

Brussels cannot fire Hungary – Foreign policy of the new Orbán government

by Dániel Bartha

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The Hungarian elections took place on the 8th April. With a 69 % turnout, the governing Fidesz party secured 49,8% of the votes, enough for an absolute majority (about 68%) in the Hungarian Parliament. Prime Minister Orbán indicated during and following the campaign that certain freedoms will be further restricted and the government will push forward with its anti-migration policies. A day after the elections, CEID asked influential foreign policy thinkers and decision-makers for their opinions on how Hungary's foreign policy will change and what kind of reactions do they expect from other EU member states.

All respondents agreed that Hungarian foreign policy will continue to focus mainly on migration and the limitation of Brussels' authority over member states. However, the respondents remained divided when evaluating the potential impacts of these stances. Government affiliated experts believe that the strong mandate received from the voters and the emergence of the radical right in recent European elections justify existing Hungarian policies and the role of PM Orbán in the discourse on Europe's future. On the other hand, critical experts believe Orbán crossed the red line, and Budapest will have to face retaliations.

Géza Jeszenszky, Foreign Minister of the conservative Antall government (1990-1994) highlighted:

„All the deplorable features will continue, probably with even less restraint. Since the Fidesz voters endorsed an anti-EU and anti-Western propaganda the remaining sympathy for Hungary and the Hungarians will disappear”.

As relations with the West deteriorates,

„Poland will remain a strong ally, despite the love affair with Putin, but Slovakia is less likely to join Hungary, and Czechia remains unpredictable (for now)”

which means that EU criticism will less likely to be delivered through the V4 format. According to Mr. Jeszenszky

„Putin will be even more cordial, along with the Central Asian authoritarian governments”.

Not only Mr. Jeszenszky but also Mr **András Rácz**, Professor of the Pázmány Péter Catholic University and board member of the CEID, mentioned Hungary's further opening to the

East as a likely scenario.

„One of the strategic intents behind both vectors will be to secure access to future credits for the post-2020 period, that could keep the government afloat when EU funds dry out.”

2 The government already spent almost all EU resources available for the 2013-2020 period, and if we take the points of Mr. Rácz, Brussels has limited financial tools for responding to the governmental plans to further eliminate any remaining checks and balances

„The government is likely to continue centralizing and promoting increasingly authoritarian domestic politics, particularly in the possession of a firm constitutional majority. It was declared that one of the first laws to be passed will be the so-called "Stop Soros" law. If coming to force, this law will enable the government to deliver serious blows to critical - or, actually, to any - NGOs, basically at will. It is also very likely that rapid and aggressive steps will be taken against the few remaining independent media outlets, as well as against the judiciary system.”

Conflicts will dominate relations according to **Balázs Jarabik**, a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as well.

„I expect that Orban will try to elevate his conservative revolution to the EU level since he did mention that a strong EU is in Hungary's national interests in his victory speech on the night of the election. Importantly, Hungary now remains isolated mostly due to its governing style. Perhaps Budapest will realize that the EU reform needs more allies as well. Key relations will remain with Germany and of course with the EU”,

but it's not clear yet how this balancing will be possible.

„I think it will depend on what the new government's first steps will be. Passing Stop Soros, pressuring civil society organizations and supporting media takeovers will certainly raise the pressure on the EU "to do something". Therefore, clashes between the EU and Hungary over the rule of law and other issues will remain, and likely even intensify.”

Government affiliated experts see this differently. They believe the strong mandate of the Hungarian voters provides legitimacy for keeping the existing tone.

Dávid Szabó, director of Foreign Affairs at the most important pro-governmental think tank, Századvég stressed:

„The legitimacy given by the election outcomes and the strong mandate of PM Orbán

increases Hungary's room for manoeuvring in the European and broader international space. Hungary wants to play a constructive but firm role both in the debate on the future of Europe's integration and in the actual processes regarding resettlement quotas etc., in which I expect a continued effort in representing Hungary with a strong voice, not bending under pressure from "old" members states and the European Commission."

Mr. Szabó sees the isolation of Hungary as less realistic and believes that

„the number of Hungary's European allies will increase both on issue-bases and on strategic bases, reaching even further than the already well functioning V4 cooperation and the countries of the CEE region."

Zsolt Németh, member of the Hungarian Parliament (FIDESZ) and head of the Foreign Affairs Committee, believes that based on the legitimacy given by the Hungarian people the government will pursue its policy to counter illegal migration. However Mr.Németh highlights further priorities of the Hungarian foreign policy:

„We support the EU's neighbourhood policy and development policy in order to strengthen European security. We are open and committed for cooperation, but we will follow the path our voters gave the mandate to."

Mr. Németh envisions further confrontations as well:

„Major battles await Hungary in the coming months, especially in the field of handling illegal migration, the protection of borders, and Europe's security. „

The Hungarian government understands and suffers from the problem of an ageing society and a shrinking workforce. The government believes that the solution for Europe is to support family policies and encourage the raising of children. Meanwhile, Hungary is launching campaigns to attract workers from third states with non-Muslim population. Budapest's main ally, Poland already has more than 1 million workers from Ukraine. These developments slightly undermine Hungarian policy on refusing any kind of migration, and the governmental argument of

„We wish to preserve Hungary for the Hungarians and Europe for the Europeans."



Zsolt Németh accepts that isolation might be a threat, but retains a similar opinion to Mr. Szabó:

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„We are experiencing signs of a possible isolation, but the outcome of the national elections in Germany, Austria, Italy and the Czech Republic as well as the Visegrád Group’s and EPP majority stance prove that the Hungarian government’s protagonism of the Christian-democratic values in Europe has supporters.”

He is positive that the EU cannot and will not be able to change political directions of Hungary.

„As we cannot fire our voters, Brussels cannot fire us. We must live together in Europe and consider the idea that Hungary might also want to enlarge, strengthen and help the EU instead of bringing down could help finding the common denominator.”

Mr. Németh believes that main allies for Hungary will be the V4 and the alliance of broader Central Europe.

It is already clear that existing Central European formats are not capable of constructing even a blocking minority in the EU. Hungarian leadership in articulating regional interests is also an unrealistic scenario. Evidently the government believes, that internal developments will not invoke EU actions, despite the Polish example on judiciary reforms. Neither is it clear why governing parties of “old member” states would endorse policies represented by their own political opponents, the emerging radical-right parties. In reality it would be Berlin and not Brussels which will most likely to be deciding on how to approach Hungary. Seemingly, the government has a plan B for a possible isolation by turning to the East.

In any case, we can summarize that clashes will continue and Hungarian politics will remain widely debated in Europe.

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