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In opposition to the EU and the International Criminal Court: Netanyahu visits Budapest

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Between 2 and 6 April, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu paid an official visit to Hungary. This was his second foreign trip (the first being to the United States) since the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant for his arrest on charges of responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the Gaza Strip. Viktor Orbán extended the invitation to the Israeli leader, disregarding the ICC's decision and guaranteeing him immunity. On the day of Netanyahu's arrival, the Hungarian authorities announced that they had initiated the procedure to withdraw from the ICC. This became the subject of a joint phone conversation between the two prime ministers and Donald Trump.

Hungary's position on Israel and the ICC is yet another area in which the Orbán government is deliberately positioning itself in opposition to the EU mainstream, in an effort to cultivate bilateral relations with third countries – in this case, Israel and the United States. For Israel, cooperation with Budapest is beneficial in several respects: Hungary consistently adopts a pro-Israel stance on the international stage, supports the Jewish state's campaign to discredit institutions it finds inconvenient (such as the ICC), and reinforces its narrative portraying radical Islam as the principal threat to the 'Western world', which – in this narrative – is represented by Israel, Europe, and the United States.

Commentary

- **Hungary is one of Israel's closest European partners, with their relationship built on strong personal ties and ideological affinity between Orbán and Netanyahu.** The invitation extended to the Israeli Prime Minister aligns with the Hungarian government's broader strategy of building alliances with radical political forces that share its anti-immigration, anti-Muslim, Eurosceptic, pro-Russian, or pro-Trump views, as well as its general contestation towards international institutions. Fidesz and Likud have maintained close cooperation for many years, and both parties have at times hired the same advisers for their election campaigns, including Arthur Finkelstein and George Birnbaum. The two governments were also brought closer together by their approach to the migration crisis after 2015. Orbán's anti-immigration policy was inspired in part by Israel's handling of the influx of African refugees after 2006 (the Israeli right referred to these individuals as 'infiltrators'). During Netanyahu's term, the Hungarian authorities also used Israeli-made Pegasus spyware to surveil opposition figures and the media.

- **Israel appreciates Hungary's support in the EU and the UN, as well as its efforts to undermine the actions of the International Criminal Court.** Budapest, in turn, leverages its close ties with Israel to strengthen its relationship with the United States, particularly following Donald Trump's rise to power. In recent years, Hungary has repeatedly blocked – sometimes alongside Austria, the Czech Republic, and Romania – EU and UN statements condemning Israel's actions against the Palestinians. It has remained one of Netanyahu's staunchest defenders within the EU, including following the military offensive in the Gaza Strip. Restoring cooperation with Israel was listed as one of the goals of Hungary's EU Council presidency in the second half of 2024, although this did not translate into specific actions. Hungary was also the first to announce plans to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, though to date, only a trade office has been opened there. In recent years, the two countries have also expanded their military cooperation: the Hungarian military has purchased, among other equipment, radars and drones, the latter being produced in Hungary by the Israeli company UVision in partnership with Germany's Rheinmetall.
- **For the government in Budapest, Israel's support plays a key role in deflecting accusations of anti-Semitism and in downplaying Hungary's role in the Holocaust.** Local Jewish organisations and Yad Vashem have, for many years, criticised the Orbán government for minimising Hungary's involvement in the Holocaust and for promoting historical figures known for their anti-Semitic views. The rehabilitation of the regime of Miklós Horthy has been one of the main themes of the Orbán government's historical policy. In 1920, under Horthy, Hungary introduced the first anti-Jewish laws in Europe, and during the Second World War, his administration was responsible for deporting Jews to extermination camps. During his visit to Budapest, Netanyahu notably emphasised the shared historical experience of Hungarians and Jews – specifically in their struggle against foreign oppression – while entirely omitting Hungary's collaboration with Nazi Germany. Israel's support has also enabled Orbán to reject allegations of anti-Semitic motives behind the government's campaign against George Soros, the American financier of Hungarian-Jewish origin, who, for both leaders, represents the liberal globalist elite.
- **For Budapest, the expansion of the definition of anti-Semitism – promoted by Israel over the past two decades – to include (or even primarily mean) criticism of the Israeli state has proven favourable.** At present, Israel primarily directs accusations of 'anti-Semitism' at individuals and institutions that denounce its human rights violations and alleged war crimes against the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank. For Orbán's party, as well as other like-minded political movements across Europe, supporting Israel in this regard provides a means of fending off the 'anti-Semite' label without having to alter their own, often revisionist, historical policy. At the same time, Israel's framing of its struggle as one against 'Islamic radicalism', the Western left, and 'corrupt' international institutions reinforces the message propagated by Fidesz and Europe's far right that immigrants (and, implicitly, Islam) pose the principal threat to European identity.