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HUNGARY'S ATTITUDE TO THE RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR

1. Introduction

The Hungarian Government, which has been in power in Hungary since 2010, has a very different approach to the Russian-Ukrainian war from that of most EU member states. Direct support to Ukraine is mainly limited to support for Ukrainian refugees, and in many cases Hungary explicitly or implicitly supports EU and NATO

decisions - while cases where Hungary attempts to veto (consensual) decisions receive a lot of media coverage. One spectacular sign of this policy of dissent is the frequent meetings between Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. „The Hungarian government’s friendly attitude towards Russia clashes with the position of most member states and the Commission itself. Orban’s partial isolation makes the Commission more willing to exercise rule of law enforcement initiatives” [10, p. 967]. EU member states are ready to use a range of legal instruments against the Hungarian Government to prevent it from speaking out of the EU’s broadly unified policy on Ukraine, or - for example - to veto again the revision of the common budget’s items on Ukraine or block Ukraine’s membership of Western organisations. While Article 7 action, including the suspension of Council voting rights, is most often mentioned, there are in fact several means for the EU institutions to take strong action against Hungary.

The reasons behind the peculiar, eccentric attitude communicated by the Hungarian Government are basically the disenfranchisement of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine and - partly independently of this - Hungarian peace support, which sees the only solution to the conflict not in escalation but in an immediate ceasefire and peace agreement. *The most exciting and relevant question is, of course, whether the abstract desire for peace has any reality in the short term in the concrete conflict.* Of course, there are not only historical, legal, political or even 'Kremlinological' answers to this question, but also ethical, moral and explicitly theological ones.

The fact is that the majority European position - contrary to the Hungarian Government’s position - sees the solution in political, financial and specifically military support for Ukraine, attributing to complex support a kind of preventive role in addition to the need for solidarity, if its absence would also result in a threat to the territorial integrity of other European states.

In this paper, I will examine the issue from two angles: first, I will try to present the reasons for Hungarian separateness in a more nuanced way, from several perspectives, and second, I will hypothesise the reasons behind a possible change in Hungary’s relationship with Ukraine in the near future.

2. The main possible approaches

Hungary’s relations with Ukraine can be examined from at least 7 directions:

I. The first is the historical aspect. In the last two hundred years of history, Hungary has fought four times with the Russians (1849, World War I, World War II, 1956), each time losing the war or the struggle for freedom due to Russian (Soviet) interference. This fact significantly amplifies the voices in Hungarian public life, as well as in the current political leadership, that a successful war against the Russians, Soviets, etc. cannot be fought. This empirical knowledge is complemented by the fact that part of the territory of the former Hungary was transferred to present-day Ukraine as a result of the Trianon and later Paris Peace Treaties, which - given that contiguous, ethnically Hungarian territories were also transferred - Hungarian national memory continues to have difficulty in coming to terms with and a related 'mourning process' is still ongoing.

However, despite the above, it is true that the Hungarian government’s relatively consistent approach to Ukraine after 2022 cannot be considered historically determined! The Hungarian Government could have decided otherwise,

precisely on the basis of historical precedents, since this was precisely the greatest pain of Hungarians at the time in the wake of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, when the Hungarian people were drowned in blood, that we were left to our own devices, that the expected Western help did not arrive - and the West of the time, to save its own conscience, offered generous support to the 200,000 Hungarians who fled, but no more. Appealing to this living element of Hungarian historical memory, the same Hungarian Government could have built its narrative on the increased support for the Ukrainians, on the moral obligation to do so. But it did not.

II. The second is the legal approach, including human rights and specifically minority rights. To a lesser extent, this aspect examines the human rights situation in the Russian-Ukrainian relationship in the light of events before and after February 2022 - but more important is the aspect that focuses on the legal status and actual situation of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. On this sensitive issue, the two sides held several consultations after 2022, most recently, for example, on 4 April 2024, the joint working group on education set up by the Hungarian and Ukrainian governments met again, but there was still no significant convergence of positions, and Hungary continues to insist on the full restoration of the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, which had been taken away, primarily in connection with the use of the Hungarian language.

In Ukraine, the *Act on Indigenous Peoples* was adopted in 2021, which did not consider Hungarians to be included in this category, but even before that, *The Act on Ensuring the Functioning of Ukrainian as a State Language* (State Language Act) had already generated serious conflicts by granting Ukrainian exclusivity or near-exclusivity status in many important areas of public life (schools, theatre, administration, etc.). The fact that the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, in its decision № 1-p/2021 on the MPs' petition challenging the constitutionality of the State Language Act, declared the State Language Act to be in full conformity with the Constitution of Ukraine did neither contribute to a balanced and substantive debate.

