

The enduring legacy of Beneš: Slovak–Hungarian tensions in a historical context

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The renewed dispute over the so-called Beneš Decrees could escalate Slovak–Hungarian tensions and hamper efforts to rebuild regional cooperation in Central Europe. In recent months, the rights of the Hungarian minority and attitudes towards the Beneš decrees have become central issues in Slovakia's political debate. Efforts by opposition parties to win support among Slovak Hungarians prompted a government response in the form of controversial legislative changes introducing penalties for "questioning the post-war order". Tensions between Bratislava and Budapest were further fuelled by the decision of the victorious TISZA party to make the issue part of its election campaign. On the one hand, its leader and Hungary's new prime minister, Péter Magyar, has recently signalled a willingness to pursue a pragmatic solution, much like his Slovak counterpart Robert Fico. The fact that both leaders have an interest in strengthening regional cooperation also points in this direction. On the other hand, domestic political risks continue to weigh on bilateral relations. It cannot be ruled out that Slovak political actors will seek to play the 'Hungarian card' ahead of the 2027 parliamentary elections, or that Magyar will continue to mobilise voters around the issue of protecting the rights of ethnic Hungarians living abroad.

The Hungarian question in Slovak politics

Although sizeable Hungarian communities live in the border regions of nearly all Hungary's neighbouring states, Slovakia has the highest proportion of ethnic Hungarians, at around 8 per cent of its population. Nevertheless, both their absolute number and their share of the population have gradually declined. Since 2020, they have lacked organised representation in Slovakia's unicameral parliament. This reflects the failure of Hungarian parties to surpass the 5 per cent electoral threshold. The strongest of these parties in current polling, Maďarská Aliancia, which until recently maintained close ties with Fidesz, is supported by only around 4 per cent of voters. At the same time, regions with significant Hungarian populations remain among the most underinvested parts of Slovakia. Transport infrastructure is a particular concern. For example, the country's main east–west motorway routes run through the northern part of the country. This is one of the factors that has fuelled perceptions of discrimination and directed the attention of Slovak Hungarians towards Budapest.

Close ties between Slovakia's Hungarian minority and the government in Budapest, combined with the revisionist gestures of the long-serving Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, have

in recent years heightened distrust of this community among both Slovak society and many political parties. These concerns have been reinforced by the evolution of the minority's political representation, which was largely liberal in the 1990s but subsequently came under the influence of Fidesz. Tensions also regularly arise over the use of the term *Felvidék* ('Upper Land'), which Hungarians – including the new prime minister, Péter Magyar – use to refer to Slovakia instead of the neutral *Szlovákia*. In Slovakia, the term is often regarded as provocative because it recalls a period of Hungarian dominance, particularly the era of intense Magyarisation at the turn of the twentieth century.

As parties representing Slovakia's Hungarian minority have become increasingly marginalised, other political groups have paid growing attention to the concerns of this community in an effort to attract its voters. One such party is OĽaNO, the winner of the 2020 election, now operating as the Slovakia Movement, whose influential figures include MP Gábor Grendel, who identifies as ethnically Hungarian. The liberal Freedom and Solidarity party (SaS) has also sought to appeal to this electorate. A key member of its security team is the former Slovak police chief Štefan Hamran, who comes from Komárno.

The Hungarian minority vote has also become a key target for the main opposition party, Progressive Slovakia (PS). Among its ranks is Ľudovít Ódor, the first ethnic Hungarian to serve as Slovakia's prime minister, albeit as a non-partisan technocrat, and now a Member of the European Parliament. Although PS has led in most opinion polls, its support has remained at around 20 per cent since the election nearly two years ago, prompting the party to seek new ways of broadening its appeal. In autumn 2025, it held an off-site meeting in southern Slovakia and called for measures to improve the position of Slovak Hungarians through greater investment in the region. Most controversially, it criticised the post-war application of the principle of collective guilt and the continued reliance of the Slovak authorities on the Beneš Decrees. Under decisions taken by the then president of Czechoslovakia, most Hungarians and Germans were stripped of their Czechoslovak citizenship in 1945, while a large proportion of their property was confiscated. Although many Hungarians regained citizenship by the late 1940s, the recovery of confiscated assets proved far more difficult. Even today, unlike in the Czech Republic, where the decrees remain formally part of the legal order but are regarded as obsolete, the Slovak authorities continue to invoke them in property disputes. In 2025, the number of state confiscations carried out on this basis actually increased compared with previous years.

