Fields of Power

Episode 2: The Land Grab Chronicles”

In supermarket:

Péter: So here we go.

Ian: Where are we?

Péter: So we are in a CBA supermarket. We are looking for food that is produced by oligarchs. We have here Mizo. We have salted caramel milk. Let´s grab that. We have walnut toffee flavoured lattes and what else? Let´s just grab a milk. So that is Mizo and why Mizo is interesting because it is produced by a company called Sole Mizo and the owner of Sole Mizo is a guy called Sándor Csányi, one of the richest person in Hungary, one of the wealthiest oligarchs. So let´s move on.
It´d be great if we could find a wine that is called Deressza because that´s a company owned by none other than Lörinc Mészáros... so what does it say? It says Deressza Cabernet Sauvignon. Looks nice? Shall we get it?

Ian: No.

Péter: No, I also don´t think so. Don´t buy this wine if you don´t want to support the oligarchy.

Ian: Welcome to Episode 2 of Fields of Power, “The Land Grab Chronicles”

Péter: As we can see from our trip to the supermarket, oligarchs have become an integral part of Hungarian life. But what actually is a Hungarian oligarch and why do they even matter?

Ian: Maybe, when you hear the word oligarch, you imagine a Russian billionaire with a yacht bigger than your flat, a supermodel girlfriend and a football club to beat. The sort of man who looks a bit dangerous, likes cigars and has deep ties to the government. As a group, these oligarchs have a powerful grip on both business and politics, often shaping policies to benefit their interests, whilst blurring the lines between public good and private gain.

Péter: Caricatures aside, in Hungary, oligarchs are like this in some ways, they certainly have football clubs, but the key difference here is the direction of power – so who is in control of who - is a bit more confusing and complicated.

Ian: Of course, there were oligarchs before Orbán came back to power in 2010: many of the managers of successful Hungarian businesses during state socialism embraced the the neoliberalisation and privatisation of the Hungarian economy and became incredibly rich through the process. Others enriched themselves through utilising the political capital they gained as members of the Socialist Party.

Péter: But under Orbán's 15 year rule, this process has accelerated to completely new heights. Corrupt public procurement processes have enriched a number of people who in exchange provide economic support and political loyalty to the regime.

This can be clearly seen when it comes to the media. News outlets are bought by oligarchs, then they are either closed down, or switch to producing pro-government narratives. Such moves are often framed as being completely above board, the buying of a private business by a private individual: a completely normal economic activity within a democracy- they say. And though we don't have time to go into it here, and it truly deserves another series of podcast itself, - the veneer of legitimacy being projected through such claims - just like with the transfer of land - hides layers of politics and power.

Ian: This has helped create a complex web of economically and politically interconnected elites that shape the future of Hungary. And just so you know it's not us making more of something that's not really there, there's even a name for the wider phenomenon which Hungarian oligarchs are a part of: The Nemzeti Együttműködés Rendszere or NER, which translates as the System of National Cooperation. This term is widely used in Hungary to describe the web of private corporations and individuals, alongside the slew of cultural and political institutions, that are closely aligned with Orbán.

Péter: The most famous, or infamous, oligarch within this system is Lőrinc Mészáros, a childhood friend of Orbán, who rose from working as a gasfitter to becoming the wealthiest person in the country. His portfolio of companies: it includes everything.From asset management, food and energy, road and railway construction, real estate, tourism, banking, media and more. His net worth including these assets is estimated at a whopping 1.8 billion US Dollars. But it's not only his wealth that is startling, but also the insanely fast rate at which he has accumulated it, multiplying his worth by something like 85 between 2014-2024.

In our research more broadly, when I come across a local case of corruption, people often attributed it to Mészáros: even if it wasn't him. This just goes to show that he has quite literally become somewhat of a symbol of appropriation in the country.

Ian: He might be the most famous one, but he is just one of many - not so many that you could call it simple and fair economic competition, but enough to have a significant impact on Hungary. And, as we already hinted in the previous episode, they have their hands all over the country's agricultural lands as well. And you don't need to take our word for it, it's all been detailed by a former government minister from the ruling FIDESZ party.

Professor József Ángyán talking in Hungarian in the Parliament .

Péter: You might remember from the previous episode this name that kept popping up when we spoke to people: József Ángyán or Professor Ángyán. Or simply the Professor.
We´ll refer to him as Professor Ángyán. And Professor Ángyán is a key figure in our story. For reasons that will become clear in a bit, we haven't been able to talk to him personally in the creation of this podcast. But the footage we find of him online shows a man - then in his 60s -, with a white beard, lively, but slightly angry eyes and a voice that tries to find the balance between reason and exasperation. And he has good reason to be exasperated.

