

The Fico-Orbán meeting: an Article-7 alliance

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On 16 January, Slovakia's prime minister Robert Fico visited Budapest, where he met Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán and president Katalin Novák. After his trip to Prague, this was the second bilateral foreign visit paid by Slovakia's head of government since he took office last October. The talks covered European policy, migration, bilateral infrastructure projects and attitudes towards the Russian-Ukrainian war. Referring to the EU's proceedings under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) concerning Hungary's violation of EU values, Fico announced that he would not allow Brussels to punish Hungary for protecting its own sovereignty. According to Orbán, the interests of the two countries are "99% aligned" as they support each other in the areas of physical, economic and energy security.

Commentary

- The Hungarian government has high hopes for Fico's return to power, counting on his support in its ongoing dispute with the EU. This is particularly important after a group of 120 MEPs issued a letter on 12 January calling for further action against Hungary under the Article 7 TEU procedure that was launched in 2018. The political changes in Poland have left Hungary searching for a new ally that could potentially block a decision by the European Council on the existence of a serious breach of EU values in Hungary, a step that requires unanimity. Such a decision could then lead to the suspension of the country's voting rights in the Council of the EU. Fico's remarks suggest that Slovakia would oppose such a move.
- Despite the two countries' declarations of mutual support, however, the first summits of the European Council since Fico's return to power have already revealed significant differences between Slovakia's and Hungary's approaches to key topics in the EU. Unlike Hungary, and despite employing anti-Ukrainian rhetoric at home, the Slovak government has supported the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine and the establishment of the EU's Ukraine Facility to provide financial assistance to this country. Fico has embarked on controversial reforms in Slovakia, such as reduced penalties for economic crimes and the abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office, thus putting himself at risk of triggering EU proceedings for violations of the rule of law in Slovakia. This means that on one hand, he wants to secure Hungary's support in case this happens, while on the other he is seeking to set himself apart from the government in Budapest and highlight his pragmatic approach. He has demonstrated his openness to cooperation with the European Commission and displayed a constructive attitude on the EU's support for Ukraine and its European aspirations, which are currently key topics on the EU's agenda.

- Fico's visit heralds a significant improvement in Slovak-Hungarian relations on the time when the centre-right government held power in Slovakia (see '[Slovakia, Hungary: minister Káčer's controversial comments](#)'). In the most recent sign of those tensions, Slovakia's Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs protested Hungary's alleged interference in the September 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia. During the election campaign, Orbán's government openly supported Aliancia, the main party of the Hungarian minority, which accounts for 8.4 percent of Slovakia's population, as well as Fico, emphasising its ideological proximity to his Smer party. While Aliancia failed to cross the electoral threshold, Smer gained around 20% of the vote among the Hungarian minority, despite the fact that Fico's previous governments had taken some measures unfavourable to it, including a ban on dual citizenship in 2010 which sparked tensions with the then Orbán government. However, the issue of minorities, which has caused much controversy in bilateral relations, appears to have receded into the background as both leaders are set to focus on providing political support to each other within the EU and making efforts to reactivate the Visegrad Group.