



Football as a Tool of Propaganda and Public Diplomacy: The Strategy of Viktor Orbán's Government

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Abstract

The article focuses on the use of sport, particularly football, as a propaganda and public diplomacy tool by the Fidesz political party and the government of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. The first part outlines the relationship between politics and sport in post-Trianon Hungary, and the activities of the 'Golden Team' of footballers during the first post-WWII decade. This period ended with the suppression of the 1956 autumn revolution by the Red Army. The construction of the myth of an 'invincible team' is linked to conspiracies and more general negative perceptions of external actors, as well as nostalgia for a glorified, albeit fabricated, national and state history. This mythologisation is reflected in Orbán's illiberal democracy regime and its instruments of public diplomacy and soft power strategies. The analysis focused on selected phenomena of this process within Hungarian society and externally, primarily among the so-called cross-border Hungarians. The author contextualised football within the realms of emotions, identity and centralised authoritarian power, where it emerges as a pivotal phenomenon in the establishment of Orbán's national oligarchic regime.

Keywords: football, sports diplomacy, propaganda, soft power, Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government

1. Introduction

Throughout Hungarian history, sports have played a significant role in shaping national identity. As in the case of many other countries and nations, modern sport became a means of channelling rivalry with other nations and of building prestige and national cohesion in Hungary as early as the last few decades of the 19th century. Just like architecture, for example, sport was seen as a sign of progress. In architecture (for example the new parliament building, the Budapest Metro, or the zoo), Great Britain served as the primary model (Országh, 1979). It is certainly worth emphasising the military-educational dimension as well, comparable within the Habsburg Monarchy, for example, to the Czech Sokol movement or the German Turners. As showed by Nolte (2012), while the Czech and German physical education associations grew from the grassroots up, in the Hungarian context the elites played a key organizational role, injecting nationalism into the sports environment and shaping Hungarian mass identity.

Let us emphasize – once again, particularly in common with the Czechs – the interest in modern Olympism, which allowed not only states but also nations to be represented. Thus, even before World War I, Hungary had established itself as a powerhouse in certain sports, and after the war and the Treaty of Trianon, it focused even more intensely on sport as a means of substituting its political ambitions (Venuti, 2024).

As in many other countries, sports in Hungary have often been used as a tool for competition, or even as a 'proxy war', against external actors. The most well-known example of this was probably the water polo match between Hungarian and Soviet teams at the 1956 Olympic Games, known as the 'Melbourne Bloodbath'. One month after Soviet troops had brutally suppressed the Hungarian people's uprising against the communist dictatorship, the match between the Hungarian and Soviet water polo players in the final round took place. Due to the great distance between Australia and Europe, many members of the Hungarian delegation had travelled to a training camp abroad or directly to Melbourne before the Soviet occupation, and they competed at the Olympics under the symbols and slogans of the revolution (including a flag without Marxist symbols). The brutal match ended prematurely after a Soviet player attacked the Hungarian star Ervin Zádor, sparking a mass brawl in which spectators – many of whom were Hungarian exiles – also took part. Although Hungary later became the Olympic champion, most of the Olympic team decided to remain in exile, joining the approximately 200,000 Hungarians who had left the country shortly after the occupation (Novák, 2021). The way the 'Melbourne Bloodbath' is discussed in Hungarian political, societal, and media discourse is very similar to the way the ice hockey matches between Czechoslovak and Soviet players were politicised following the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (Numerato, 2010; Tůma et al., 2014).

Hungary has established itself as a sporting powerhouse in a number of disciplines, including water polo. The men's team has won the gold medal nine times, making Hungary the most successful country in this sport in the modern Olympic Games.

The women's team is also gradually gaining strength, achieving third place in 2020 and fourth place in 2024. Other notable disciplines include track and field, swimming, canoeing, boxing, combat sports, chess, and sports with a strong martial arts framework, such as modern pentathlon and fencing. Hungary has already won more than 500 medals at the Summer Olympics, including 181 gold medals. In the last decade, the country has also strengthened its presence in winter sports, particularly short-track speed skating (Printz, 2021). These achievements were publicly envisioned as part of a new Olympic Park situated right next to the national parliament as part of a bid to host the Summer Olympic Games in Budapest in 2024, put forward by Viktor Orbán's new government after 2010. The park is dominated by metal Olympic rings in the colours of the Hungarian flag and a list of the names of all Hungarian Olympic medallists carved into marble (PestBuda, n.d.).

