

Hungary's stance on the Ukrainian-Russian conflict

Andrzej Sadecki

On 10 May, the Hungarian prime minister, Viktor Orban, appealed to Ukraine to grant more rights to the Hungarian minority in Zakarpattia Oblast. He called upon the government in Kyiv to recognise their right to hold dual – Ukrainian and Hungarian – citizenship and to guarantee them “full collective rights.” He reiterated these declarations on 15 May during the meeting of the prime ministers of the Visegrad Group countries in Bratislava. He also expressed doubt about the democratic direction which the current Ukrainian government is headed in,, especially regarding how minorities’ rights are being respected in Ukraine. Although Orban has declared his support for the territorial integrity of Ukraine to be maintained, given the Ukrainian-Russian conflict his statements fit in with the rhetoric used by Russia in that it claims that the government in Kyiv is undemocratic and accuses it of discriminating against ethnic minorities in Ukraine. Hungary’s demands concerning its compatriots in Ukraine are nothing new, nor is its tendency to enhance economic co-operation with Russia. However, now that Orban has thrust them into the public glare, the unity of the Visegrad Group (which supports Ukraine’s pro-European aspirations) has been seriously undermined.

Hungary's ambivalent stance

Hungary has been very moderate in evaluating and reacting to the Ukrainian-Russian crisis from the very beginning. Although Hungarian diplomats co-authored the Visegrad Group’s and the EU’s declarations condemning the annexation of Crimea by Russia and supporting Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, Prime Minister Viktor Orban has emphasised Hungary’s neutrality as regards the Ukrainian-Russian conflict. Hungary has been avoiding any friction in relations with Russia, since it has been building closer co-operation with it in the energy sector. Hungary is also opposed to the European Union imposing economic sanctions on Russia, arguing that it would be among those countries who have incurred the greatest losses as a consequence of the sanctions. At the same time, Orban, who speaks on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on rare occasions, appealed on 10 May to the Ukrainian government to grant more extensive rights to the Hungarian community in Zakarpattia (around 150,000 people). As he explained later, the scope of this autonomy would be determined by the Zakarpattian Hungarians themselves.

The primacy of the issue of the Hungarian minority

The demands put forward by Orban are a constant element of his country's policy regarding ethnic Hungarians living abroad, which his government has been implementing since 2010. Over this period, Hungary has expressed its support for the aspirations of ethnic Hungarian communities living in the neighbouring countries on numerous occasions. It has backed an expansion of their collective rights and has supported their aspirations to be granted autonomy. Nevertheless, this is the first time that these issues have been so clearly highlighted in a speech made by Prime Minister Orban. The government in Kyiv became concerned following his statement and demanded an explanation from the Hungarian ambassador in Ukraine.

Issues concerning the Hungarian community in Zakarpattia have traditionally played an essential role in Hungary's policy towards Ukraine. The Hungarian government took a cautious stance from the beginning of the protests on the Maidan. This was partly due to the concessions President Viktor Yanukovich had made with regard to ethnic minorities – including that of Hungary – as part of the regulations passed in response to the Russian-speaking minority's demands concerning their language. Hungary, along with its partners from the V4 backed the democratic and pro-EU aspirations expressed on the Maidan, but at the same time voiced serious concern about the growing influence of the Ukrainian far right. Since the fall of President Yanukovich in February this year, Hungary has given very much publicity to the attempts made by the Ukrainian parliament to repeal the Regional Languages Act (blocked by the acting president of Ukraine) and two anti-Hungarian incidents in which Ukrainian nationalists were involved. The Orban government has argued that its moderate reaction to the Ukrainian crisis is linked to its need to be concerned about the interests of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. This made it easier for the government to stave off accusations from the left-wing opposition, who claimed that Fidesz had been overly submissive to Russia during the election campaign.

Orban's demands that ethnic Hungarians should be given more rights in Ukraine have been given a lot of publicity by the Russian press and fit in with the Russian government's narrative, in which they accuse the Ukrainian government of discriminating against national minorities. Meanwhile, the regulations concerning the rights of ethnic minorities and the protection of these rights in Ukraine are not massively different to the solutions applied in many EU member states. However, observing these rights is sometimes a problem, in part due to shortages of funds. The Ukrainian constitution prohibits holding dual citizenship, but in practice, the Ukrainian government does not react when residents of Ukraine are granted Hungarian citizenship. Since 2011 – when the act facilitating the procedure granting citizenship came into force – around 70,000 Hungarian passports have been granted to Ukrainian citizens.

