Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is known to have a bad international reputation, gave a speech recently at a foundation. One of the most important reasons for this reputation is that for some time now, the Orbán-cabinet seems to have been drawn more to autocracies, than to liberal democracies. At least this is what its internal and external opponents believe. Critics seemed to see Orbán's fondness for autocracies reflected in this aforementioned speech as well, namely in the train of thought that liberal democracies have turned inward – and that the countries that provide energy both in Europe and worldwide are autocracies. In Hungary – and consequently, abroad – this statement was regarded as further evidence that the Hungarian Prime Minister has seriously strayed off the beaten track.

In this case however, the critics were chasing shadows. This idea was merely quoted by Orbán; he even made this clear in the speech. However, his critics “forgot” this, and attributed it to the Prime Minister.

In fact, this idea was originally written by the internationally recognized American historian and political commentator, Robert Kagan in a January 2015 article. Kagan has been around for a long time, and amongst others he has been the long time debate partner of Francis Fukuyama. In face of Fukuyama’s theory about “the end of history”, it was he who argued that “history has returned”:

In the article cited by Viktor Orbán, Kagan is obviously not praising autocracies, at the same time however, he points out that history shows a peculiar trend where waves of democratization are followed by democratic decline. Thus, the author does not say that autocracy would be a better system than democracy. What he does say though, is that it is worth caring about geopolitics, which is actually nothing more than the system of the balance and relations of international power. This balance was
disrupted many times in the course of history, and today we are in such a situation again, where our challenges are much greater than, for example in the second half of the 90s, which was characterized by a spell of optimism.

This topic is rather unusual for the Hungarian public, which is partially due to the fact that after the system change of 1990, the paradigm of liberal democracy was overtaken by legal jargon. Its essence is the focus on internal politics, analyzing the internal development of institutions and democracy. To this day, the Hungarian public believes that democracy is almost exclusively about the liberal, democratic arrangement of domestic affairs. The fact that this has a foreign policy context is not at all evident to the majority of Hungarian citizens.

Through Robert Kagan – Viktor Orbán drew attention to the importance of examining the relationship of democracies to other systems. He did not say that autocracy is the best example to follow, he said less than that. He said that one should analyze non-democratic, so-called hybrid systems as well. After all, these are also a part of global politics and the world economy, and their influence is visibly growing. Of course, in the intense atmosphere of Hungarian politics, this proposal is considered as taking a stance.

However, if someone looks beyond the Hungarian horizon a bit, and takes a look at, for example Foreign Affairs, he will know for how long and how intensely this topic has been debated. But who reads this journal? And who would come to the conclusion that what are described there are not just American issues?

In Hungary, we are not yet ready for a renaissance of geopolitics. And it is likely that other Central and Eastern European countries aren’t either. However – whether we like it or not – the optimistic character of the 90s has been over for a long time. Of course, the era we live in is very different from the years of the Cold War (and we hope it will remain this way), but it is also certain that it is no longer the “warm peace” which previously prevailed.