

Bavaria: Orbán's window onto Germany

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On 5 January, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán was a guest at the congress of deputies of the Christian Social Union (CSU) in Bavaria. After the sessions he appeared at a press conference together with the head of the CSU, Horst Seehofer, and was also interviewed by the newspaper *Bild*, in which he described the influx of immigrants to Europe as "a Muslim invasion". Of all the German *Bundesländer*, Bavaria is Hungary's most important economic partner; it is responsible for about a third of German investments in Hungary, and is also the largest recipient of Hungarian exports in the federal state. Above all Bavarian companies invest in the automotive industry, which is the driving force of the Hungarian economy (e.g. the Audi plant in Győr). Fidesz has been a partner of the CSU since the 1990s, and Orbán's government also cooperates regularly with the Bavarian Government at the sectoral level.

Commentary

- The close ties between Fidesz and the CSU have developed in recent years, despite the allegations by the German government (in which the CSU participates) of violations of democratic standards in Hungary. The deepening cooperation between the two parties was aided in 2015 by the similarities in their restrictive approaches to the migration crisis. Thanks to this, PM Orbán was able to argue in his country's national debate that Germany was not united in its criticism of his country's solutions, and was also able to strengthen his position against Chancellor Angela Merkel by showing that he had supporters inside her own camp. Fidesz's cooperation with the CSU also enhances its position within the European People's Party, in which the leading role is played by the CDU/CSU, and which has repeatedly defended Fidesz in its disputes at the EU.
- Fidesz's tightening of its relations with CSU is aimed at rebuilding the position of Orbán's government in its dealings with the federal government of Germany, which both Hungary's political elite and its public consider its most important foreign partner. For this reason, Budapest has emphasised that regardless of the dispute over migration policy, it largely agrees with the German vision of economic policy in the EU (including fiscal discipline) and maintains the general orientation of its foreign policy towards Berlin. In a situation of difficult contacts at the highest level (the last bilateral meeting between the heads of government was held in February 2015), Hungary's PM is looking for other channels, such as visits to individual *Länder*; in the last year, apart from Bavaria he has also visited Baden-Württemberg and Saxony.

- The visit to Bavaria has allowed Orbán to realise his political ambitions on the international stage. During the migration crisis Orbán saw a chance not only to boost his popularity at home, but also an opportunity to break free from Hungary's marginalisation in the EU. In this way he is trying to position himself as the spokesman for that part of European public opinion that is opposed to the influx of immigrants, and which – as Orbán has claimed – is not represented by the political elite in Europe. For the CSU, inviting Orbán with his sharp anti-immigration rhetoric to Bavaria, both at the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015 and now, serves to emphasise their difference in approach to immigration from their sister party the CDU, and represents an element of its rivalry for voters with the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany.