

Hungary: half a million new citizens

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During a ceremony held in the Hungarian Parliament Building on 5 December, Prime Minister Viktor Orban granted Hungarian citizenship to the five hundred thousandth person who had applied for it under the streamlined procedure in force since January 2011. This procedure is mainly used by ethnic Hungarians living in countries bordering Hungary in areas which were separated from the country under the Treaty of Trianon of 1920. The government has not revealed the countries of origin of the applicants. However, when the hvg.hu portal took legal action against the government demanding that the information be made available to the general public, the data was published once in April 2013. It turned out that the greatest numbers of the applications received by that time (totalling 423,000) had been submitted by citizens of Romania (284,000), Serbia (77,000) and Ukraine (51,000). Only a small share of the applications was rejected.

Commentary

- Since Fidesz took power, the Hungarian government has become more actively engaged in the affairs of ethnic Hungarian communities (a total of approximately 2.5 million people) living in the neighbouring countries. This is traditionally an essential element of the political agenda of Hungarian right-wing parties. Orban's government has placed great emphasis on the unity of Hungarian nation and the need to build "national solidarity that goes beyond state borders". One of the government's first actions was to adopt an act introducing the streamlined procedure in May 2010. This act made it much easier for ethnic Hungarians living abroad to obtain Hungarian citizenship. The new constitution imposes greater responsibility on Hungary to take care of the ethnic Hungarian communities abroad. Furthermore, the government has expressed support for their ambitions to gain autonomy.
- Half a million of new citizens form a potential electorate for Hungarian political parties in the upcoming general election scheduled for spring 2014, since the new voting regulations extend suffrage to individuals living outside Hungary. However, unlike the citizens who have a registered residence address in Hungary, they can only vote on national party lists and not for individual candidates in single-member constituencies. This means that the votes cast by Hungarians living abroad are likely to contribute to only a few seats being won. Nevertheless, since the unicameral Hungarian parliament has been reduced to 199 seats, they may play a certain role. Given the fact that the politically active representatives of Hungarian communities abroad hold conservative views, they

will vote primarily for Fidesz. Furthermore, Orbán's party is strengthening its position among the right-wing electorate at home since solidarity with Hungarians living abroad is of great significance for them.

- The dual citizenship issue is complicating Hungary's relations with its neighbours. Slovakia has strongly protested against the possibility of granting Hungarian citizenship and introduced regulations which make it possible to revoke Slovakian citizenship from a person who applies for another country's citizenship. The Ukrainian constitution prohibits dual citizenship. However, the government in Kyiv has not so far reacted to the fact that ethnic Hungarians from Zakarpattia have been granted Hungarian passports. Romania and Serbia have accepted the solutions adopted by Hungary partly because they themselves also offer dual citizenship to their compatriots living abroad. Still, Hungary's increasing engagement in the political affairs of the Hungarian minority (a population of 1.23 million) living in Transylvania, Romania, which is also linked to the upcoming election, is giving rise to a growing tension in relations between Budapest and Bucharest.