Orbán in the International Arena

In the last five years, Hungarian politics have become quite famous – or rather infamous – in the international community. It’s been quite a while since foreign press has written this extensively about the country. In comparison, the times of the 2002-2010 left wing-liberal coalition were much more peaceful as Hungarian diplomacy was fundamentally more adhesive. It strongly emphasized its Euro-Atlantic commitment and didn’t undertake open conflict with any of the bodies of the European Union. It did not seek to create an independent foreign policy approach in the European political scene. Hungarian foreign policy formerly sought to adhere to the views set out by the European superpowers and the EU in important issues as it was believed that it was in the country’s best interest to establish cooperation with the Western powers. The thought behind this is not at all a mystery: since Hungary is a rather small country it would be superfluous to try to determine the course of events and it is better off adapting to the bigger and stronger states and international organizations.

Fidesz’s Viktor Orbán brought quite a change of attitude when he took office in 2010. It became clear to the international public that – in contrast with their predecessors – the leaders of the country are more than willing to undertake open conflict in the international arena. The Hungarian Prime Minister does not believe that small countries do not get a say in European and international affairs, therefore, the Hungarian government abandoned its predecessor’s policy. The delegated negotiating partners accustomed to the previously relaxed and friendly Hungarian diplomats’ had to shift to a much tougher tone. Viktor Orbán’s government took on legal as well as political conflicts with the European Commission several times with various outcomes. Even when defeated, he claimed to have been standing up for Hungarian interests that others before him have failed to try.

The refugee crisis has highlighted the peak of this change of attitude. The Hungarian government openly turned against the European Union, particularly Germany, the most influential member state, when calling the idea of compulsory resettlement quotas crazy. Since then, the government has been engaged in a major national campaign to reject it, in the name of protecting Hungarians and Christian culture. They have even taken legal action
on the EU level which was not a hasty decision but a well thought-out policy as it is not the first time the Hungarian government has taken an open stand against the EU and other Western European countries.

Domestic and foreign critics have repeatedly reproached Orbán for throwing Hungary into political isolation saying that perception of the country has never been this bad. However, this is only partially true. The Hungarian Prime Minister was certainly not a popular figure among European governments and Heads of State but his “eastern opening” policy was successful enough to keep the country from complete isolation in spite of fall outs with the Western powers and the USA. He managed to establish cooperation based on interests with influential actors in world politics such as the leaders of China and Russia. Moreover, Hungarian diplomacy appeared very active in the Western Balkan countries. The Prime Minister took the view that in order to develop and sustain the domestic political system it is necessary to partially restrain Western power and economic interests as their power seemed too prominent. One example is the Hungarian banking sector: the government promised to relieve the bank tax, but only after about half of the sector was bought by Hungarians; this was even a publicly expressed objective of the prime minister. At the same time, critics were right to complain about the Hungarian leaders’ style; the tense weeks of the aforementioned refugee crisis also demonstrated this. Perhaps the Hungarian aspirations would have been easier to accept with more restraint.

During the refugee crisis, it seemed that this time Viktor Orbán was barely able to make allies in the EU, given that the Hungarian government could not prevent the EU’s Council of Ministers in September 2015 to oblige its member states (including Hungary) to implement a refugee reception quota. However, the new PiS government coming to power during the elections now agrees with Viktor Orbán in terms of the refugee policy, which is an important turnaround considering that Poland is not a small state, it has significant voting weight in EU decision-making bodies. Due to the growing pressure of immigration, more and more states – Austria, Slovenia, and Macedonia – decided to set up a border barrier, despite the fact that the Austrians previously condemned similar steps of Hungary. And, although the Austrian barrier, unlike the Hungarian one, will be only a few kilometers long, yet, the Hungarian government welcomed this change of direction with undisguised gloat.
As the refugee crisis caused great and unexpected difficulties for the affected countries, especially for Germany, and it intensified voices among European citizens opposing the acceptance of migrants / refugees, Viktor Orbán’s consistent anti-immigration politics suddenly became an interesting and exciting topic for the Western public. Several interviews with the Hungarian prime minister have been published in influential papers and websites (e.g. in the German Bild, or on the politico.eu), enabling him to speak directly to European citizens – and comments show that quite a few of them may consider it a valuable opinion. The dam has broken: an unprecedented number of foreign commenters write on Viktor Orbán’s Facebook page, and, adapting to this, the Hungarian prime minister’s staff now also publishes videos with English subtitles. Since the 1989/90’s change of regime, no Hungarian prime minister was able to evoke such an active interest around him among foreign citizens. However, Orbán is not only able to reasonably reject the quota: he is also capable of addressing the Europeans who are afraid of Muslim immigration, and this was further emphasized by the Paris attacks.

The Polish change made the international political climate more favorable for Viktor Orbán. His allies are already trying to make him seen in Hungary as a politician who has gained significant international prestige – and it is certainly an undeniable political achievement of him that Orbán is able to influence the public opinion of Europe. At the same time, there is a significant risk for the Hungarian government that since the crisis aggravated its relations with many of the Western governments (particularly the German government) and the EU Commission, it is possible that they will offer less development funds for Hungary in the next seven-year budget cycle of the EU than at the present. But this budgetary bargaining will only affect Hungary four or five years from now, while the next Hungarian elections are expected to be in 2018. As the Hungarian opposition has few things to say, for now, his rejecters can only hope for a change of political luck.