Hungarian athletes' remarkable achievements in a variety of disciplines often lead to celebrity status, involvement in propaganda (e.g. boxer László Papp as the 'ideal communist athlete') or promotional activities, and participation in public life. For example, two-time Olympic fencing champion Pál Schmitt was elected president in 2010, but resigned from office two years later following a plagiarism scandal involving his dissertation (AP, 2012). Many women also feature among sports celebrities, including Judit Polgár, widely regarded as the greatest female chess player of all time, and the swimmers Krisztina Egerszegi and Katinka Hosszú.

As this brief overview shows, sports have played a significant role in Hungarian society and politics for more than 150 years, regardless of the specific regime in power. It would therefore be surprising if the hybrid regime led by Viktor Orbán did not use sports as a tool for self-promotion, the promotion of certain ideological patterns, the construction of myths, and, above all, the cultivation of national identity.

This relatively brief analysis cannot provide a comprehensive examination of the evolution of the relationship between sport, politics and propaganda in Hungary, due to the length of the period that would need to be examined, as well as the changes in political regimes. Therefore the author focused on football, which is widely regarded as the most prominent and truly global sporting phenomenon for many reasons. It is also a sport that has enjoyed significant support and favour from governments led by Viktor Orbán over the past 16 years, and was closely associated with the development of a hybrid regime in Hungary (Magyar, 2016).

The first part of this article examines key moments in the development of soccer's role in Hungarian society and politics during the interwar period, particularly in the first decade following World War II. It then focuses specifically on the period after 2010. Football is thus embedded in a complex model of establishing a national economic and political oligarchy linked to the Fidesz political party. Fidesz – the Youth Democrats' Association (*Fiatal Demokraták Szövetsége*) – was founded in 1988 during the transition to democracy by a group of students, including Viktor Orbán, Tamás Deutsch (currently a Member of the European Parliament, as well as president of the traditionally Jewish-rooted MTK Budapest FC club since 2010), and also the Speaker of the Hungarian

Parliament from 2010 to 2026, László Köver. The party's acronym was retained even after its transformation into the Hungarian Civic Union (cf. Enyedi & Zsolt, 2011).

This narrative also includes the concept of regional or international populism (see e.g. Söderbaum et al., 2021), which are placed within the context of memory politics and collective identity as oppression or even a conspiracy by external elites against the 'pure' Hungarian nation. The national and regional populism is thus based on the idea that Hungary has experienced negative external influences throughout its history. The defeat of the 'unbeatable' team in the 1954 World Cup final is considered to be a key external factor in the history of Hungarian football.

Thus the primary aim of this article was to analyse how the myth of the 'Golden Team' was manifested in the activities and communication strategies of Hungarian governments since Viktor Orbán returned to the office of prime minister in 2010. Football can particularly be seen as one of the key instruments of Orbán's broader 'conservative revolution' ideology and his efforts to revitalise the 'golden age'. Through the analysis of this case study, one can also reflect on the strong nationalist and revisionist tendencies characteristic of Orbán's regime and, more broadly, of Hungarian politics and society. Lastly, it can reveal broader trends in positive or critical reflections on Orbán's regime, using football as an example, including differences in media coverage and commentary.

For this analysis, the author relied primarily on analytical texts, and with the exception of the concept of regional populism, he did not ground the study in a robust theoretical framework, drawing on sources from both scholarly literature and numerous popular works, as well as media coverage, which is relatively abundant due to the interest in political topics related to sports – and vice versa. To reflect on historical events, the article primarily turns to historiographical works.

Regarding the methodology, the analysis was based on a combination of textual and discursive approaches, incorporating academic texts, journalistic works and the rhetoric of political figures into the issues under study. Specifically, the author focused on the discourse of the Orbán government and the Fidesz party, who use sports, primarily football, to build their own image. Given that these strategies extend beyond Hungary's borders, the study also monitored the Orbán government's sports and broader public diplomacy activities. In this regard, it is essentially a policy analysis concentrating on the entire political cycle, from agenda-setting to the use of sports as a propaganda tool, the construction of preferred narratives, and their prioritisation in the public sphere.

