**Interview with Viktor Orbán in the Swiss weekly *Weltwoche***

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*“We pray and trust in God”*

*Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán talks about the war, the paths to peace, his meetings with Putin, Europe’s dramatic weakness and his own political achievements. He says that Christian teachings are relevant to politics.*

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*Rising above Budapest is the old castle quarter, the palace of kings, from which the rulers and governors of the Danubian monarchy once looked down on the river calmly flowing below. The huge, magnificent walls were shattered during the Second World War, but [further] rebuilding is now well under way. One forgets that Budapest was the site of the second largest urban battle of the Second World War – after Stalingrad. Under the communists the former seat of government became a museum. Recently Hungary’s ministries started moving back into their old home, which is a sign of the separation of Parliament and the executive – a line that the communists deliberately crossed. We meet Viktor Orbán in the fortress’s\* beautiful library; everything is fully restored, with dark wooden shelves and a huge terrestrial globe adorning the room. The Prime Minister, who won another two-thirds majority in the last general election, makes his entry. He is in excellent spirits – a man of good humour, self-deprecating, direct and without a hint of brashness. He will celebrate his 60th birthday this year. Outside Hungary he is considered controversial, and recently has even been dubbed “pro-Putin” for his advocacy of peace and negotiations and his criticism of the West’s belligerent actions. In the light of history, the accusations seem somewhat out of touch with reality. Hungary has suffered more than almost any other country at the hands of Russia. In 1848–49, aiming to implement parliamentarism, Hungarian liberals defeated the armies of the Habsburg Empire. But Vienna requested help from the Russian Tsar, whose forces showed extreme brutality in crushing the Hungarian democracy movement. Just over one hundred years later, this time under the Soviet flag, the Russians once more called a halt to freedom in Budapest. As a young man, Orbán himself fought against the yoke of the Moscow communists. It would be purblind to accuse him of being naive about Russia. Seen in this context, Viktor Orbán’s nuanced attitude towards the war and the Kremlin’s current leader seems all the more interesting.*

*Prime Minister, how is Hungary coping with the war in Ukraine? What are the major challenges for your country?*

We’re most affected by the EU sanctions against Russia, which have driven up the price of oil and gas. In Hungary recently we’ve made huge progress in industry, and for this we have to import the energy we need. This cost us 7 billion euros in 2021, but 17 billion euros in 2022.

*What difficulties do you still face?*

For Ukrainians, we’re the first safe country. We’re an upright Christian country, and we let everyone in. Since February 2022, more than one and a half million Ukrainians have arrived in Hungary. This isn’t too much of a problem for us, because most of these people have passed on through. But war is taking its toll on our souls, on our psyche. Ukraine is our neighbour, and a country where Hungarians also live. They’re being called up to fight, and hundreds of them are dying at the front. This war isn’t far from us, and it’s part of our lives. We’re saddened by it. This is why everyone in Hungary wants peace.

*Are Hungarians in Ukraine being forcibly conscripted?*

In Ukraine now everyone has to join the army, whether they’re Ukrainian or Hungarian. One cannot say that Hungarians are being treated badly: they’re dying together with Ukrainians.

*You’ve said that there’s sadness in Hungary. What does this mean to you as Prime Minister? How do you fight this? Where do you find hope?*

We pray and trust in God to bring the warring parties to their senses. We’re under constant pressure. They want to force us into war, and they’re using all the tools they can. So far we’ve managed to resist. This gives me hope. Hungary’s political leadership is strong enough to keep our country out of the war. I say this in all humility, but also with confidence.

*Have you experienced a similar difficult situation in your long political career?*

In 1999, when the Kosovo war broke out, they wanted to force us to open a front against Serbia on Hungary’s southern border. By then we were a member of NATO. We made it clear that NATO was a defence alliance, not a war alliance. No one can force us to attack another country. This is why we allowed our airfields to be used, but we didn’t attack Serbia, and we didn’t open up a front.

*In such difficult situations, what’s the most important principle for you?*

I consider Christian teaching to also be valid in politics. It sounds simplistic, but I believe that there is a God-given order. We must participate in God’s work, and in doing so we’re contributing to the good in the world. Meanwhile, evil doesn’t stand idly by. In Hungarian we say that it creates chaos out of order. In my daily work I must avoid anything that assists this destructive force.

*Where does the certainty come from that you’re doing the right thing, that you’re on solid ground?*

In a democracy, everything must be discussed openly. Ruthless openness: only this will lead to good solutions. And if public debate doesn’t lead to results, you can always ask your wife for advice.

*What do you personally consider to be your greatest success for Hungary?*

Being able to contribute to turning a losing country into a winning country. In 2010 Hungarians still thought that we were always on the losing side of history. We were happy just for the situation not to get worse. I managed to convince Hungarians to be more ambitious. I said that everyone would have a job, that everyone would be in control of their lives, and that we could do it – no matter what the world says. And we did it.

*Have the Hungarians overcome their gloom in the face of adversity?*

Yes. It was important to set a personal example. The message was this: if I can do it, you can do it. The whole world has been trying to talk me into changing course, but I’m not going to give in. And you can also do it.

*How would you describe your political philosophy in a single sentence?*

When I was young, I’d probably have said freedom. Today I’d say balance: change what needs to be changed, preserve what needs to be preserved. The quest for balance is deeply rooted in Hungarians. Both obedience and resistance are important to us. This is what makes political debate so interesting.

*You’re a Calvinist. What’s Calvinism’s most important political message?*

We Calvinists are Protestants. Many people think that to protest is to be against something. That’s wrong. Properly interpreted, it means to stand up for something. And that’s what I do.

*One year ago, the war in Ukraine that began in 2014 escalated. What’s been the most important realisation for you?*

In 2014 there were important personalities leading European countries – especially Mrs. Merkel. I often disagreed with her, but it’s undeniable that she had political weight and authority. At the time it was said that Europe needed to resolve this conflict. Today, Europe has withdrawn from the debate. In the decisions being taken in Brussels nowadays I see American interests being represented more often than European interests. Today, in a war on Europe’s borders, the Americans have the final say. I don’t blame the Americans, because lions eat meat – they can’t be expected to graze in the fields.

*You say that Europe has disappeared, and in this war it’s no longer recognisable. What’s the reason for this?*

There are deeper reasons, and then there’s sheer bad luck. The deeper reason is that we don’t recognise a European identity – either emotionally or intellectually. Sooner or later this must shake our self-confidence. If we’d engaged in a serious, taboo-free debate on the future of Europe, even if it had included a revision of the Treaties, then by the beginning of the war we’d probably have had a solid sense of our identity. Then there was bad luck. There wouldn’t have been a war if Donald Trump had won the US presidential election. The change of government in Germany also played a part.

*Let’s go one step further in interpretation. The deeper cause of Europe’s weakness lies in the European Union. It’s breaking up nation states without putting anything workable in their place.*

That’s how I see it. The European Union wants ever closer union. We disagree on the goal, but we agree on the way. This is the cause of Europe’s sickness.

*Is the European Union a danger to Europe today?*

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. I have no doubt that the politicians in Brussels are driven by good intentions. They think they’re building something. In reality, they’re destroying something that works, without knowing what will follow. I lived under socialism for twenty-six years. When I heard the phrase “ever closer union”, I thought back to my studies of Marx. Marx wrote a whole library on how to achieve communism. But he never wrote a single sentence about what life would be like under communism. Intellectually, we’re on the same path. My feeling about this union is always that I’ve heard this before and I’ve seen this before.

*The good news is that the war in Ukraine is the big shock that can cure the European Union of itself.*

Let’s hope that it will. I just don’t see the capacity for self-reflection. The great advantage of Christian-based politics is that one examines oneself before God. Europe’s great successes have come from a spirit of constant self-reflection. Unfortunately this tradition has withered away. All that’s allowed to be said about the war is victory speeches. Anyone who raises even a few questions is treated like a heretic.

*Who will win this war?*

No one can win it. The Ukrainians are up against a nuclear power with 140 million inhabitants, and the Russians are up against the whole of NATO. This is what makes it so dangerous. We have a stalemate that could easily escalate into a world war.

*How worried are you about a nuclear war?*

Human reasoning suggests that cannot happen. But desperation is part of the nature of war. The mental and spiritual forces that prevail there are different from those of normal life. And there’s always the possibility of misunderstandings and accidents.

*As I see it, for existential reasons Russia cannot lose this war, it’s incapable of losing it. The West tells itself that this war is a matter of life and death, but no one really believes that. For the Russians it’s more than that, and so they cannot afford to lose.*

That sounds logical. What I find most strange is that I see a war in which the objectives aren’t clear. On this issue neither side is consistent. We don’t know what would be enough for the Russians. They’ve never committed themselves publicly. And what’s Europe’s real war aim? We hear the most dangerous things – right up to the demand for regime change in Russia. The greatest danger is a war in which the parties don’t define their objectives. If they don’t, it can become completely open-ended.

*And the Americans? What’s their goal?*

A mystery. The President says something different every month.