A rapprochement with Russia

Hungary's stance on Ukraine cannot be viewed separately from its rapprochement with Russia, which was initiated by the left-wing government and has been continued by Orban. Hungary views Russia as its main partner in resolving the key challenges in the Hungarian energy sector. The Orban cabinet upheld the country's engagement in the construction of the section of the South Stream gas pipeline in Hungary, and was among the first who withdrew their support for the construction of the rival Nabucco gas pipeline. On 14 May,

Prime Minister Viktor Orban met with Gazprom's CEO, Alexey Miller, in Budapest. During the meeting, they made a joint announcement that the implementation of the Hungarian section of South Stream would be brought forward. Furthermore, the Orban government has decided to entrust Russia's Rosatom to be the company to develop the Hungarian nuclear power plant in Paks, without holding a tender. Prime Minister Orban and President Putin signed an agreement concerning the construction of two reactors at this power plant on 14 January in Moscow. On 10 March, the parties struck a deal under which Russian banks granted Hungary a loan worth 10 billion euros, which will cover 80% of the costs of this investment. Hungary has also made efforts to be granted favourable conditions in a new contract for Russian gas supplies (the present contract with Gazprom will expire at the end of 2015). Orban has presented his co-operation with Russia on the one hand as an opportunity for the Hungarian economy, and also as a necessity due to the unsuccessfulness of EU measures (e.g. he has recently been trying to use Croatia's and Romania's failure to co-operate adequately on the development of transmission infrastructure as an excuse for his support for the South Stream project).

Jobbik: a legitimising rival

Putting a stronger emphasis on the "reintegration of the nation" beyond Hungary's borders and on more rights being granted to Hungarian minorities abroad has also been part of Fidesz's rivalry with the nationalist party, Jobbik. As Jobbik gains in strength, it gives more legitimacy to the policy of Fidesz as a party for which there is no other alternative but radicals. The government has given publicity to Jobbik's successes, including the last poll, which indicates that Jobbik may become the second strongest party in Hungary (in the survey, conducted by Median agency, which was published in the middle of this month, Jobbik for the first time achieved a better result than the Hungarian Socialist Party). The fact that *Magyar Nemzet* daily newspaper published information a few days ahead of the election to the European Parliament that Bela Kovacs, an MEP representing Jobbik, had been accused of spying for Russia, was also an element of the government's public rivalry with the radicals. Kovacs, who is number three on Jobbik's list of candidates in the election, has been dealing primarily with energy issues in the European Parliament. At Jobbik, he has been in charge of co-operation with Russia and has organised the Alliance of European National Movements (AENM), and is now the chairman of this alliance. According to an announcement from the Hungarian prosecution authorities, he could spend between 2 and 8 years in prison for espionage.

Conclusions

As regards the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, Hungary will barely be able to maintain its neutral position, since its ambivalent stance has been used by Russia as an element of pressure on Ukraine and the EU. However, nothing seems to indicate that Moscow's hostile moves with regard to Kyiv could change the Hungarian concept of co-operation with Russia. Orban has announced that this policy will be continued as "economic co-operation". In the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, he has been trying to exploit to the full the benefits resulting from Russia's particular interest in developing co-operation with those EU and NATO member states which it has close relations with. The changes already announced in

the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could signify Hungary's stronger engagement in the 'Eastern opening' policy. Proof of this can be found for example in the fact that Janos Martonyi, who had been engaged in co-operation in the V4 and in ensuring that Hungary maintained the Euro-Atlantic direction, retired as minister of Foreign Affairs, and that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been transformed into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Economic Co-operation. This is likely to reinforce the position of Secretary of State Peter Szijjarto, who has created an important centre for shaping foreign policy (in charge of economic co-operation and the 'Eastern opening') at the Prime Minister's Office.

Co-operation: *Mateusz Gniazdowski*