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Orbán in Chișinău – the activation of Hungary's Eastern policy

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Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán paid an official visit to Chișinău on 12 March. He met President Igor Dodon, Prime Minister Ion Chicu and Parliamentary Speaker Zinaida Greceanîi amongst other officials. The centrepoint of the visit was the signing of a declaration on a strategic partnership between Hungary and Moldova. According to Prime Minister Chicu, the document's overriding aim is to enhance bilateral relations and Budapest's support for Moldova in the process of European integration. In turn, Orbán concluded that building a strategic partnership with Eastern neighbours was in the EU's interest. He also announced the launch of a US$100 million credit line for Moldova to boost economic co-operation between the two countries. During the visit Orbán also took part in a Moldovan-Hungarian business forum, where he stated that the links between Moldova and Russia (including the presence of Moldovan expatriate workers and entrepreneurs in Russia) were a good argument for enhancing co-operation with Moldova.

Commentary

- Prime Minister Orbán's visit to Chișinău is very important in political and prestige terms for the Moldovan government, in which the Socialist Party (PSRM) predominates, and for President Dodon, who in fact controls this grouping. The Chicu cabinet is distrusted by Moldova's main partners in the EU, and the government in Bucharest is especially critical about it. Over the past few months, Romania's Prime Minister Ludovic Orban and President Klaus Iohannis have expressed negative opinions about the Chicu cabinet and the future of Moldova's pro-European policy. Thus, from Chișinău's perspective, the Hungarian prime minister's visit proves that there are countries in the EU which are interested in co-operating with the present governing majority. It has also added external legitimacy to the policy advocated by Dodon of manoeuvring between the West and Russia. This has been further strengthened by both the declarations concerning Moldova's European integration (intended at emphasising Chișinău's interest in co-operation with the EU) included in the Hungarian-Moldovan agreement, as well as the Hungarian prime minister's clearly positive attitude towards Moldovan-Russian co-operation. The boost in ties with Budapest (and, above all, the launch of the credit line) is also expected to serve as an instrument to put pressure on Bucharest, which announced a reduction in the aid it was offering to Chișinău after the cooling of its relations with Moldovan authorities.

- The stepping-up of relations between Budapest and Chișinău is perceived negatively by the Romanian government. Bucharest wants to reduce Russian influence in Moldova as much as possible, and believes that groupings supporting co-operation with Russia (such as the PSRM) jeopardise Moldova's European integration. It also criticises the policy of manoeuvring between the West and Russia as it feels that this serves the interests of Moscow, which wants to prevent Chișinău from building closer relations with the EU. In this context, the intensification of co-operation between the Moldovan government, where pro-Russian socialists predominate, and Orbán, who supports co-operation with Russia, has provoked serious concern in Romania.
- From Budapest's viewpoint, the visit to Chișinău fits in with the assumptions of the Hungarian policy of 'opening up to the East'. Orbán believes that Hungary's geographical location justifies its efforts to maintain close political and economic contacts with both the EU and the East (Russia, China and Turkey) and predestines it to play the role of mediator (Olivér Várhelyi was appointed as the European Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations in December 2019). For example, this narrative has been backed by the words of the Hungarian foreign minister Péter Szijj ártó, who during his visit to Belarus in February 2020 appealed to the EU to build closer co-operation with the Eurasian Economic Union dominated by Russia. At the same time, from Budapest's perspective, the visit to Chișinău was intended to improve the perception of Hungary within the EU. EU institutions have accused the Hungarian government of a number of undemocratic moves (including violating the rule of law and tolerating corruption) and conducting a foreign policy contrary to the EU's interests. The emphasis on the positive aspects of Hungary's EU membership and the appeal to Moldova's government to persist in their efforts towards European integration were intended to balance this message.
- Within the context of the intensification of Hungary's Eastern policy, it must be emphasised that Hungarian-Ukrainian relations have also been visibly revived recently. However, Budapest seems to have adopted a different approach towards Kyiv than towards Minsk or Chișinău, and (at least for the time being) it is not promoting enhanced co-operation with Russia for understandable reasons. Since the change of government in Ukraine in 2019, the Hungarian government has been showing signs of readiness to compromise. President Volodymyr Zelensky, unlike his predecessor Petro Poroshenko, is viewed in Hungary as a supporter of an inclusive model of identity in which ethnic minorities may enjoy extensive rights. The educational rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, composed mostly of over 100,000 residents of the Zakarpattia oblast, has been the source of the most serious crisis in bilateral relations since Ukraine passed the Education Act in 2017, which restricted minorities' rights to education in their native languages. In response to this, Hungary is still blocking the meetings of the Ukraine–NATO commission, even though Kyiv has amended the educational regulations in compliance with the Venice Commission's recommendations. However, there has been an intensification of contacts and a more constructive atmosphere in bilateral relations since the beginning of this year; during his visit to Kyiv in February, Minister Szijj ártó spoke about the Ukrainian Education Act in a conciliatory tone, and announced the first session of the Joint Commission for Economic Cooperation; this will be held in Budapest after a seven-year break, and will precede the Zelensky–Orbán meeting. The

date of the commission's session has not been agreed as yet. However, the Ukrainian foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, is expected to visit Budapest on 26 March. The most important issues to be raised during the bilateral talks include the unblocking the Ukraine–NATO commission; building a new border checkpoint a loan from Hungary of €50 million to repair transport infrastructure in the Zakarpattia oblast; and regulations concerning school education in the native languages of ethnic minorities in Ukraine.

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