



Agressive foreign policy – only in rhetoric

Hungarian foreign policy manoeuvres between an occasionally aggressive rhetoric, an ambitious ideology and a more sober and less ambitious diplomatic reality. Fidesz seeks a more assertive foreign policy that marks a break with MSZP's subservience to foreign domination (Fidesz' own interpretation) or, alternatively, the Socialists inability to formulate an independent and coherent foreign policy strategy that moves beyond blindly orienting Hungary's diplomacy along the lines set by powerful actors that Hungarian leader wish to please (our interpretation). While Fidesz has rarely gone beyond rhetoric in challenging major countries and international institutions, the few acts it has done (e.g. the crisis tax) and its occasionally loose cannon rhetoric might cause the country some grief in the future. Some of the grief may be worth it if the goals pursued justify it – as far as mere grandstanding is concerned, however, it's hardly worth sacrificing diplomatic clout for.

On a rhetorical level at least, Hungarian foreign policy has been in combat mode since the “revolution in the voting booth” last April. Or maybe it would be more appropriate to say that it was our *domestic* foreign policy that has been in combat mode, if there were such a thing as domestic foreign policy. It appears namely that there are two foreign policies in Hungary right now; the official one is actually conducted in the international arena while the other manifests at Fidesz-rallies.

The first one is mostly pragmatic, with just a hint of critical attitude towards the EU and other international organisations. The latter is fiercely ideological and sometimes extremely disparaging of the international arena and its leading institutions. The past months have shown that despite the Orbán-governments heroic efforts, it is increasingly difficult to keep these two worlds apart.

Ideological tenets...

Fidesz had often accused the MSZP-led governments of being too servile in the international sphere, of sacrificing Hungarian interests because they were weak and/or incompetent and/or insufficiently loyal to Hungary. Dating back to the time when MSZP's predecessor party was doing Moscow's bidding as the Soviet Union's placeholder in Hungary, the left needs an outside force that it can serve and which can guide its policies – that is how Fidesz interpreted MSZP's foreign policy.

In Prime Minister Orbán's view Hungarian foreign policy ought to be assertive and only compromise as long as Hungary's interests are sufficiently observed. The fundamental difference between the two worldviews isn't only how Hungary should act in international politics but how much Hungary actually needs the international arena.

MSZP's foreign policy was rooted in the conviction that Hungary is inextricably linked to international economic and foreign policy processes, that the country's interests were more or less aligned with those of the western world, and that even if they weren't in sync in a given context, a small Central Eastern European country had to compromise in order to remain a member in full standing of the western club.

A weak Europe?

In the image portrayed by Fidesz, Hungary appears larger and, more importantly, it is far less dependent on international processes and institutions than the Socialists like to claim. Orbán's often-repeated dictum a decade ago was that there is a "life outside the European Union". This was not a widely shared notion in the region at the time, and even with growing euro-scepticism it is still a minority view.

The prime minister remains critical of the European Union, arguing repeatedly that the European model is in trouble and that countries need to devise their own strategies for the 21st century (this was also a key feature of his speech at the COSAC meeting last week in Budapest). The financial and economic crisis, the failure of traditional economic theory, the demographic crisis, etc., illustrate that Hungary cannot adhere to policies prescribed in Brussels or Washington, for those fail to properly reflect Hungary's interests and, moreover, have been found wanting. Asia's peculiar brand of development is sometimes held up as a future-resistant model, though it is unclear how exactly the Asian model might be adapted to the Hungarian context.

Hungary's role

In this framework, Hungary's foreign policy would be more assertive and more willing to reject even powerful international powers if that best suited the national interest. The first move in this struggle for "national liberation" was the government's refusal to comply with the IMF's fiscal policy demands. Apart from leaving its embassy in Tripoli open to represent essentially the entire western world, both the Prime Minister and the Minister for Foreign Affairs have failed to articulate a strong message on the 'Arab spring' or on the civil war in Libya.

