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The Psychology of Standing Out Internationally



The foreign policy of Viktor Orbán has confused Western elites for years. He often uses antagonizing language towards the leadership of organizations in which Hungary is a member, mainly the European Union, and, unlike most European leaders, has not been a staunch supporter of Ukraine in the conflict against Russia. This baffles most observers, as the advantages of this approach are not apparent at first glance,

leading some to dismiss this strategy as Orbán being a Russian asset or '[useful idiot](#)'. However, this simplistic analysis does not take the psychology of international relations into account.

Social psychology can offer an alternative explanation for why Orbán is doing what he is doing, and why it was at least partially successful in preserving his popularity over the last decade. Social psychologists (mainly based on the research of Henri Tajfel) have proposed that [social identity theory](#) (SIT) can explain events in the international arena that more traditional approaches cannot. SIT claims that states (especially smaller ones) can choose from three potential grand strategies when creating their long-term foreign policy, and most only consider one or two of these.

The first option is *social mobility*. In this case, belonging to a strong, cohesive group can provide a sense of identity to the country in question. Joining an alliance and strongly supporting its policies can achieve this. This is the least risky option of the three, as it aligns the country with another group, usually headed by a superpower. This can create safety and a sense of purpose: being a member of a strong group validates the country. This is the strategy employed by most Western countries that align themselves with the EU and American foreign policy, expecting the same from Hungary as well.

If the country has issues with the direction this group is taking or the values it is representing, and especially if it is made to feel like an inferior, lower-status member, it can choose to employ *social competition*. In this case, the country aims to establish its own group, rivaling that of the existing dominant group, and eventually seeks to overtake their dominant position. This struggle creates the sense of identity for the country. There are elements of this strategy in Orbán's [rhetoric](#) and [actions](#), but overall, Hungary is too small to create an alternative that could rival the West.

That leaves the third option: *social creativity*. In this case, the country does not want to align itself with the dominant group, nor does it intend to create a clear alternative, but wants to redefine international competition, introducing new dimensions or angles, focusing on aspects that could make it stand out. Thus, identity is created through being different, unique, and consequently a significant actor that cannot be ignored.

It is clear that since Orbán and many Hungarians have felt that the West has treated Hungary as a second-order member of the EU and NATO, identity through social mobility was no longer a valid option. Lacking sufficient resources for competition, Orbán has opted for creativity. He wants to make the country special and worthy of attention in the international space, and his foreign policy, which is baffling to most observers, achieves this

goal. It is no coincidence that Fidesz has been communicating how important Hungary has become internationally, particularly when Donald Trump hosted numerous members of the cabinet in Washington DC. This sense of importance and uniqueness provides Orbán and his supporters with a strong identity that serves as the basis for his domestic support.

As a result, trying to make sense of current Hungarian foreign policy by analyzing the tangible and geopolitical advantages it achieves is a futile exercise. Orbán may or may not get certain economic and political results, but this is all secondary to the question of identity. As long as Orbán is treated as one of the most important figures of European politics, which is currently the case, his foreign policy achieves what it is intended for: creating an identity for his supporters.