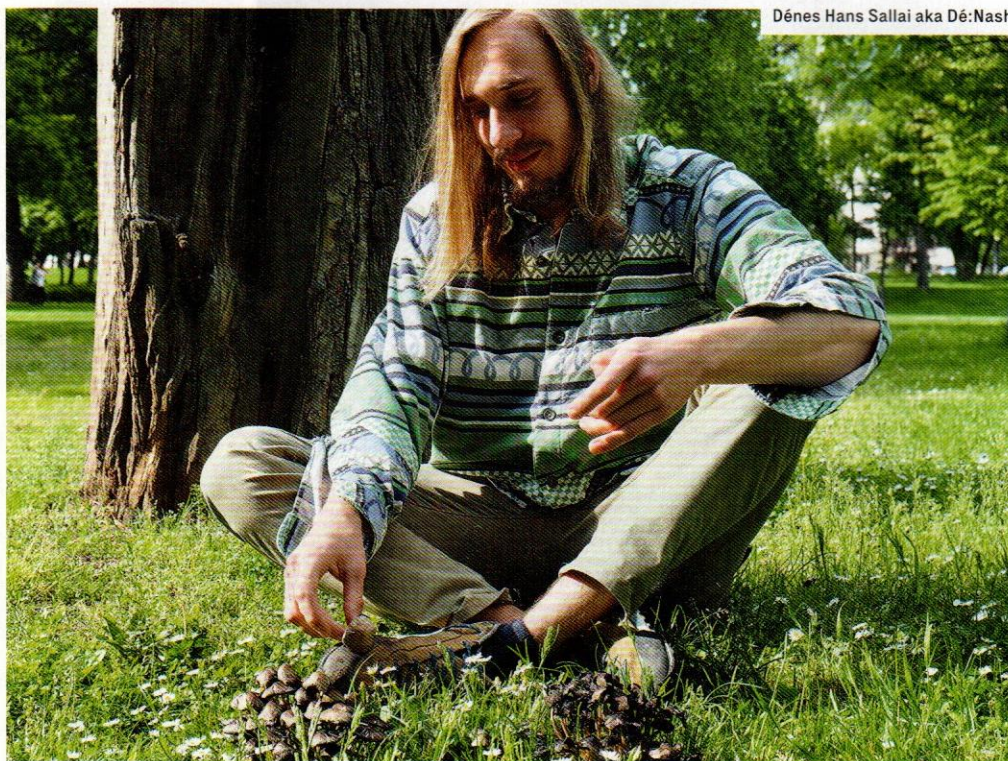


The ultra-nationalist government in **Budapest** is the target for rocker turned rapper Dé:Nash whose surreal videos lampoon the machismo of the ruling Fidesz party. By **Lorraine Mallinder**



Striding through Budapest's City Park, Dénes Hans Sallai cuts a sort of hippy troubadour figure, long blond hair swinging side to side as he seeks a shaded clearing beneath the giant plane trees. Just as he flops down, a group of young people sitting nearby crank up the volume of their music and start whooping wildly.

Hearing his low-pitched vocals rumbling over the park, the 23 year old twists round and gives them a bashful wave. It's only been a few months since his sudden rise to fame as Dé:Nash, the ingenué rapper, whose playful yet merciless lampooning of Hungary's far right leaders is about the only thing cheering up disheartened opponents of the seemingly immovable regime right now.

Gazing into the middle distance with placid bemusement, Sallai seems a little dazed by it all. A prog rock fan of Gentle Giant and King Crimson, he stumbled into rap as a joke, after watching a documentary on the genre. Quite simply, the gangstas on screen reminded him of the gangsters in the ruling Fidesz Party, still riding high in their third consecutive term, seducing the masses with their ethno-nationalist swagger, while making off with bags of European Union swag – regime cronies have grown rich on the largesse of Brussels.