2. Football, the 'Golden Team' and Propaganda

Despite the significant achievements of Hungarian athletes in many of the above sports, football continues to hold a special place, even though the country has not seen any major international successes in the sport for fifty years. In addition to the sport's general global popularity and media appeal, key factors stemming from Hungarian history and historical politics must be mentioned. Of paramount importance here is the

mythologisation of the Hungarian national team, the 'Magical Hungarians', from the early 1950s. Building on the successes of Hungarian clubs in the Central European Cup in the interwar period (the Budapest teams Ferencváros and Újpest secured four victories and three additional final appearances), the team also drew on the achievements of a strong national team, which culminated in a World Cup final appearance in 1938 (the Hungarian team lost 2–4 to Italy).

After World War II, coach Gusztáv Sebes (born Scharenpeck) assembled an 'unbeatable' team, the biggest star of which was the forward and captain, Ferenc Puskás. The term 'Golden Team', originally *Aranycsapat*, is generally used by Hungarian sources, and it also appeared in the title of a film by András Surányi (1982), among others. The term 'Aranycsapat' was also used in the titles of several monographs written about this phenomenon (e.g. Bailey, 2019; Borsi-Kálmán, 2008; Fried, 2000; Gál, 2015; Horváth, 2011; Kalman, 2014; Kö, 1997; Szabó & Millisits, 2016). In light of the topic of this analysis, it is interesting that many of these works were published after 2010, clearly responding to a new wave of the politicisation of football as a tool for integrating Hungarian society while also distinguishing itself from the outside world.

The team enjoyed strong support from the Stalinist-style totalitarian regime and comprised players from two clubs: the military-run Honvéd and the originally Jewish MTK, which had been tied to the secret police since 1946. Communist propaganda presented the team as proof that communism was the best system, yet, like Hungarian society as a whole, it existed in an atmosphere of terror. For example, national team defender Sándor Szűcz was detained at the Austrian border in June 1951 while attempting to emigrate. As a soldier in the Honvéd team, he was subsequently hanged for treason (Cola, 2016).

Between 1950 and 1956 the Hungarian national football team lost only one of its 51 matches. They were the first team to defeat England at Wembley, winning 6–3 in 1953, and a year later they beat them 7–1 at home. They also became Olympic champions in Helsinki in 1952, a success they repeated twice more in 1964 and 1968 (Hořejší, 2012). A key turning point in the perception of the 'unbeatable' team was their defeat in the World Cup final, known as the "Miracle of Bern" from the perspective of the winning West German team and the "Bern Shock" from the Hungarian perspective. The 2–3 defeat on 4 July 1954 triggered an outburst of negative emotions within Hungarian society and was consistent with the atmosphere of Stalinist totalitarianism. The players were accused of 'selling' the match, and they and their families were subjected to attacks (Vráblik, 2021).

The Communist regime used the *Aranycsapat* for propaganda purposes and to boost its prestige, which made their subsequent defeat all the more painful in the eyes of the public. Spontaneous demonstrations and local unrest broke out in Budapest, lasting several days. Some reports mention smashed shop windows and attacks on state institutions (Jones, 1984). These reactions were directed not only at the players and coaches, but also at the authoritarian regime of Mátyás Rákosi, who had invested heavily in the team's success. Consequently, historians often view the shock of the

defeat in Bern as one of the catalysts for the growing disillusionment that culminated in the 1956 uprising (Vráblik, 2021; Woods, 2025;). The regime's response focused on identifying individual 'culprits'. Alongside coach Sebes, goalkeeper Gyula Grosics became the main target, criticised for the opponents' third goal. He was briefly placed under house arrest, accused of espionage and treason, and ultimately forced to transfer from Honvéd to the team in Tatabánya.

Following the 1956 Hungarian Revolution and its suppression by Soviet troops, the Golden Team was disbanded as many players went into exile. This was compounded by the fact that, in early November, the Honvéd team was on a foreign tour, and virtually the entire under-18 team, which had just won the European Championship in Switzerland, also remained abroad (Vráblik, 2021).

Various speculations and conspiracy theories have emerged surrounding the defeat in the Bern final, the most significant of which was the allegation that the West German players took performance-enhancing drugs. Scientific research into the discussion about the West German footballers' suspiciously good physical condition in the 1954 World Cup final indicates that, contrary to claims by those close to the team, the players were injected with methamphetamine (Randerg, 2013). This finding was part of an analysis commissioned by the German Olympic Sports Confederation from two universities. The resulting report, spanning more than 800 pages, documented two decades of systematic, state-organised doping among West German athletes following World War II (Krüger et al., 2013).

