Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 28.09.2022 www.osw.waw.pl

Hungary's campaign against the West's Russia policy

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In recent weeks, the Hungarian government's main message at home and abroad has been to criticise EU sanctions against Russia and advocate lifting them, or at least not imposing any new sanctions. Fidesz politicians have accompanied this with an open contestation of the West's support for Ukraine. On 26 September, in his speech opening the autumn session of parliament, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stressed that "the West stands on the side of war, while Hungary stands on the side of peace". He accused the West and its sanctions policy of transforming a "local conflict" into a "global economic war". He also stressed that Russia's reserves in terms of human resources and weapons are "limitless", and that in the energy field "we in Europe are dwarves and Russia is a giant", which is why "Europe has shot itself in the foot with the sanctions". He added that the sanctions were "decided on by Brussels bureaucrats and European elites" and introduced in an undemocratic manner, as "nobody asked the European people for their opinion" and "it is they who are paying the price". At the same time, he announced a so-called national consultation (surveys sent out to all citizens), emphasising that "we in Hungary will be the first in Europe to ask people's opinions on sanctions".

Hungary is also becoming increasingly outspoken in its criticism of EU sanctions and Western policies internationally: this was the main message from Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó during his meetings at the UN General Assembly in New York. On 23 September, he was the only foreign minister of an EU member state to meet his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov. In his media appearances (including on CNN), he called for the lifting of EU sanctions against Russia and immediate peace negotiations. In an interview with the Russian news agency TASS, he announced that Hungary had no intention of stopping the issuing of Schengen visas to Russian citizens.

Commentary

- In recent weeks, Orbán has increasingly taken the side of Russia in its war against Ukraine, resorting to ever harsher criticism of EU and US policy towards Moscow. In his speeches Orbán paints a defeatist image of the West, an all-powerful Russia and a Ukraine which is doomed to failure. At the same time, the West is portrayed as pushing for conflict with Moscow and aggressively "imposing sanctions on others", in nominal contrast to the peaceful Central European states who are only bearing the cost of the sanctions. He also promotes the false thesis that the economic problems (inflation and high energy prices) are solely due to the EU's imposition of sanctions on Russia, and are not a consequence of the pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine or the Kremlin's deliberate manipulation of gas prices. Orbán's claims that "energy prices and inflation would be

halved" and "the European economy would avoid recession" if the restrictions were lifted completely ignore the fact that the main source of the global slowdown is the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pro-Russian narrative in the Hungarian government-controlled media has also recently intensified, directing criticism primarily against the EU, the US and Ukraine.

- The main target of Orbán's political offensive is his domestic audience, as it seeks to blame Brussels and its sanctions policy for Hungary's growing economic and political problems (e.g. its isolation within the EU, difficulties balancing the budget and its energy dependence on Russia due to its neglect of fuel diversification) in an attempt to distract from the ruling party's responsibility for them. The so-called national consultation, which has been conducted about once a year throughout the past decade, is an apparent appeal to direct democracy. However, as in the previous cases, the questions are likely to be formulated in a biased way, and will only serve to legitimise the Hungarian government's opposition to the sanctions on Russia.
- The Hungarian government wants to show the European Commission and the EU member states that it is ready not only to veto any new sanctions on Russia, but also (possibly) to oppose the extension of some of the existing sanctions. This act of political blackmail – which has also been accompanied by some concessions on contentious issues with the EC (including the establishment of an anti-corruption institution and the strengthening of cooperation with the European Anti-Fraud Office and the European Public Prosecutor's Office) – is intended to avoid the freezing of cohesion funds in the ongoing procedure of the so-called conditionality mechanism, and to gain access to funds from the Recovery Fund (see *Conditionality mechanism: Hungary facing the threat of withheld EU funds*). Both the extension of some of the sanctions on Russia and the EC's assessment of Hungary's promised changes to the law are due in November.
- Orbán wants to rebuild his position in European politics by exploiting the social frustrations growing across the continent due to the economic problems, and by consolidating those political forces which advocate agreement with Russia under the guise of pursuing peace. This mainly concerns the Italian right wing, which won the most recent elections (although the Brothers of Italy, the largest party in the coalition being formed, has hitherto been supportive towards Ukraine and critical of Russia), but also extends to other radical right-wing groupings in opposition in individual countries (the French National Rally and the Dutch Party of Freedom). Orbán has also invested into his relationship with the Donald Trump-centred wing of the Republican Party (while Szijjártó was in New York he awarded the Hungarian Order of Merit to Jared Kushner, son-in-law and advisor to the former US president). While Central European countries favour a tough response to Russia and support sanctions, some opposition parties in the region (Robert Fico's Smer in Slovakia, and Tomio Okamura's Freedom & Direct Democracy in the Czech Republic) support Orbán's criticism of the EU's sanctions policy. Hungary's relations with almost all the countries of the region have cooled; only its ties with Serbia, a country with traditionally close ties to Moscow, have strengthened recently.
- Budapest is still striving to maintain good relations with Moscow, primarily because of the two countries' energy links (with a view to securing gas supplies in the context of the upcoming heating season). At the same time, the government has emphasised the need

to gradually become less dependent on Russian gas and to increase the country's energy efficiency (both of which have been neglected in recent years as the government has relied on cheap supplies from Russia). In his speech, Orbán announced an intention to reduce the share of gas in the energy mix from the current 35% to 30% in 2025. Nevertheless, Hungary still wants the Russian company Rosatom to build new blocks of the Paks nuclear power plant. Energy diversification has been hampered by a lack of trust between Hungary and the other key countries involved, such as Croatia and Romania, and even by rising tensions in its relations with them.