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CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 22.02.2023 www.osw.waw.pl

Slovakia, Hungary: minister Káčer's controversial comments

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Slovakia's foreign minister Rastislav Káčer has once again sharply criticised the actions of Viktor Orbán's government. In a post on his Facebook profile published on the evening of 20 February, referring to Budapest's policy on the war, he wrote that only one country in the EU is worried that supporting Ukraine would prolong the conflict. He pointed out the hypocrisy of Hungary's stance: "They claim to be on the side of peace (...). Over the weekend, their Carpathian prophet said that this is not our war. It is 'only an armed conflict between two Slavic states'. We were supposed to (...) let the Russians slaughter the Ukrainians quickly. (...) How disgusting. How low. How un-Christian. St. Martin of Tours (who was born in the area of today's Hungary) would be ashamed of such Christians." In the post, he also criticised the former Slovak prime minister Robert Fico for his words about how he would do the same as Orbán if his Smer party is in the future government. He ended the post with a quote (written in Cyrillic) from the notorious response given to a Russian warship by the Ukrainian defenders of Snake Island ('*idi na khuy*', or roughly, 'go to hell'), which he directed at "Putin's collaborators, especially those in the Carpathian Basin and the *Felvidék* [a Hungarian term for Slovakia, which is tinged pejoratively by association with the period of Magyarisation] who want peace at the price of Ukraine's destruction." In response, on 21 February the Hungarian deputy foreign minister Tamás Menczer described Káčer as "a provocateur who should be treated accordingly", and the head of Hungary's parliamentary foreign affairs committee, Zsolt Németh, advised that the Slovak minister "go to a psychiatrist as soon as possible."

Commentary

- After the centre-right came to power in Slovakia in 2020, Bratislava's relations with Budapest deteriorated. Initially, this was due to its assertive expressions of opposition to the unilateral and unconsulted actions which the Orbán government took in areas inhabited by the Hungarian minority, who make up about 8% of the country's population. Budapest bought up land and property, restored Hungarian monuments, and sent leading Fidesz figures to minority celebrations without notifying the Slovak authorities. Bratislava has also distanced itself from Hungary over its dispute with the EC over compliance with the rule of law. It also criticised Budapest's abuse of the Visegrad format, in which its own ideas were often presented as a common V4 position. The rift has deepened since Russia's invasion of Ukraine: while Slovakia is among the world's top countries in terms of providing military support as a percentage of GDP, Hungary is one of the few EU countries (and the only one in the 'Bucharest Nine') that has not provided similar assistance to Kyiv.

- The recent rise in Slovak-Hungarian tensions has also been affected by the character and views of Káčer, who has previously made a name for himself in the world of diplomacy and think-tanks as a strong personality with distinctively liberal, pro-Atlantic views. Even when he was ambassador to Budapest, he caused controversy by flying a rainbow flag on the embassy building in 2016 as a gesture of solidarity with the LGBT festival. This led to disputes with his political masters in Bratislava, with then-prime minister Robert Fico deeming his actions "unacceptable". Although after taking over as foreign minister in September 2022 Káčer asserted that he could adapt to the rigours of diplomatic discourse, he has stepped up his rhetoric in recent weeks, becoming the target of attacks by the Fidesz-linked Hungarian media. His statement in early February, in which he warned that Hungary could potentially make territorial claims against Slovakia if Putin succeeded in Ukraine, attracted particular attention. The head of the ruling coalition's largest party, Igor Matovič, called on him to apologise, which he did not do.
- An important context for Káčer's statement is the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia, scheduled for 30 September. With his criticism of Budapest, the head of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs is indirectly striking at Fico, who is against military support for Ukraine and is clearly supported by Hungary (he has held meetings with politicians there and given interviews in the Hungarian media). This is also part of Káčer's attempt to build up his own political position in the face of the current reshuffle on the liberal-right of Slovakia's political scene. While support for the left-wing parties remains stable (polls show Peter Pellegrini's Hlas leading with about 20%, ahead of Robert Fico's Smer with about 15%), the situation on the opposite side is still in flux. Currently, only the Progressive Slovakia party (PS; 13–14%), where President Zuzana Čaputová has her political origin, can be sure of winning seats in parliament. A number of right-wing and liberal groups are vying for votes, and are trying to distinguish themselves from their competitors; this includes attracting recognisable figures to their projects. There is speculation that Káčer may join one of these political groups in the making: perhaps that of the current prime minister Eduard Heger or the former prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda; he could also run on the list of one of the existing liberal formations (PS, or SaS led by Richard Sulík).
- In view of the length of the election campaign, further Slovak-Hungarian tensions are to be expected; in addition to their traditional disagreements over the minorities, Hungary's attitude toward the war has become an important reference point – positive for some, negative for others – in public debate in Slovakia. The disagreements between Bratislava and Budapest may further loosen the ties of cooperation – already severely damaged by divergences over the Russian invasion of Ukraine – within the Visegrad Group, of which Slovakia currently holds the presidency (until the end of this June, when the Czech Republic takes over).