Professor József Ángyán talking in Hungarian in the Parliament .

Ian: Trained as an agricultural engineer, he also worked as a professor at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, was part of the Association of Hungarian Farmers' Clubs and Farmers' Cooperatives, and founded and ran a department of Environmental and Landscape Management at the Gödöllő Agricultural University. He was one of those rare people in academia who practised what he preached. He knew how to hold a scythe and work with the land - a Professor wearing rubber boots, as he once described himself.

Péter: He was someone that held the respect of farmers, politicians and academics alike. Which is why he was one of the leaders, quite naturally, of the 2005 farmers protests, when thousands of farmers took their tractors to Budapest to demand fairer agricultural subsidies and stronger protection against cheap imports flooding the market. At the time Orbán's FIDESZ party was not in power.

Scene: Ángyán at the farmers protest.

Péter: That's Professor. Ángyán at one of the demonstrations in front of the Hungarian Parliament. He stood up for the farmers, he rallied for them and this got him noticed by Orbán, who after his defeat in the 2002 elections knew he needed to change tactics. He had to transition from a primarily urban party to one that has the backing of the countryside if he was to be reelected. So he made strategic alliances with rural parties, the Association of Hungarian Farmers' Clubs and Farmers' Cooperatives, and, to top it all, he recruited Ángyán. In preparation

of the 2010 elections, he enabled the Professor to develop a progressive, pro-European, sustainable and family farm-focused rural strategy. And, according to Ángyán, over a cup of tea brewed by Orbán himself in his village home, he was not only offered the state secretariat for agriculture, but promised that tFIDESZ would implement his strategy.

Ian: Éva, the organic farmer in Kishantos who we met last episode, and who lost her land in 2014, believed that Ángyán's rural popularity was key in the 2010 elections.

Éva: He was the one who brought the votes because he was a trustful and well known person.

Ian: So in part thanks to Ángyán, the widespread rural support propelled Viktor Orbán and FIDESZ into power with a two-third majority in 2010. However, just a year into his term as vice-state secretary, Ángyán began to notice that the government's rural strategy was not going as promised. He started noticing the strange renegotiations surrounding leases and in the preparations for large land auctions. He smelled trouble.

Éva: And when he could see what is going on, how openly the robbing is going on within the government, organised, in an organised way, not even the minister was leading the ministry, but somebody from the Orbán circle who was just sitting there and taking away the documents and bringing back the orders, what should they do? And then first he told to Orbán that it is not possible to work in this condition under these conditions. He told it on an official government meeting and Orbán didn't tell anything. And then he tried everything, but he could see that he will not get through. So he stood up and he waited for Orbán to ask what's wrong, but he never have asked him, never met him. And then he wrote a letter about the whole situation and his reasons why he is leaving to his friends, but it leaked out and that was a very big scandal. And he just openly and truly described how does this whole government works.
So. And then he was absolutely and totally... destroyed. He had built up an independent university in the Gödöllö Agriculture University where we both studied, which was teaching sustainability. The Környezet és Tájgazdálkodási Intézet – the Environment and Landscape Development Institute. It was a very popular, very successful branch there in the university. And it was totally destroyed.

Péter: Indeed, once it became clear that Ángyán wouldn't stand down or stop criticising FIDESZ' land policies, he was quickly alienated. Orbán was famously quoted as saying: 'You'll stay as long as you are able to. We won't make a martyr out of you.'
Later, at another closed-door meeting, he supposedly said, in a comment obviously directed at Ángyán: 'If someone gets injured on a battlefield we'll rescue them if

they behave respectfully. But those who don't? We'll shoot them ourselves.' Ángyán eventually left the oarty and - following the destruction of his life's work at the Gödöllő University - all-but withdrew from public life.
However, despite living a self-proclaimed hermit's life, he didn't stop fighting. In 2016, he began to compile extensive, long documents detailing the entire land redistribution and land auctioning process that took place under the Orbán-regime.

These have become known as the Ángyán-reports. Going from county to county, he compiled evidence of who received the most land and how those people are connected to the regime.

He finally finished his research, after eight years, in 2024.

Time and time again, his reports show that - despite claims that the land auctions would enable young family farmers - in reality it just enabled those loyal to the regime to accumulate land. Almost two thirds of land was bought up by wealthy urban residents with no ties to agriculture.

Ian: Let's back up a little. We have a group of people who get rich through the highly selective redistribution of state assets and, in return, give the government political support. This is, of course, not great.