Naturally such conclusions reinforce suspicions of negative externalities, which are generally very prevalent in the Hungarian context. In the next part of this article examines how the regime associated with Orbán's return to the position of prime minister in 2010 links football with propaganda.

3. Football as a Tool for National Reintegration and Strengthening National Self-Confidence

As was already demonstrated, following the so-called Trianon tragedy, sport became a significant symbol of national identity and a cultural phenomenon in Hungary. Football emerged as the most visible element of this symbiosis, thanks to sporting successes and the mythology surrounding the Golden Team. For Orbán and some of his associates, it was precisely football that became a tool for strengthening national consciousness and reintegrating the nation, including ethnic Hungarians who found themselves in the territories of other states after 1920. Thus football became a kind of mirror of political ambitions, both within and outside Hungary, as well as a vehicle for transferring key characteristics of the autocratic regime into an environment with which Hungarian society associates a constructed history of national success and pride.

Orbán, who generally presents himself as a pragmatist, is open about his passion and enthusiasm for football. In his biography, he emphasised that he was an active

player in his youth. In addition to his hometown of Felcsút, other sources mention a youth team in Székesfehérvár (Wilson, 2024). At the same time, Orbán also used football very effectively as a symbolic space and a key tool for reinforcing the social narratives favoured by his government, including distrust of foreign actors, the idea of building a strong nation-state and the concept of the Hungarian nation's unique qualities. In Orbán's interpretation, sport, and football in particular, serves as a tool for national revival, state propaganda and personal self-realisation (Mortimer, 2022).

Even before his return to the helm of the government, Orbán had established the village of Felcsút – with a population of just 2,000 – as the primary focus and centrepiece of his football mission. This is the village where he grew up and which, according to available statistics, is the wealthiest municipality in Hungary on a per-capita basis. His key partner in this endeavour was Hungary's wealthiest businessman, the village mayor and his friend, Lőrinc Mészáros. The youth football academy they founded together in 2007 bears the name of Puskás – the Puskás Ferenc Football Academy (*Puskás Ferenc Labdarúgó Akadémia*). Following its establishment in 2010, more than ten additional youth academies were subsequently founded (Hrabě, 2022).

After Orbán's return to power, football became a key component of the so-called 'national oligarchy' model, in which economic success is closely linked to loyalty to Orbán. People close to Orbán were gradually incorporated into these structures. As previously mentioned, one such individual was Fidesz co-founder T. Deutsch, who manages the MTK club. Sándor Csányi, the second-richest businessman, became president of the football association, while Ferencváros, Hungary's strongest club, is led by Gábor Kubatov, another oligarch and long-time Fidesz vice-chairman (Vait, 2025). As Adámek (2021) noted, "In the first division, clubs with no ties to the Hungarian government are now in the minority."

Puskás Akadémia FC, the team from Felcsút, has become one of the symbols of this transformation, bearing a striking resemblance to the situation in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s. With key state support, the small village was given a 3,500-capacity stadium, Pancho Arena, and financial backing propelled the team to the top ranks of the Hungarian league. Orbán's son, Gáspár, played several dozen minutes in European cups and three league matches for the team before becoming a chaplain in the Hungarian army (Palata, 2022).

In addition to direct support, Orbán's government has channelled funds into football through other means. One of the key sources is revenue from television rights purchased by state television. However, the most crucial mechanism is the government's provision of significant tax breaks to businesspeople affiliated with the football sector (Vait, 2025). Meanwhile, there are signs that supporting football has become a prerequisite for grant applicants or bidders for government contracts (Gulyás, 2025). For example, as Hrabě (2022) noted: "Sports, and football in particular, are financially supported by state-owned enterprises". While it is generally claimed that this support is voluntary, based on an awareness of social responsibility, those familiar with the situation speak of coercion. The way it works is that a company

receives a government contract and allocates a portion of its profits – sources indicate as much as half – to the public interest, in this case sports. If it refuses, it cannot count on any further contracts.

A key priority for the government is supporting the success of Hungarian football. One visible tool of nationalisation has been the measure whereby second-division teams only receive support from the football association if their rosters consist exclusively of Hungarian or transnational players (i.e. ethnic Hungarians from neighbouring countries) (Hrabě, 2022). It is also worth noting that Hungary is currently granting citizenship to a significant number of foreign players. Notable cases include Serbian footballer Nemanja Nikolić and French-born Loïc Négo.