"I had an idea that I could show the primitiveness and aggression of the government through gangsta rap," says Sallai. And this he did, to troubling effect, with "V4 KRÚ", a track depicting the so-called Visegrád Four countries (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia) currently kicking against the liberals of Brussels, as masked thugs ready for a ruck. The doom-laden synth melody, underlaid with cavernous beats bringing to mind a punch-up outside a nightclub, is filled with dark resentment. "There will be a new order in Europe", it warns. "You will come begging to us in the end. But we will have no mercy".

Musically and lyrically, "V4 KRÚ" is probably the most straightforward critique of the regime on his debut EP. Other tracks also deal with what Sallai

terms as Fidesz's "fairy tales", but dig deeper into the jumbled collective consciousness, satirising the regime's use of ancient legend, historical grievances, national pride and conspiracy theories to craft a narrative that fits its agenda. The results are stranger and more intriguing.

Take "Turul", his biggest hit, which has been viewed almost a million times on YouTube. In the track's video, Sallai dresses in rustic garb, playing a flute one minute, brandishing a machine gun firing cartoon shots the next. He's the ethnically pure son of the Turul bird, a powerful symbol in Hungary, appropriated by antisemitic groups in the 1920s. According to ancient legend, the bird's son was the founding prince of the House of Árpád, the country's first ruling dynasty. "My Hungarian Turul heart is beating", goes the chorus. Hungary will be "great and glorious", as it used to be.

"I wasn't so proud of its cheap parodying, but it became the most popular," says Sallai, perhaps underestimating the track's power. "Turul" has a nursery rhyme quality that worms its way into the cortex, Sallai's deep vocals like a semi-shamanic chant, the vocoder adding pseudo-mystical edge. In an era of polarised debate, in which endless voices compete for attention by shouting ever louder, Sallai effortlessly pricks the over-inflated balloon of ultra-nationalist vanity. And he does it not so much with a needle as with an artfully aimed feather duster.

On the rollicking hip-hop odyssey "Keresztes Hadjárat 2019" ("Crusade 2019"), Sallai joins forces with close friend Krubi, a well-known local rapper, to deal with a number of festering sores in the country's past and present. Led by the strains of a queuing flute, the sword-wielding 'crusaders' set off to claim Jerusalem for Hungary. The obsession with conquest, or reconquest, is embedded deep in the Hungarian psyche – the country lost of over two-thirds of its territory in the allied settlement that followed the First World War.

On their way to the Holy Land, the crusaders do battle with migrants at the border – an allusion to the government's brutal response to a massive influx of refugees fleeing war-torn Syria and Libya in 2015, which led it to erect an electrified fence. Crossing Turkey, they overcome religious differences with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, discovering a kindred illiberal spirit, helping him to hunt down opposition journalists and Kurds. Finally, in Jerusalem, they confront Hungarian-born Jewish philanthropist George Soros, whose funding for liberal causes has made him an enemy of the state. The regime's campaigns against him had an overpowering whiff of antisemitism.

It's a track chock full of ideas taken to their most absurd extreme. Sitting in the pollen-filled haze of the park, Sallai confesses to a passion for history, but seems uncomfortable with the notion of being a political spokesman for his generation. "I didn't have a political mission," he declares. "The reason I write about these topics is because these were the things that could interest people... personally, I didn't expect it to gain this much attention."

For now, this mild-mannered lover of hiking and mountaineering is enjoying the ride. In a country where regime cronies now control much of the media and the entertainment industry, ensuring a constant stream of pap and propaganda on the airwaves, his popularity is especially remarkable. Being signed by Universal Music in Hungary helps. "They don't depend on the government in any sense," he says. "It's easier to be brave when you're backed."

Gearing up for a trip to Scotland, where he plans to hitchhike from Edinburgh to the Cairngorms, Sallai is mulling over ideas for an album. Assisted by a dubstep producer friend, he's looking forward to getting more experimental, ditching the rap clichés for something more like Gentle Giant or Mr Bungle.

He smiles at the idea. Music for misfits in a post-Communist one-size-fits-all regime. □