The issue is an important national policy issue for Hungary even before 2022: the Hungarian-language academic literature in Hungary and Ukraine has been highly critical of these changes since the early 2010s [5; 7; 16; 17], but this criticism has remained ineffective - despite the Venice Commission's serious concerns, stating, among other things, that „136. While fully recognising that it is a legitimate aim of every State to strengthen the State language, this legitimate purpose has to be coordinated and adequately balanced with guarantees and measures for the protection of the linguistic rights of Ukraine's minorities, which may not be unduly diminished. In order to avoid the language issue becoming a source of interethnic tensions within Ukraine, it is of crucial importance that Ukraine achieve an appropriate balance in its language policy. Unfortunately, none of the four Ukrainian texts assessed hitherto by the Commission fully satisfied this criterion” [12, p. 29]. In addition to the narrow linguistic issues, of course, various concepts of autonomy also appeared in the academic literature before 2022 [8].

It is obvious that the situation of the Russian language and the Russian minority is to a certain extent a prisoner of the Hungarian language and minority, since it would be difficult to justify different rights - but the war situation can only temporarily put a stop to the general rights, enshrined in international documents, which Ukraine will sooner or later be forced to guarantee [13].

III. The third is the economic aspect, which is also an essential element in the scheme of relations; whether it is the supply of Russian gas or oil, or wider energy issues [2], or - as of 2023 - the issue of contaminated Ukrainian grain, or other market protection considerations, the economic context is also constantly on the agenda [6].

At the moment, another important link is the fact that Polish farmers' demonstrations and road blockades have made trade on the more than 500-kilometre-long Ukrainian-Polish border virtually impossible in many cases, and that the Hungarian-Ukrainian border, which is only 136 kilometres long, will be under greater pressure than ever in spring 2024.

IV. The fourth is the security, security policy and specifically defence aspect, which also takes into account the risk of war escalating into a European or world war. The Hungarian Government has also stepped up the pace of military development, with an increasing share of GDP going on defence spending in Hungary.

V. The fifth is the ideological factor. The Hungarian government in power since 2010 has a distinctly conservative stance, in the more traditional sense of the word, with a policy focused on Christian values and the defence of the traditional family model and other Hungarian values. This is accompanied by a constant external and internal identity struggle [15]. It is extremely important that all this has serious consequences for the organisation of the state and public policy: for example, the principle of national administration has become a new, independent principle of Hungarian public administration in the last decade, which means that the Hungarian state also takes care of Hungarians living beyond its borders on a systemic level, through a specially built system of care.

The possibility of a confrontation with the liberal world is also present here: official communication sees a world in which the liberal elites of the West and the Brussels bureaucracy are inciting or interested in inciting war. And in which any criticism of Hungary can be traced back to a hatred of Hungarian conservatism - even those contained in the rule of law reports. In the government-controlled mass media, the rise of liberalism is communicated as the greatest potential threat - even in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. Today, the government of Hungary pursues an *illiberal* policy, which it claims to be resistant to attempts to gain influence from abroad [14]. This is the context in which the political and literary criticism of the Hungarian government is most often directed [1; 3; 9], and the authoritarian features of the government are also given considerable attention [4, p. 13].

VI. Relations with Ukraine as a potential for blackmail. Behind the lofty ideals and value-conscious stance, some analysts argue, lies a very ordinary political calculation: for Hungary, its radical stance on Ukraine and its willingness to compromise on it could be used to influence the outcome of the infringement proceedings against Hungary, and more generally to obtain concessions in a wide range of areas - in other words, it has a kind of blackmail potential.

3. When and why might Hungary's relations with Ukraine change?

There are a number of foreign and domestic policy reasons why Hungary's relationship with Ukraine could change, but below I will only consider the three most likely scenarios in the short term. It can be assumed that any one of these reasons alone could be sufficient to bring about a total change in the Orbán government's policy:

I. The government and the parties behind it want to break out of European isolation. One way of doing so could be to join the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), a family of European right-wing parties dominated by Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia. It is clear that this is out of the question as long as the Hungarian government does not make any spectacular changes to its policy towards Kiev. One sign of this change could be an Orbán-Zelensky meeting.

II. The further radical deterioration of the situation of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine may force Viktor Orbán and the ruling parties to take action. There may be a forced confrontation with the fact that the policy pursued so far has not only failed to produce results, but has itself significantly worsened the situation of Hungarians there. It is already clear that the ethnic composition of the border areas has changed significantly after 2022 [11, p. 22], and the population of Hungarians there has halved in a few decades. The Hungarian population of about 200,000 in 1991 has now dwindled to about 80,000 [18], and the decline is accelerating - the collapse and disintegration of the Hungarian community and the existing cultural infrastructure is now within reach.

III. And, of course, other, specifically external reasons are also possible, such as an attack on a NATO member state, in which case Hungary cannot maintain its "neutrality", its constantly communicated peace support, and as a member of NATO is itself forced to take substantive steps and make commitments.

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