However, the principle of nationalisation also applies in the opposite direction, as the Hungarian government and associated actors engage in 'stadium diplomacy' with cross-border Hungarians. Over the past decade the Hungarian government has financed the construction or renovation of stadiums in minority regions of Slovakia (Dunajská Streda/Dunaszerdahely and Komárno/Komárom), Romania (Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy) and Serbia (Bačka Topola/Topolya). Funding has been channelled through grants, foundations and directly via the Puskás Academy, with official rhetoric stating that the aim is to support Hungarian culture and youth.

In reality, however, this is a deliberate policy aimed at consolidating influence in border regions. For example, Sokol (2023) directly linked these activities to Orbán's programme to support the 15 million Hungarians living in the Carpathian Basin. Sokol also pointed out that, in addition to the three league teams that advanced to European club competitions in the summer of 2023 (DAC Dunajská Streda, TSC Bačka Topola and SEPSI OSK), the Hungarian government supports youth academies in the Slovenian region of Prekmurje, specifically the second-division ethnically Hungarian team NK Nafta 1903 Lendava, as well as the Munkács Football Academy in Mukachevo, Transcarpathian Ukraine. Orbán's friend, the Mayor of Felcsút, L. Mészáros, is a co-owner of the Croatian team NK Osijek. This city, known as Eszék in Hungarian, is the centre of Eastern Slavonia, where the Hungarian minority is present. A brand-new stadium was also opened here in 2023 with Hungarian support (Sokol, 2023).

Hence one can see that exporting Hungarian football infrastructure to regions with Hungarian minorities aligns with the Orbán government's geopolitical and cultural identity strategies. Funding for sports is complemented by a campaign to grant Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living abroad. As a result the stadium becomes a cultural centre as well as a sports venue, where language, identity, and loyalty to Budapest are reinforced, yet this practice causes diplomatic tensions with neighbouring countries, who perceive Hungary's actions as interference in their internal affairs. The governments of Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine have repeatedly protested against the politicisation of the minority agenda. Visible political and diplomatic clashes include the tensions at matches in Dunajská Streda and Komárno in Slovakia, where large numbers of people sang the Hungarian national anthem. In 2019, Robert Fico's government amended the Law on State Symbols (known as the 'Lex DAC') to

prohibit the use of another country's national anthem, except when an official foreign delegation is present (VT, 2019).

Similar manifestations of ethnic tension can also be observed at SEPSI OSK matches. The club considers itself to be representative of the inland Romanian region of Székely Land, which has Hungarian ethnic roots. Orbán frequently attends the team's matches without coordinating with the Romanian government. Particular controversy was sparked by his attendance at a match between the unofficial Székely junior national team (Székelyföld U18) and the Hungarian junior team. This match was held at the stadium of the Romanian second-division, ethnically Hungarian team, FC Csíkszereda, in the city of Miercurea Ciuc, in July 2022 (Gáll, 2022; Sokol, 2023).

One of the most striking gestures by Orbán, linking football, ideology and his government's foreign policy goals towards Hungarians living abroad, was his attendance at a friendly match between Hungary and Greece on 20 November 2022. This match served as a farewell to Balázs Dzsudzsák's international career. The Prime Minister's Office released a video in which Orbán thanked the player for his contribution to Hungarian football while wearing a scarf depicting a map of so-called Greater Hungary, i.e. the region of the Tisza River basin prior to the end of the First World War.

This symbolic act sparked outrage in Romania, where the Foreign Ministry described the scarf as an "expression of revisionism", as well as in Croatia, Slovakia and Ukraine, where the Hungarian ambassador was summoned for consultations at the respective foreign ministries. The Slovak Foreign Minister Rastislav Káčer described Orbán's gesture as "disgusting and repugnant", and the Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský also criticised it (Burger 2023; ČTK 2022).

In response to the criticism, Orbán made a light-hearted remark: "Football isn't politics. We shouldn't read into it what isn't there. The national team belongs to all Hungarians, no matter where they live". He also said, "Take it easy. A football match is a football match, and politics is politics." At the summit of the Visegrád Group prime ministers in Košice, held just four days after the incident, both the Czech prime minister, Fiala, and the Slovak host, Eduard Heger, distanced themselves from Orbán. Heger presented the Hungarian prime minister with a scarf bearing Slovak symbols and the message: "I noticed that Viktor Orbán has an old scarf, so I gave him a new one today" (Vilček, 2022).