*Mr. Orbán, you’re the longest serving head of government in the European Union, and you’ve been following the conflict in Ukraine for a long time. Who’s responsible for the escalation?*

It’s a fact that Russia has attacked Ukraine. It’s also true that this isn’t the first time: they attacked Crimea. But the fact that Russia has attacked one of its neighbours doesn’t necessarily mean that a European war has started. The fact that this war has taken on European dimensions is the responsibility of the Europeans.

*Youve said that Christian politics is about critical self-examination before God. For fifteen years the Russians have been saying that NATO enlargement to include Ukraine and Georgia is a red line. All that the Americans and Europeans have done is ignore these Russian statements. You know Putin personally. What do you say to his interpretation? Was it the West, the Americans, who provided fuel for the fire that Putin ignited with the invasion?*

When I last met President Putin in Moscow, two weeks before the outbreak of the war, I asked him: “Is Hungary’s membership of NATO a problem for you? Are you asking Hungary to leave NATO?” I told him that we had to be clear about this from the beginning. He replied that Hungary’s membership of NATO wasn’t a problem, only that of Ukraine and Georgia. Putin’s problem, he told me, was the US missile bases already established in Romania and Poland, and the possible expansion of NATO into Ukraine and Georgia in order to station weapons there. Moreover, the Americans have cancelled important disarmament treaties. That’s why Putin could no longer sleep soundly at night. My foreign policy mentor was the German FDP [Free Democratic Party] politician Otto Graf Lambsdorff. He made me aware of the difference between understanding and acceptance. I understand what Putin said, but I don’t accept what he did.

*What was your impression of Putin? What kind of man is he today? Where is he in his life?*

I’ve known Putin for more than a decade. We met every year until the war broke out. He’s the man who in effect runs Russia – with all its nuclear weapons, its millions of people and its immense territory. He’s the boss, and he runs – as far as is possible – this huge country spanning twelve time zones. As we Hungarians say, this is a different level, a different weight class.

*Has Putin changed over the years?*

I’ve not detected any negative change. Putin always said what he wanted and was never happy when I contradicted his ideas. I always had to fight for the Hungarian position, but it was possible to find reasonable solutions with him. And if we agreed on something, he kept to it.

*Is Putin a dangerous man?*

Russia is always dangerous. And Russia can only be led by a Tsar. Russia is another civilisation. European political norms don’t work there. All Russian rulers back to the 15th century have understood that. It doesn’t matter whether we like it or not. We have to find a way to live with a big, dangerous power like Russia in our neighbourhood.

*Isn’t Putin putting his country in mortal danger with this war?*

I don’t think so. Putin isn’t leading his country towards suffering. The next two or three years may be difficult for Russia, and then things will get better again. Russians can learn, they can adapt to even the most adverse circumstances. They should never be underestimated.

*What happens if Russia loses this war?*

I don’t even want to imagine that. Russia is a nuclear power. That would be a geopolitical shock, a potentially devastating earthquake on a global scale – far worse than the collapse of Yugoslavia. The very fact that such scenarios are now being taken lightly in the West shows a disturbing – even frightening – detachment from reality, a blindness to the risks inherent in its own policies.

*My impression is that Russians are melancholic Italians. Do the Russians have an inferiority complex stemming from the fact that they, a European civilisation, were dominated for centuries by the peoples of the Asian steppes? This is why they today crave European recognition, and why they react so sensitively when it’s denied them.*

I’ve never had that experience. But I’m Hungarian, so I’m a European of Eastern origin. In the West we used to be considered bloodthirsty: the merciless Huns. This never triggered an inferiority complex in Hungarians. On the contrary, it strengthened our sense of difference. “You’ll never be like us” – that was the attitude.

*How would you describe the Russians?*

Russians are a martial people. The imperative of obedience accompanies all Russians from birth, and is culturally reinforced by Orthodoxy. Western politicians say that they’re in politics so that the citizens of their nation can live as freely as possible. Russian politicians say that their job is to keep their country together. We must accept this point of view, because then peaceful coexistence is possible. It also means showing strength. A martial nation will never respect a weak country.

*What does this mean for Europe specifically?*

We must be able to defend ourselves, to defend Europe. A European NATO would be the solution. I proposed this back in 2012.

*How can we bring peace to Ukraine?*

Peace starts in the heart. It must reach the head, which then guides the hand. This is the order: peace must be wished, then it must be wanted, then it must be made. Today the will is lacking – at least in the West.