But, another way of looking at it, a pragmatic person might say, is that it provides some level of political stability. All countries need a political economic elite to sustain the system, they might say. And, moreover, this fictional pragmatic person might continue saying, all supposedly democratic systems are a little bit corrupt. Americans institutionalise the exertion of political influence and call it 'lobbying', the British have an upper chamber of parliament in which many of the preposterously named Lords - people who actually shape the laws of the land - have been put there my their mates as a reward for loyalty, or were preordained to be a Lord by virtue of their birth. Nowhere is perfect!

Are you not, this pragmatic person might say before we kick them off this podcast, engaging in a bit of Orbán-bashing, a sport so popular with his opponents it's almost become its own business. All states - to varying degrees - allow a bit of stealing around the edges!

Péter: You might have guessed by now that we don't agree with the straw man we created. Rather, an impetus for creating this podcast is exactly our belief that land is crucial for democracy. To unpick this, and to better understand the specificities and particular importance of land, we sat down with Noémi Gonda, who we mentioned in the last episode..She's a researcher at the Department of Urban and Rural Development at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, and has been looking into this issue - and other related issues - for many years. Full

disclosure, me and Noémi have worked and written together before, and she is the catalyst for this podcast. She also asked us not to refer to her as Professor Gonda, so it's Noémi from here on in.

She was back visiting her family in Hungary during the holidays. So we pulled her into a makeshift recording studio at the institute where I work to pick her brain. We started off asking her why oligarchs acquiring land was such a big deal.

Noémi: This is not just about oligarchs grabbing for example an enterprise or let´s say a car-making industry. Agricultural land is very different from that. And let´s remember a little bit that land has always played a unique and very complex role in human society. It is not just another natural resource: it is a very powerful one that has justified revolutions, that is at the heart of geopolitical relations and power dynamics. What is really particular about land is that it does not require labour to have a value. And nor is the value generated by agricultural land proportional to the labour that is put in it. So for example if you have a car industry, the wealth that it´s going to generate depends on the amount of labour, the amount of work that you will put in it. Whereas land comes with an intrinsic wealth which is its fertility, so it has an intrinsic value that does not depend on the quantity of labour that is put in it.

Ian: One of the reasons land can become so profitable without anyone working on it, as we mentioned in the last episode, is because of the system of EU subsidies. But this system of giving money to farmers based on the size of their land has further implications, as Noémi went on to explain.

Noémi: The problem with Hungary, is that subsidies are not even supporting agriculture. They're supporting the fact that agricultural land is being left fallow. That is not acceptable.
Also , the European Union cares more about how the money is used. So if you have money from the subsidies that is supposed to support agriculture within protected areas, they will want to know whether this money has been distributed for supporting rural areas within a protected area. They will also have, for example, a list of farmers, a list of names, let's say, who benefit from these subsidies. But they can't know whether these farmers or these names of these people really farm, whether they are close to an oligarch, whether they are the cousin, the son, the grandfather of somebody who's connected to the regime and whether this is the reason why they got access to that subsidy. It's very hard to do that investigation. And we have in Hungary Professor Ángyán's work, who precisely did that, who tried to do some kind of network analysis of who gets these subsidies and how the beneficiaries of these subsidies and how the beneficiaries of land are connected to the regime.
And this is not only a question of, okay, who profits, but it's also taking away the possibility for Hungary, the country, of producing their own food. So it's also a

question of food security. It's profiting on the back of food security and sovereignty.

Péter: And so we come back to food. But don't worry, we won't take you on another trip to a supermarket, but rather to meet a farmer who, when he's not working the land, has a lot to say about those who are profiting from the current system.

Logan: I won't call them farmers, I call them landowners. Because there's a big difference between who is actually doing the farming and who owns the land. And the mega farms, they're doing quite well through European Union subsidies. So they don't have to do anything. Through the scale of having that much land, they're going to have a profitable activity. I won't even call it farming because it's not farming, It's resource mining. But, as long as the European Union financial support programme rewards people based on the amount of land that they have, this type of farming will stay profitable.

My name is Logan Strenchock. I'm a garden team member at Zsámbok Organic Garden. I'm a co-founder of Cargonomia and I'm a member of the Hungarian Agroecology Network. Very happy to have the opportunity to have this discussion in one of my favourite parts of Budapest, which is outside, and in Pope John Paul II Square in the 8th district in the heart of Budapest.

Ian: As Logan mentions, we met him in Budapest, outside the headquarters of the bike cargo organisation he works at when he's not on the organic farm, which is located east of the capital. I've known Logan many years, so I hope he doesn't mind me describing him as the sort of man who you might expect to be an organic farmer and cargobike acolyte: long hair, colourful clothes, and on occasion seen riding around Budapest on hot summer nights with his shirt off, vegetables packed up front. Also, you might have guessed from his accent, he´s from Pennsylvania.