However, the government aimed at reinforcing the role of Central Europe in international politics and to bolster Hungary's position within the region. Making such a use of the V4 was a central goal already under the first Orbán-government, and the prime minister appears to want to continue where he left off in this policy area. Thus far, this has not been a major success, mostly because the envisioned partners - primarily Poland - remain cool towards Hungary's attempts at endearment.

All in all, the idea of strengthening the region's political cohesiveness would be a deft move, but as long as there are no buyers it is doomed to fail.

Pragmatic governance

Ultimately, any theory is limited by the viability of its premises, and Fidesz' foreign policy falters on account of its untenable assumptions. Hungary's dependence on its international intertwinements is not below but in fact above average. Hungary depends on foreign capital, know-how, imports and exports, transportation, tourism, etc. Ultimately, foreign policy cannot afford to antagonise the major international institutions and states on many crucial issues.

That is why Hungarian diplomacy acts very different from the domestic rhetoric. With few exceptions, Hungarian foreign policy is considerably more co-operative and conciliatory than the PMs occasionally strong language would suggest. When Hungarian politicians speak or write in the international arena, they generally paint a picture of Hungary as a country that is eager to please and wishes to be a co-operative partner in international affairs.

And while Hungary did send the IMF packing and levied crises taxes that appeared distinctively designed to hurt foreign companies to the advantage of domestic corporations, these acts do not appear to be the rule. Hungary has simultaneously pledged to adhere to the EU's fiscal policy guidelines despite some initial grumbling (though the recent budget figures suggest that the EU's deficit guidelines might be violated in a more subtle way, simply through bad planning).

When worlds collide

On occasion the two distinct spheres of Hungarian foreign policy will inevitably manifest themselves simultaneously, though fortunately for the policy-makers this is rare. One instance was the clash between Prime Minister Orbán and MEPs critical of the media law. For an hour or so the schizophrenia was out in the open: while liberal, green and socialist MEPs attacked the media law (and in some cases the wider context of dubious political measures), Orbán protested against the attacks on Hungary - unless the interpreters completely failed in their task, no such attack took place.

Orbán was of course not really responding to his critics in the EP but emphasising to voters (viewers) at home the very rhetorical point outlined above: Hungary will not be subject to domination from the outside.

This attitude was expressed even more forcefully on other occasions, such as the implicit comparison between Moscow's domination of Hungary and Brussels' influence over Hungary - such nonsensical comparisons are a classic canard of right-wing populism - at the commemoration of the 1848 revolution on March 15th.

Will the limits be observed?

Provocative actions, such as the crisis taxes levied last year and some of the more muscular acts "reforming" the rule of law, as well as some provocative rhetoric, such as the PM's harsh comments about the intentions of international institutions, have damaged Hungary's standing in the international community. The bigger threat, however, is that the PM does not appear very much concerned with this and he might persist in continuing his polarising rhetoric.

Fidesz has a tendency to intellectually categorise the international arena in much the same way it interprets domestic politics: there are good forces and there are evil forces that must be reckoned with. It is not clear whether this level of complexity does the situation justice. Hungary's interests are rarely as simple as Fidesz would have it, and the IMF, or the EU for

that matter, are hardly the sinister forces as which they are portrayed. They may clearly be wrong or even obtuse on key matters – we have known such things to happen to political leaders and professionals of all ilk –, but the hostility towards Hungary, the wish for dominating it that the PM believes to have observed is plainly not there. Orbán's inflammatory rhetoric might arouse some genuine ill-will abroad, however, and while it may not bring about a desire to dominate Hungary, it could trigger some form of backlash.

Apart from the domestic applause that the hardline section of the Fidesz' base will dole out for such tough speeches, it is hard to see what benefits Orbán hopes to achieve with his rhetoric. The major risk is that with the challenge from Jobbik potentially intensifying, the prime minister will see the bashing of foreign institutions as an easy way to gain traction with defectors on Fidesz' hard-right. If that happens, it might result in more permanent damage for Hungary's diplomacy.