



Weekly Briefing

**Hungary External Relations briefing:
Changing Importance of Eastern European Relations in the
Hungarian Foreign Policy
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Changing Importance of Eastern European Relations in the Hungarian Foreign Policy

This briefing looks at the different Eastern European relations and its changing relevance to the Hungarian foreign policy. The briefing basically focuses on Hungarian and Ukrainian relations and it also deals with other Hungarian diplomatic efforts to use the V4 framework in order to protect Hungarian minorities and enhance the efficiency and the leverage of the Hungarian foreign policy in EU context.

1. Ukrainian relations

In recent years, tensions in the Hungarian and Ukrainian relations have been building up slowly, as our earlier briefing pointed out in February 2018. In 2017, the starting point of the debate was the Ukrainian education reform, against which the Hungarian government protested several times. The new education law was adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament in September 2017 and it restricted native language educational trainings on pre-school level, and in the first four classes of the elementary school. The steps taken by the Hungarian government showed that it put sincere efforts into the protections of ethnic Hungarians' rights in the neighboring countries, since Hungary blocked all Ukrainian broader integration efforts both in the NATO and the EU.

But there is another motivation: the eventual membership of Ukraine in the NATO and the EU would change power relations significantly and destabilize the Eastern European region, since relations between Russia and the EU, respectively Russia and the US would come under further pressure. That would only add to the already growing tensions. It is worth remembering the latest dispute between Russia and the US, which was sparked by the American president, Mr. Trump, who told the media last week, that the US would withdraw from nuclear arms treaty with Russia, that was signed in 1987. (Mr.

Trump referred to the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces treaty (INF) in his speech.) The Russian reaction was rapid, and it said the Russian government would be forced to “take measures” if the US abandoned the treaty. As we can see from this international political environment, blocking Ukrainian’s integration efforts not only serve Hungarian interests, but it mitigates regional tension as well.

The second round of diplomatic spat between Hungary and Ukraine came in September-October 2018, when a secretly recorded footage was uploaded by anonym users on the internet, that seems to show people in Ukraine being granted Hungarian citizenship and who were told not to inform the Ukrainian authorities about it. The Ukrainian law neither acknowledges nor prohibits dual citizenships explicitly, however, the issue became fiercely discussed when Moscow overtook Crimea in 2014. Before 2014, dual citizenships were not sanctioned and the law did not specify the legal repercussions of having dual citizenship.

After the footage was uploaded, a nationalist website also published the personal data of more than 500 ethnic Hungarians with Ukrainian citizenship having obtained Hungarian passports. Although Ukraine’s foreign minister told the press that he condemned the nationalist website for publishing the details, the diplomatic spat led to expulsions of diplomats on both sides. First, Ukraine expelled a diplomat in the standoff with Hungary over the issue; then, Hungary retaliated in kind.

In our analysis, it must be also mentioned that the presidential elections are to be held in Ukraine in March 2019. It seems to be not far-fetched to state that a political campaign against ethnic minorities can contribute to a growing popularity of ultra-national political forces in the country.

The next scandal, that come a few day later, showed elements of a deliberately designed political provocation. In the night of the 19th of October 2018, billboards were located on the major highways showing local leaders’ pictures and names of the Hungarian community. The texts in the billboards

called upon Ukrainians to stop them and derail their alleged breakaway efforts. The governor of the West Ukrainian region drew attention to grammar mistakes in the Ukrainian text and he stated the texts were translated from Russian, and he also added the billboard most likely are parts of the provocation campaign run by the Russian Federal Security Service (RFSS). However, it can be easily argued the other way around as well, that grammar mistakes were put in the texts intentionally to make the impression of a Russian provocation, moreover, if the billboard really were set by pro-Russian forces, it would not be too complicated for the RFSS to check the accuracy of the Ukrainian texts.

It is obvious this briefing cannot answer this dilemma however, it is very likely that this diplomatic spat between the two countries has got more than two players and further-reaching reasons than the dispute around dual citizenship. The global and regional importance of the Hungarian foreign policy to block Ukrainian's integration efforts must be underlined, because as long problems between Russia and Ukraine, moreover problems between Russia and the EU/US are not settled properly, Ukraine's membership in the NATO and the EU would only add fuel to the fire.