Logan: So, yeah, I'm not a Hungarian either. I'm an observer of the agricultural sector in Hungary and in Europe, and in comparison to what I see in the US as well. But I think my 14 years of direct experience makes me past the point where I would consider my opinion naive.

So having affordable food is a good thing all around. Sacrificing a quality soil which takes at least hundreds of years- but if we're talking about topsoil thousands or ten thousands of years to generate- and destroying it in under a decade just through malpractice to allow someone to get rich quickly, that's not something that we should forgive.

How is the conventional farming lobby, how are pesticide corporations and the type of companies which sell large agricultural machines trying to somehow steal

forward the idea that this type of farming is the farming of the future? Their biggest impact is in their lobbying ability. And there is a huge amount of- getting back to why the common agricultural policy doesn´t change- because people who create the policies are greatly influenced in Brussels by the people who have access to their beer. And this money talks so I don´t expect the policy to change.

Their system is on the verge of collapse anyway because they're not ready to deal with drought, flood, erosion like people who would be protecting their soil would be able to. I'm not wishing for a collapse, but I think we might only have a decade or two of this type of farming with the absolute ignorance of soil microbiology and ecosystem health. It's going to become harder and harder to keep doing it that way. I don't want them to be forced to change through some sort of famine. I hope that the knowledge of how to farm even in a somewhat industrial model, through the avoidance of tillage and through the avoidance of over application of herbicide, I hope that this knowledge of one, this type of farming increases. But two, and probably the best hope for the future, is that there's a better business incentive for it. So free yourself of the necessity of needing to buy herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers and I hope that then the farming becomes more actually profitable, not only profitable through the land based subsidy. That's what we have to hope for.

Péter: Logan doubts that consumers' choices alone can change agricultural practice. The organic farm he works on sells produce directly to customers. Experience has shown that price is key amongst those who buy from them, and when times are tough for families, they cut back on stuff like organic vegetable boxes.

Ian: Times are also difficult for farmers in part, Logan argues, because of the effects of climate change, something farmers who farm the land themselves can see with their own eyes and feel with their own hands.

Logan: We´re not just on the verge of just seeing the climate change impacts in Europe, we´ve already had a decade of this. And this is just going to keep happening more frequently. So I would hope it encourages a wider adoption of change. But when someone who works on their farm every day sees this and reacts to this, someone who has an Excel spreadsheet with all of the plots of thousands or ten thousands of hectares that they own, they don't see this.

Ian: Importantly, Logan went on to tell us. This has led to a growing number of farmers becoming open to regenerative practices. And not the usual types one might expect to be open to such farming methods.

Logan: We´ve seen a wave, what we consider a wave. Extra increase in interest by hundreds or two hundreds people who would be coming from the most

conservative stakeholder group that you could imagine. So people who were historically from farming families who own farms of at least 100 hectares, but sometimes up to a thousand hectares, who have become open to regenerative practises because it's an important part of their legacy and their family's legacy, that they could continue to foster a healthy ecosystem which belongs to their family for the future. So not for their future, but for someone else in their family's future. The people who still actually own their own land are the ones who have the most concern about maintaining it properly for the future. So they're thinking about soil, they're thinking about soil health, they're thinking about ecosystem health.

They've seen the detrimental impacts of tilling it deeply and spraying it constantly in the last few decades. They know the ever increasing costs of petroleum based fertilisers and chemicals. They know that it doesn't come out at the end of the year when you need to keep paying more for inputs which aren't your own. So they're looking for the opportunity to absolve themselves, to free themselves from the necessity of needing to buy all these inputs and thinking about how to build soil organic carbon, how to build organic matter naturally based on the resources which they already have on their farm. And these aren't Budapest dwelling hippies or something like that. These aren't these, you know, weird people who never touch soil in their life, who want agriculture. It's a change. These are people who had farms in their families for 50, 100 years. That's one thing that gives me optimism.

The question I have is, are we getting the information to them fast enough and are we getting accurate enough information to them for them to be able to save their farm in the time that they're still physically capable to be managing it?

Ian: It's clear then, at this point, we need to go and meet some of these farmers. Not ones like Logan or Éva from Kishantos, who, as nice as they are, are different in that they are also driven by the politics of organic farming. Rather, we need to meet – quote on quote- a real farmer. Your average József who has a plot of land in eastern Hungary.

Péter: Does that mean I'm driving again?

Ian: Next episode on Fields of Power we drive east looking for farmers and find fear, anger and violence.

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