*What about the rest of the world?*

The Chinese, the Indians, the Arabs, the Turks and the Brazilians want peace. The West has lost the ability to unite the world for a cause. Its philosophical tenets are spatially limited. This is a new phenomenon.

*As Hungary’s prime minister, what can you do for peace?*

The most important question for me is this: What must I do to keep Hungary out of this conflict? The next question is: What can I do to ensure peace in our neighbourhood? If our friends and allies want to give up their belligerent position, they need to see an alternative. This is all that a country of ten million people can do.

*What has to happen in the United States? Can its policy change?*

The Hungarian experience is clear: when the Democrats are in power in Washington, we run for cover. They always want to change us, just like the politicians in Brussels. They want to tell us how to deal with migration and how to educate our children. It’s disrespectful. We’re a successful country, and we’re doing our bit for Europe. We’re the defenders of the fortresses on the edge of the continent. This work is not being recognised. This is why we’re waiting for our Republican friends to return to power.

*Could “the deal-maker” Donald Trump “do a deal” with Putin? Is Donald Trump the world’s last hope for peace?*

Not the last. But he is a hope.

*Could he cut the Gordian Knot in the war in Ukraine?*

He could probably do it in a few weeks.

*The US is an empire in relative decline. The days of unipolar world domination are over. New powers are emerging, including China. What does this mean?*

A paper has just been published – at Harvard, I think. It seeks to answer the question of how the empires that once aspired to world domination dealt with their loss of power, their demotion from first place to second place. In sixteen such cases over the last five hundred years, war broke out twelve times. Empires are reluctant to move back down to second place.

*The preachers of globalisation and free trade who meet every year at the World Economic Forum in Davos have a new gospel. This is retrenchment [of globalisation – ed.]: “We’re the good guys, they’re the bad guys, and we must no longer cooperate with them.” Are we heading for medieval isolationism, parochialism, the end of free trade?*

For Hungary this is a serious threat. We’re an export-oriented country, with 85 per cent of our gross domestic product coming from exports. We have important cultural and economic links with the East. Such a retrenchment would be disastrous for Hungary – and also for Germany, I think.

*And for Switzerland too.*

Then you must speak out in time. You have to say: “We’re not going that way.” Otherwise you’ll be pushed aside. I’ve been experiencing this for thirty years.

*We can say that ideology never triumphs over reality. Politicians and ideologues want retrenchment, but people and the economy are stronger.*

Let’s not underestimate the power of ideology. Reality may win in the end, but that end may be a long way off. We see this in the history of Hungary. We always knew that the socialist system was doomed. But it took decades for it to collapse. Fifty years of my parents’ lives were lost, and twenty-six of mine.

*What’s the significance of Switzerland for the world?*

Switzerland is important. We don’t fully understand what happens there, but we know it exists. And we know that it is what it wants to be. But it’s not isolated. So maintaining your own identity doesn’t necessarily lead to provincialism. Switzerland is an important positive example.

*How do you see Swiss neutrality?*

You’re lucky in that. If we were located where Switzerland is, we’d be neutral too. It’s a Swiss luxury. We don’t have it.

*What do you see as the greatest danger of uncontrolled immigration?*

In the short term, a deterioration in public safety and terrorism. In the medium term, economic losses. In the long term, people will no longer recognise their own countries, they’ll lose their own countries.

*What do you see as the greatest danger of gender ideology?*

If you have children, you know very well that the age between 14 and 18 is difficult. Children have to grow into the world. It’s during this period that their identities need to be strengthened – not weakened and cast into doubt, as gender ideologists do. In doing so, they’re destroying our children – irrevocably and irreversibly. They have no right to do this.

*The former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, once greeted you with the words, “Hello, dictator!” Let’s say that for one day you’re the dictator of the EU. What would you do?*

I’d do what Mr. Juncker was keen on doing: get drunk. Fortunately, there’s no such possibility. There’s a good handbook written by former Bavarian minister president Edmund Stoiber. In it, Stoiber describes how the European Union could be reorganised on the basis of subsidiarity. It’s not knowledge that’s lacking, but the will.

*What’s the most important measure?*

All the powers that the EU has expropriated without authorisation from the Member States must be returned to the Member States.

*In Switzerland, direct democracy has never been urged from above. It’s always had to be pushed for from below.*

This is a difficult question. Is Europe capable of renewal, or does it need some kind of cataclysm? It would be good to know the answer.

*What do you do when despair gains the upper hand?*

I go home.

*Who’s your favourite writer?*

A Hungarian, but you don’t know him.

*What’s the best news of our time?*

That there’s life beyond this earth.

*What gives you hope?*

My children.

*\* a former monastery*