Hungary external relations briefing:
Without ideologies: Hungarian foreign policy in practice
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Summary

Relying on ideologies in foreign policy was a common practice in the pre-Westphalian world, and this approach led to decades and centuries of permanent war in Europe. Reliance on a balance of power and the core interests of nation-states was the first element in creating a more peaceful environment. Hungarian foreign policy adheres to this principle and this is probably the reason why it has been successful in deepening cooperation with many partners. Hungary's achievements in securing vaccine supply, natural resources show the success of the ideology-free Hungarian approach and the failure of the ideology-laden approach of European Commission.

Introduction

The way the European Commission (EC) has handled the issue of vaccine supply has been more or less ideologically tinged, mainly opposing the approval of Russian and Chinese vaccines. The EC last week adopted its proposal for a European vaccination certificate under the framework "Digital Green Certificate", which would be a vaccination certificate accepted throughout the European Union (EU). The proposal excluded Sinopharm and Sputnik products. From a broader perspective it could be argued that this reinforces EU vaccine sovereignty, unfortunately this is not a good argument as American and UK products are recognized at the same time. This briefing looks at the arguments of each side in this debate and provides a brief overview of the recent Hungarian and Chinese negotiations.

The European Commission’s management of vaccine supplies

The EC has been in the crossfire of criticism in recent months, as the vaccination program in EU member states has been slow to get off the ground and the bloc itself lags far behind the US, United Kingdom, Israel and even United Arab Emirates. The contract with the Swedish-British Astra Zeneca was particularly criticized, as the company was unable to produce and ship the number of vaccines specified in the contract and the EU seemed unable to enforce its right.
Another dispute broke out between the EC and Austria when the latter accused the EU of unfair distribution of vaccines and the dispute between the EU and the UK is still ongoing, the EU accusing the UK of stopping the shipment of vaccines to the EU while the EU has done its part and supplied to the UK.

These disputes clearly show that the EU is not the right framework to ensure the supply of vaccines, or at least not the only framework that Member States should use if they want to ensure access to vaccines. The European Union does an excellent job when it comes to issues relevant to Single Market and other economic aspects of European cooperation. However, it always fails when it comes to issues that are part of core sovereignty. In our view, protecting citizens from disease is part of core sovereignty. The European Commission has misjudged the developing situation and has reacted inappropriately on three occasions:

1. When the EC made the issue of vaccine supply a supranational matter and criticized the steps taken by the sovereign Hungarian state to secure vaccines for its citizens.
2. When the EC saw that vaccine rollout is slow, it threatened to use protectionist trade tools (banning vaccine exports). Under new rules recently adopted by the EU, vaccine shipments can be stopped to countries that produce vaccines but do not export doses, or to countries that have higher vaccination rates than the EU. Officials have insisted they hope not to use the restrictions, but that they are necessary to keep up the pressure. Being a proponent of a free trade policy and using export bans in the 21st century seriously contradict each other. The EU's program would not be in trouble if it had used the full range of vaccines available worldwide and made decisions regarding the pandemic without getting caught up in geopolitics. Sad to say, but protectionist moves usually trigger direct counter moves or vindicate those who advocate protectionist measures in general. India's moves to ban the export of vaccines prove this spill-over effect of protectionism.
3. When the EC excluded Russian and Chinese vaccines from the range of available vaccines and ruled that the EU vaccination certificate does not apply to people vaccinated with Russian and Chinese vaccines. In other words, Hungary, which wants to protect its citizens, is being punished in this way.

**Hungarian strategy regarding vaccine supplies**

In recent weeks and months, it has become very clear that Hungary has behaved as a responsible EU Member State because it has fully supported the EU vaccination program. At the same time, Hungarian diplomacy has started its negotiations with other partners (China,
Russia, India, in the case of Covid-19 medicine with Japan) to ensure that the country has full access to the available vaccine types. In this role, the country – not blinded by ideology – has made reasonable political steps of a full-fledged sovereign country.

The reason Hungary was able to get ahead of other EU members is that in this case it was simply pursuing its closest strategic goal and not paying attention to the growing international tensions between the US/EU bloc and China-Russia. The success of this strategy can be easily measured in numbers: 1.5 million Hungarians were vaccinated (dates: 22-03-2021) and 700 thousand Hungarians were inoculated with Russian and Chinese vaccines.¹

In other words, almost half of Hungarians who have been vaccinated so far could be protected because we also have access to vaccines from the East. According to the Facebook post of Hungarian Foreign Minister, 1.7 million vaccines have arrived from China and Russia so far (03.03.2021). In a symbolic gesture, the minister also mentioned that gas transport from the West is continuous (through the Croatian LNG terminal, Hungary imports American gas).

This case shows that cooperation with other countries is always more successful than a confrontational policy. At the same time, the fear that we are heading for a new Cold War era is now real. The Hungarian foreign minister told the media during the two-day meeting of NATO foreign ministers in Brussels (23-03-2021) that Hungary does not want to see a new cold war or hostilities between the West and the East. At the same time, he also made it clear that Hungary does not believe that Russia would pose a security threat to Hungary. The real threat to Europe comes from the South, he said, pointing to terrorism, the spread of radical ideologies, religious persecution, military conflicts and mass migration as real security problems.

The rationality of Hungary's strategy is easily demonstrated by looking at how the attitude in Germany towards Russian vaccines is slowly changing. According to Politico,² Germany is pushing EC to buy Russian vaccines, Sputnik at the EU level. At the same time, we must add that the gap between Germany and France on this issue is widening, as the French Foreign Minister just told the media: "In terms of how it is managed, it (the Sputnik V vaccine) is more

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a means of propaganda and aggressive diplomacy than a means of solidarity and health aid ...

Hungary is intensifying cooperation with partners on all possible fronts. The Chinese defense minister made a courtesy visit to Budapest on March 23-24, 2021. He met with the Hungarian Defense Minister, Tibor Benkő. The return visit took place as the Hungarian Defense Minister visited China in 2019 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of Hungarian Chinese Diplomatic Relations. During the talks, the partners agreed that they see potential for cooperation in sharing health, education and peacekeeping practices, according to official government statements. The background to the visit was particular as EU members decided to impose sanctions on China in the Foreign Affairs Council and Hungary did not vote the decision. The Hungarian foreign minister told the media afterwards that he thought the sanctions were "pointless, grandstanding and harmful". He added that these kinds of decisions are particularly "senseless" when the need for international cooperation was increasing.

**Conclusions**

Using the example of vaccine supply, we could see in the analysis that the ideology-free approach to the issues of vaccine supply in Hungary brought more and the use of Chinese and Russian vaccines helped to save thousands of lives. Hungary ranks first as the country with the highest vaccination rate among EU member states! And similarly, the same approach was useful in negotiating American gas shipments to Hungary to diversify supply sources. The irony of the reactions of other EU members is that they will most likely follow the Hungarian approach sooner or later, but before they do, Hungary will be heavily criticized from their side. Because it seems to correspond to a very rational Hungarian calculation that the main threat to Europe will come from the South and not from the East.

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