hired to similarly smear activists involved in helping asylum seekers in Hungary.

And a European Commission staff report from last year documented the “diverse threats” that journalists and media outlets face in Hungary.

To be clear, I have not been hurt by this bizarre sting in any meaningful way. If anything, I’m appreciative of my new Twitter followers from Hungary and of the new interest in my work in the country. Being targeted in this way by a rogue semi-authoritarian government is a badge of honor which I’m afraid vastly exaggerates my importance as a critic of Orbán’s government.

I would feel very differently, though, if I were a Hungarian living in Hungary. Constant smears and petty harassment, which fall just below the threshold of actual persecution, must be just enough for many to stay away not simply from politics but from public life at large, including journalism and honest policy analysis. Meanwhile, the public square is flooded with a stream of nonsense from both pro-government media and from official public sources, delegitimizing all critics of Orbán as involved in some elaborate international conspiracy against the Hungarian nation.

By going to Budapest next month and by celebrating Viktor Orbán’s leadership, organizers of the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and their fellow travelers in the Republican party and the conservative infotainment industry are making it very clear that they are comfortable with and approve of such—and, frankly, much worse—practices by a government that is not particularly friendly to U.S. interests. The rest of us should take note—and the U.S. government and its European partners should watch with care the developments leading to Hungary’s April election. Nobody disputes that domestic support for Orbán is real. If, however, a skewed electoral system, dirty tricks, or outright fraud prove to be decisive in his securing a fourth consecutive term as prime minister, the transatlantic community will have to have a very difficult and overdue conversation about Hungary’s place in NATO and in the EU.