4. Conclusion

Over the past 16 years, enormous amounts of money have been invested in football and sport in general in Hungary. Analysts estimate that top footballers earn twice as much as their Czech counterparts (Vait, 2025). Investment in football alone is estimated to total around 70 billion crowns, and the most visible result of this investment is the new 67,000-seat national stadium located practically in the middle of the city. The 600-million-euro Puskás Arena is located above the Puskás Ferenc Stadium metro station (formerly *Népstadion*, or National Stadium), and Adámek (2021) aptly dubbed it

'the symbolic temple of the Orbán regime'. Thanks to this new infrastructure, Hungary has naturally become the host of major international sporting events, including part of the European Championship, the Europa League final and the 2026 UEFA Champions League final (Daněk, 2024).

Budapest also hosted the World Athletics Championships at the end of August 2023. In connection with this sporting event, Orbán convened an 'illiberal mini-summit' in Budapest, attended by the presidents of Turkey (R. T. Erdoğan), Serbia (A. Vučić) and Azerbaijan (I. Aliyev), as well as representatives of several Central Asian states and the former prime ministers of Austria (S. Kurz) and the Czech Republic (A. Babiš). Once again, one sees how Orbán uses sports diplomacy to promote his preferred ideology of illiberal democracy and to express support for the official 'Eastern policy' and Pan-Turkism, to which the country adheres under Orbán (Greilinger, 2023).

Orbán's government uses international sporting events in a similar way to, for example, Azerbaijan – that is, as a means of boosting its own image and nation branding, but also as a tool for sport-washing. Recent sources (e.g. Boykoff, 2022; Grix et al., 2025) pointed out that illiberal democracies in the Global North are increasingly engaging in sportswashing, in addition to the most obvious undemocratic regimes (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, China and Russia).

Football and sports in general present effective tools of politicisation. In addition to being a significant form of entertainment that can temporarily mask, dampen or redirect feelings of frustration among individuals and social groups, football is also used to shape society ideologically based on a Manichaean dichotomy of good (the Hungarian team and the Hungarian state leadership, or rather Orbán's regime) and evil (external actors or internal opponents portrayed as traitors). Thanks to the government's control over the media, particularly through financial control, politically motivated actions by regulatory bodies, and economic pressure, the successes of Hungarian footballers and other sportspeople were presented as a success of state policy (Bajomi-Lázár, 2015; Polyák, 2019).

An excellent example of how public interest in sports can be leveraged to advance own priorities and set the political agenda, was the coverage by Hungarian state television during the 2018 FIFA World Cup. As Merkovity and Strumpf (2021) demonstrated, the government used short news segments (approximately a minute long) inserted during soccer match broadcasts to "direct viewer attention to a narrow range of migration-related news items and implemented reporting on refugees as a framing device for domestic and international political conflicts." It was thus a highly effective tool for the securitisation of migration and also for the populist division of the national and European political scene into *us* (opponents of migration) and *them* (enemies of the nation, opening the door to danger).

In general, Orbán's government effectively employed sports diplomacy, including its generous direct and indirect support, as a form of soft power. Public diplomacy also involves symbols and gestures that boost national self-confidence while simultaneously creating ad hoc or lasting tensions with neighbouring states. However, it must

be acknowledged that Hungary's sports policy system from 2010 up to 2026 was part of a broader context of an illiberal democratic regime, the development of a national oligarchy loyal to Orbán and clientelism. Contracts for the construction of sports infrastructure were awarded to politically connected businesspeople, while the system lacks effective spending controls.

However, the reality is that, for Orbán, investments in infrastructure are primarily investments in symbols. In this regard, football fits into a broader framework of nationalism and regional populism, including nostalgia – a mixture of contempt and admiration for those who are more successful – and resistance to globalisation and the liberal world order. This combination of emotions, identity and centralised authoritarian power was, above all, a narrative orchestrated by the state apparatus. Interest in the sport is rather low and stagnant, with the exception of international matches. While there are undoubtedly excellent Hungarian footballers with international potential at an individual level, the national team is yet to come close to the results achieved in the two post-war decades.

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