In response to the PS declarations, Prime Minister Fico played the 'Hungarian card' against his main political rival and swiftly introduced legislation penalising challenges to the Beneš Decrees. The law specifically referred to the "public questioning or undermining of the peaceful post-war order". Since the end of December last year, violations have, in theory, been punishable by up to six months' imprisonment. In practice, however, the provision has remained largely unenforced, with breaches so far resulting only in warnings. Nevertheless, the measure sparked a political storm in Hungary. It also enabled Magyar to position himself as a defender of the interests of Hungarians living beyond the country's borders and gave him grounds to criticise Orbán sharply for his alliance with Fico.

The evolution of Hungary's stance on the Beneš Decrees

For years, Hungary has consistently viewed the Beneš Decrees as one of the most serious unresolved issues in its relations with Slovakia and as part of its broader policy of protecting the rights of Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries. Successive governments in Budapest have challenged the principle of collective guilt that underpinned the post-war deprivation of citizenship and confiscation of property from the Hungarian population of Czechoslovakia. Following the political transition, the governments in office between 1990 and 2002, including Orbán's first administration, focused on building good relations with neighbouring states and securing integration into NATO and the EU. Under the 1995 Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation with Slovakia, Hungary accepted the inviolability of existing borders, while historical disputes were subordinated to the broader goal of stabilising bilateral relations. Although Budapest criticised the continued validity of the Beneš Decrees and called for the moral rehabilitation of the Hungarian minority, it did not make the issue a central element of its foreign policy. A pragmatic approach prevailed, and the issue was raised mainly by organisations representing Hungarians in Slovakia. It was only in 2002, at the end of the EU accession negotiations and on the eve of parliamentary elections in Hungary, that Prime Minister Orbán called for the abolition of the decrees. In response, the prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovakia withdrew from a planned Visegrad Group summit in Budapest. In the years that followed, after the Hungarian right lost power, tensions over the issue gradually subsided.

Following Fidesz's return to power in 2010, the importance of the decrees grew as Hungary intensified its efforts to defend the rights of Hungarian minorities abroad. The introduction of dual citizenship and the expansion of support programmes for the Hungarian diaspora strengthened ties with Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries and helped Fidesz build a durable electoral base among Hungarians living beyond Hungary's borders. Budapest consistently argued that the Beneš Decrees were incompatible with European human rights standards, particularly when Slovak courts or administrative authorities invoked them in property disputes. Hungary supported the activities of minority organisations and raised the issue in international forums. Although Orbán's government initiated a dispute with Slovakia over dual citizenship in 2010, it later avoided open confrontation with Bratislava. Particularly in recent years, Fidesz has prioritised close political cooperation with Fico's government, which it viewed as an ally in disputes with EU institutions. This restrained approach became the target of criticism from the opposition TISZA party, which accused Orbán of abandoning the interests of the Hungarian minority in favour of an ideological alliance with Slovakia's prime minister.

Both during the election campaign and after taking office as prime minister, Magyar has attached greater political importance to the issue of the Beneš Decrees. The matter featured in his first telephone conversations with his Slovak counterpart and has once again become one of the central issues on the bilateral agenda. This represents a departure from the approach that characterised the later years of Orbán's rule, when close relations with Fico took precedence over minority issues, and signals a return to a more assertive defence of the rights of the Hungarian minority in relations with Slovakia.

Prospects

Ahead of the V4 summit in Budapest on 23 June, the leaders of both countries have generally adopted a conciliatory tone. Fico has announced plans to invite Magyar for an official visit, and the two leaders also met on the sidelines of the European Council on 18 June. Following the controversy in Slovakia triggered by Magyar's description of Hungary as "a country bordering itself" during a speech marking the anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, he stressed that he wished to maintain "friendly and allied relations" with Slovakia and was seeking to restore regular V4 consultations ahead of European Council meetings, something that already took place in June. Shared economic, infrastructure and security interests, together with the importance of regional cooperation, should help reduce the risk of a lasting deterioration in bilateral relations.

Nevertheless, the situation remains tense and uncertain. One source of risk is the parliamentary election scheduled in Slovakia for autumn 2027, during which parties employing sovereignty-focused rhetoric may choose to play the 'Hungarian card'. At the same time, identity politics is likely to remain an important element of Magyar's strategy. This suggests an effort to preserve continuity with previous policies while giving them a more moderate and pro-European character. TISZA is likely to maintain its focus on protecting the rights of Hungarian minorities and strengthening ties with the diaspora, while moving away from confrontational rhetoric, particularly towards Ukraine, and placing less emphasis on historical grievances. Magyar's government is also likely to make greater efforts than its predecessors to frame minority issues in terms of European standards and human rights, presenting them as a matter of European policy rather than solely of national policy.