2. Other Aspects of Hungary's Eastern European Relations

The Hungarian foreign policy – in accordance with its diversification policy – has made serious efforts to maintain and deepen its political and economic relations with Russia and other Eastern European countries. As we argued earlier, this policy can be understood in the framework of interests-based foreign policy and it can be framed as Hungarian efforts to alleviate Eastern European political tensions. The following small steps in the recent past have aimed mainly to strengthen economic cooperation with the region:

— In October 2018, a meeting was held between the Hungarian Ambassador to the Russian Federation, Mr. Konkoly, and the Chairman of the board of the International Bank for Economic Co-operation (IBEC), Mr. Ivanov in Moscow. (The IBEC was founded in the framework the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance in 1963. Hungary was one of the founders, however, it left

the bank after the collapse of the Eastern European Bloc.) In the meeting, Mr. Konkoly confirmed Hungary's interest to develop a cooperation with the IBEC. And they consequently agreed to maintain contact and identify cooperation fields of mutual interest. After the meeting, the Hungarian foreign minister confirmed that Hungary intends to conclude negotiations with the IBEC and it aims to be member of the bank.

— In the last two years, economic aid provided by the Hungarian government to ethnic Hungarian communities in West Ukraine was 17 billion HUF, however, Hungary would like to increase the amount of aid in the future, Mr. Magyar, the Foreign Affairs State Secretary to the Parliament said in West Ukraine this week. At the same time, he also refused the allegations that Hungarian economic aid would finance separatist efforts in Ukraine.

— The Hungarian Foreign minister had a meeting with the Slovak Foreign Minister and the Chairman of the Slovak Parliament in Bratislava, Slovakia this week. The discussion evolved around the main challenges posed by the migration policy debate in the European Union. The Slovak Chairman of the Parliament told his colleagues, that they intend to adopt a resolution regarding the Sargentini-report in the Parliament, akin to the Hungarian one emphasizing the importance of national sovereignty. The report and the debate were set by the Hungarian Foreign Minister in a broader European framework, he underlined that there is a political debate between those who would like preserve Europe as a Christian continent and those who aim to establish a federal Europe, a kind of United States of Europe, that is beyond nation states and Christianity. The Hungarian Foreign Minister added that the European Parliament elections will play a crucial role in this political fight next year and the cooperation of European political forces preserving Europe is important.

— During the same visit, the Hungarian and Slovak partners agreed on several economic projects, that aim to boost connectivity across Central Europe. Until 2023, there will be 9 infrastructure projects that can be concluded. Mr.

Szijjártó touched upon the topic of economic programs to ethnic Hungarian communities in Slovakia as well.

— The Visegrad 4 countries had a meeting with Japan in Brussels the 18th of October, 2018. In contrast to former meetings, no joint declaration was adopted by the four Central European countries. According to the news portal 444.hu the partners could not agree on the text, since the draft version allegedly contained references to the disputes in the South-China Sea and shipping security issues. Based on the not confirmed information, Hungary rejected this drafting underlining China's importance to Hungary. Later, the information was not confirmed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

As it could be shown, the most critical issue is Hungary's relations with Ukraine for the time being. The Hungarian Foreign Minister told the press in Brussels 25, October 25, 2018: "The situation with relation to Ukraine has significantly worsened in view of the fact that nothing has happened with relation to amendment of the Education Act and the new Language Act, which strips national communities of their right to use their native language in culture, media and public administration, in addition to education, has also been adopted". He also added that the fact that the petition collecting signatures for the deportation of ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine is on the Ukrainian Parliament website, is alarming!

As we could see, Hungarian foreign policy pursues the protection of ethnic Hungarian minorities mainly focusing on economic development, and the preservation and strengthening of their Hungarian identity. At the same time, Hungarian diplomacy tools also serve the purposes of broader strategic goals, such as strengthening Hungarian national sovereignty and promote Hungarian interests in diversification of the country's diplomatic, political and economic relations.