



Weekly Briefing

Hungary external relations briefing:

The sovereignty debate:

Hungarian foreign policy in 2023 by Csaba Moldicz

The sovereignty debate: Hungarian foreign policy in 2023

Sovereignty has been one of the key concepts in foreign policy for the last 350 years. Sovereignty is the idea that a government can do whatever it wants within its borders. It is a relatively simple concept and presupposes the ability of the government to enforce its will within the territory of the country. Since this concept has been a fundamental principle for centuries, it may sound strange that the current Hungarian government's efforts to shape its foreign policy are perplexing observers and drawing criticism from other countries, including the United States. In this briefing, we will see how different concepts of sovereignty can clash and lead to foreign policy debates.

Introduction

The Westphalian system of international relations, often referred to as Westphalian sovereignty, represents the exclusive rights of each country over its territory. The concept of sovereignty became part of the international system after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. At the same time, several politicians and experts argue today that economic and political globalization has contributed significantly to the profound erosion of sovereignty and that other values such as humanity and democracy, which were irrelevant concepts in past centuries, have become increasingly important, rendering the traditional concept of sovereignty meaningless.

Of course, economic integration and the European integration process have significantly reduced the room for maneuver of independent states since the 1990s, but this does not necessarily mean that the state has become irrelevant, powerless, or an outdated concept. Similarly, sovereignty is still a valid concept in international relations that is highly valued by many countries at different levels. In the European Union, so-called shared sovereignty has become the modus operandi, based on the free will of states. In recent years, this concept seems to have changed for the worse, as the free will of member states seems to be abhorrent to the West (especially larger countries like France and Germany) and the global neoliberal mainstream in certain cases.

The sovereignty concept and NATO

The Hungarian government embraced the concept of sovereignty in its foreign policy and tried to make it central. Therefore, the principle of sovereignty has served as a reference point for discussants in past and current foreign policy debates. In recent years, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade has emphasized the importance of this principle on several occasions. This May, he said e.g.: "There is no similar legitimacy for Hungarian foreign policy in any European country." According to him, even the largest and strongest European countries participate in individual EU negotiations with a sense of compliance. He added that the goal of the Hungarian foreign policy is the enforcement of Hungarian interests.¹ (This policy has gained traction in the region. One example is Slovakia, where 47 percent of respondents in a poll thought the upcoming elections would be influenced by foreign powers.² Fear of foreign influence is clearly present in neighboring countries, and in this environment, a foreign policy with a strong focus on sovereignty may be increasingly attractive to voters.)

In the same speech, he also responded to those who want to draw an analogy between the pursuit of a sovereign foreign policy and alleged authoritarian tendencies. He said that Hungary is the only country where the intervention efforts of the global liberal mainstream have failed (referring to the "rolling dollar scandal").³ He stressed that the fact that the intervention failed is good evidence of functioning democratic institutions.

In this context, it is worth recalling the recent Twitter post by the U.S. ambassador to Hungary: "Over the past few weeks, Hungarian officials have: Hosted in Budapest a (sanctioned) Chinese Communist Party official complicit in genocide. Received an award from Putin enabler Patriarch Kirill. Embraced Russia's foreign minister – and encouraged others to do the same. They have also stood up to... Sweden." What he obviously forgets is that sovereign foreign policy does not stand for a policy approved by the ambassador, but one conducted by the Hungarian government.

There are also arguments that claim that the problem lies in the country's membership in the EU and NATO, since no one would have a problem with Hungarian foreign policy if Hungary were not a member of these organizations, they argue. The reasoning is that NATO members should not fraternize with enemies like Russia and China.⁴ But the argument is not valid for two reasons. As for Russia, it is obvious that Hungary adheres to policies and steps

¹ <https://hirtv.hu/ahirtvhirei/szijas-peter-a-legszuverenebb-kulpolitika-ma-europaban-a-magyar-2572063>

² <https://mandiner.hu/kulfold/2023/09/szlovak-lap-orban-szuveren-kulpolitikaja-egyre-tobb-szlovaknak-tetszik>

³ One of the biggest scandals of the 2022 parliamentary election was that it soon emerged that the opposition received financial support from abroad. The scandal is often referred to as the "rolling dollar scandal" and refers to the fact that the financial support came mainly from the United States, where a non-governmental organization has been involved in the scandal.

⁴ <https://nepszava.us/david-pressman-ertekelte-a-szuveren-magyar-kulpolitikait/>

agreed at the EU or NATO level, but the government has to keep the economy going, which at the moment cannot do without Russian energy. As for China, critics forget that the NATO treaty and Hungary's resulting obligations do not apply to China because the country is in Asia, while the NATO treaty applies to "on the territory of any of the Parties in Europe or North America, on the Algerian Departments of France 2, on the territory of Turkey or on the Islands under the jurisdiction of any of the Parties in the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer; on the forces, vessels, or aircraft of any of the Parties, when in or over these territories or any other area in Europe in which occupation forces of any of the Parties were stationed on the date when the Treaty entered into force or the Mediterranean Sea or the North Atlantic area north of the Tropic of Cancer." See Article 6 in the NATO Treaty!)

The sovereignty concept and the EU

Before 1990, Hungary's political sovereignty was limited, but with the political and economic transformation of the early 1990s, the country's freedom expanded. The next dividing line was the accession to the European Union, which led us to the so-called shared sovereignty. Unlike the limited sovereignty of the pre-1990 period, shared sovereignty is based on the principle of the free will of the countries. At this point, it is worth noting that the system that was based on the free will of countries and required consensus on foreign policy issues, while the current German and French efforts to reshape foreign policy and apply the majority principle, abandon this principle again.

In considering whether it makes sense to develop a foreign policy strategy at the country level, we should recall the following: (1) the European Union is not a country, so country-level strategies must be developed; (2) decentralization is a feature of democratic processes; (3) diversity is a value that must be preserved and maintained by the EU and member states; (4) we still do not know what the ultimate goal of European integration is, so nation-states must develop and shape their own strategies if they do not want to disappear from the stage of history.

While the recently unveiled German and French concept of a multi-speed Europe is often described as revenge against the Hungarian and Polish governments for pursuing an independent foreign policy course, it can actually give these countries room for maneuver if the reforms are properly implemented. At the same time, it is also clear that we do not know too much about the details of the reform, but they may be able to break the deadlock in this story.

Summary

This briefing has shed light on the different interpretations of sovereignty and shown that Hungarian foreign policy debates usually start from a different interpretation of the principle of sovereignty. The Hungarian interpretation places great emphasis on preserving and maintaining room for maneuver. An excellent example is the relations between Hungary and Belarus. On the one hand, the European Parliament condemned the maintenance of relations with Russia, stating in a document: "We find the official visit of the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade to Minsk in February 2023 unfortunate, which contradicts the EU policy on Belarus, Russia, and the aggressive war against Ukraine."

On the other hand, we note that the decision to maintain or sever diplomatic relations strikes at the heart of sovereignty. Similar stories can be told in great numbers, but the core of these stories is always the same. While many argue that economic globalization and other political trends of recent decades have eroded the original Westphalian concept of sovereignty, we believe that Covid-19, the war in Ukraine, and the energy crisis have sufficiently demonstrated to us that the intervening and sovereign state is more necessary than ever. The stakes are high. The goal of punishing Hungary for its sovereign policy has been described by the Hungarian prime minister thus: "The goal, in fact, is to have a government in Hungary that, by breaking political sovereignty, would subsequently also relinquish cultural and economic sovereignty."⁵

⁵ <https://vasarnap.hu/2023/09/26/nem-adhatjuk-fel-az-orszag-szuverenitasat/>