

Putin in Hungary – Strategic negotiations dressed up as sport diplomacy

Background

Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Hungary for the second time this year and held a meeting with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the venue of the Judo World Championship. Since 2010 this was the seventh bilateral meeting between the two politicians and the fourth since the annexation of Crimea, which is unparalleled among European leaders. While the Hungarian government justifies the unusually intensive bilateral relations by referring to pragmatism necessitated by the country's energy dependence, the deepening ties aggravates Hungary's vulnerability to Russian influence. Hungary has become a permanent point of entry to the European Union for Putin, allowing him to rid himself of the appearance of international isolation. Meanwhile, Viktor Orbán wants to win the general election in 2018, and the utility cost cuts made possible by low energy prices has helped him to victory once already.

- 1. The meeting is a symptomatic image of the nature bilateral relations:** Putin's second visit this year can be considered symptomatic in a number of ways, it depicts part of the nature of Russian-Hungarian bilateral relations. Although the Hungarian government tried to depict the visit as a sports diplomacy-related event, the Kremlin indicated on its official website that the Russian president arrived to Budapest on the personal invitation of Viktor Orbán. There was no joint press conference after the meeting, and generally the discussion was just as intransparent as the agreement of the Paks expansion or the recently signed Gazprom-agreement that the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade is keeping locked away from the public.
- 2. “Nothing can stop Paks II now”:** The meeting's main importance was connected to bilateral energy agreements: according to information released to the public, one of the talking points during the meeting was the Paks II project binding Hungary to Russia for decades, which Fidesz paradoxically depicts as the key to becoming less energy dependent and improving the country's energy security. Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó announced that the construction would start in 2018. The Hungarian government – similarly to the meeting in February – confirmed that bilateral economic relations are improving considerably despite European sanctions. Developments and investments (e.g., subway train- and helicopter renovations) handed to Russian companies, which can also be considered as a sign of increasing Russian influence in Hungary, were not on the agenda as far as we know.
- 3. The timing is important as Transatlantic relations are becoming increasingly strained:** Russian-Hungarian relations can still be characterised as asymmetric, based on a complex set of interests and in no way founded on trust, where Putin exploits Hungary as some sort of a tool to achieve the Kremlin's strategic objectives. One of these is to disrupt European unity on the sanctions against Russia at least on the rhetorical level. Hungary in itself is not strong enough to repeal the sanctions, but it is important that the Orbán-government periodically lashes out against the sanctions policy in the role described by Russian media as that of a “battering ram”. This is especially important to the Kremlin as Transatlantic relations have become strained due to the stricter sanctions introduced by the USA, which could open up further divisions between Western partners.

- 4. Political gestures of the Hungarian side are still indicative:** The University of Debrecen's honorary degree to Vladimir Putin fits into the pattern established by the renovation of Orthodox temples and the inauguration of Second World War Soviet memorials. Such symbolic gestures play a role in finetuning Hungarian public opinion¹ while 44% Hungarians are favourable to Putin (which is the highest approval rating in the V4 countries), only 38% support German Chancellor Angela Merkel.
5. Hungary's vulnerability is also increased by the fact that the **Hungarian government denies the Russian information warfare as a threat** despite the fact that this weapon was used against Hungary multiple times (e.g., T-72 tank scandal²). Hungarian secret services theoretically work on evaluating Russian influence, however, professional considerations are often overwritten by political interests (see for example the contacts between Russian intelligence officers and the Hungarian National Front). Moreover, civil society organisations and George Soros are mentioned as national security threats, following the Kremlin's communication playbook.
- 6. Hungary's international situation is further worsened by the fact that the Russian president's visit happened almost parallelly to a recent diplomatic row between Hungary and the Netherlands after the Hungarian ambassador to Holland was recalled for consultations.** Szijjártó mentioned in one of his interviews after the Putin visit that Hungary is unwilling to restore ambassador-level relations even after the Dutch government distanced itself from the departing Dutch ambassador to Hungary's comments decrying Hungary. This directs attentions to the Hungarian government's permissive attitude when it comes to Russia, since neither disrespecting³ the memory of the 1956 Hungarian revolution in Russian media nor the Russian military intelligence's activity⁴ on Hungarian soil led to any consequences on the level of diplomacy.

1 <http://globsec.org/globsec2017/news/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-and-signs-of-hope-from-central-and-eastern-europe>

2 <http://www.stopfake.org/en/russian-diplomats-exercised-with-hungarian-cop-killer-s-far-right-gang/>

3 <http://hungarytoday.hu/news/cia-ex-nazis-behind-1956-hungarian-revolution-russian-state-tv-claims-78806>

4 http://politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article_read=1&article_id=933