

Axe murderer diplomacy

During the famous ping-pong diplomacy of the 1970s, the People's Republic of China and the US exchanged visits by table tennis players to pave the way for improved relations between the two countries. In a slight modification of the original model, Hungary is sending an axe murderer to follow up on previous improvements in the country's relationship with gas-rich Azerbaijan. The Hungarian government's extradition of convicted killer Ramil Safarov to Azerbaijan – where he was immediately released and celebrated – was generally interpreted as a move intended to further bilateral relations between the two countries. It appears, however, that it is more than just a piece in the Hungarian-Azeri bilateral puzzle; it may well be a prominent step in the overall strategic reorientation of Hungarian foreign policy towards the East.

It is fair to say that Hungary does not regularly court controversy in its international relations. Especially under its cantankerous President Vaclav Klaus, the Czech Republic was for example repeatedly in the international news on account of her openly voiced euro-scepticism. Similarly, Poland under President Kaczynski had no qualms holding up EU summits when the president felt his country was not sufficiently taken into account by a particular agreement. Other small countries – e.g. Greece under Papandreu the elder – had similar reputations from time to time.

Hungary generally preferred to behave and be thought of as a quite, nice and reliable international partner. Correspondingly, our foreign policy is mostly boring and scarcely figures in the popular interest. Hungarian foreign policy news are few and often towards the back pages of newspapers. Though Hungary was often in the international news with negative headlines since Orbán's return to the premiership, this did not fundamentally alter the scandal-free workings of Hungarian diplomacy. Of all the internationally relayed controversies since Fidesz took power, the vast majority pertained to domestic, most often democracy-related issues. While Orbán was clearly more provocative on the international scene than any of his predecessors – including himself – Hungary did not get embroiled in any bilateral scandals.

A sudden storm

For the general public, therefore, the diplomatic scandal that erupted between Hungary and Armenia came quite suddenly. Because of the extradition to Azerbaijan and subsequent release of an Azeri soldier imprisoned for murdering an Armenian in Budapest, the Armenian government severed diplomatic ties with Hungary. One blogger pointed out that this was the first instance since 1967 that the diplomatic relationship between Hungary and another country were cut. We have not been able to verify this piece of information, but what is definitely true is that it is an extremely rare event. Certainly, Hungarians are not used to seeing their national flag maltreated by foreigners, not even in the neighbouring countries with which relationships are occasionally tense, not to mention faraway countries of mutually little interest.

Ties with Armenia were weak to begin with, of course, which is probably why Armenia came to this decision so quickly and why Hungary has reacted with such nonchalance to losing an

international partner. The practical impact of the decision appears negligible for now, but the ethical implications and their effect on the perception of Hungarian foreign policy are more far-reaching.

What actually happened

The man released, Ramil Safarov, was taking an English course in Budapest in 2004 within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme. Not quite in line with the goals of the programme, he took an axe and snuck into the room of a fellow student, the Armenian Gurgen Margaryan, and murdered him in his sleep, with what the police termed "unusual cruelty". Safarov claimed that Margaryan had insulted the Azeri flag, which is a distinct possibility in light of the hostility between the two nations. The murder, however, was certainly not an immediate, affective reaction, but rather one of the planned, cold-blooded variety, which makes the brutality of its execution all the more chilling.

Safarov was given an appropriate life sentence which he began serving in Hungary, until he was suddenly extradited to Azerbaijan last week, where as a reward for his actions and subsequent "suffering" he was welcomed with full honours and promptly released with a presidential pardon. He also received an impressive promotion to boot. The Armenians' shock and intense reaction is therefore understandable.

What did Hungary know?

Within Hungary, the most important question was why the government extradited Safarov and whether it knew that the Azeri government would release him. None of the potential answers are particularly reassuring. Naturally, the government claimed that the Azeris had promised to keep Safarov locked up, and it added that the transfer was perfectly normal procedure within the framework of applicable European law. With some painful delay, the relevant document, in which Azerbaijan's government pledged to carry out the effective sentence, was presented to the daily most friendly to Fidesz, Magyar Nemzet. This was an interesting choice also because the paper's internet portal clearly sought to downplay the issue even as the non-Fidesz media was abuzz with it.

Another oddity was how long it took the government to react to Safarov's release. It was only after an auspicious two-day delay and considerable pounding from the press and the opposition that the Hungarian government finally proclaimed that it was outraged by what had occurred and promised to deliver this stern message to Azerbaijan's ambassador in Budapest. Outrage generally registers somewhat quicker, as Armenia's rapid reaction shows. Still, it is not clear what the government knew in advance. The absolute naïve scenario was called into doubt by Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, who claims Minister of Justice Tibor Navracsics assured him a little while ago that Safarov would not be extradited. Given Navracsics's long history of uneasy relationship with the truth, Sargsyan's statement may well be true. Either way, being duped by a country that Hungary has so assiduously courted over the past two years also does not shed good light on the Fidesz-government. And the Azeris' open acknowledgment of the Hungarian government's co-operation in bringing Safarov home seems like mockery intended to pour fire on the panoply of sinister speculations.



Courting Azerbaijan

What made the whole event especially suspicious were ruminations that Hungary had reached a secret agreement with Azerbaijan that in return for the release of Safarov the latter country would purchase Hungarian government bonds worth billions of euros, thereby rendering Hungary less reliant on the IMF for financing its debt. Through Péter Szijjártó, the recently minted junior minister for foreign and international economic policy, the government flatly rejected any such connection and relegated it to the realm of fantasy. The problem appears to be, however, that most commentators' fantasy is just not creative enough to come up with an alternative explanation why Safarov was released in spite of ample warning suggesting that he was widely considered a national hero rather than a criminal in Azerbaijan.

If Szijjártó and Fidesz are saying the truth, then one must consider the timing of Safarov's extradition extremely unfortunate, for there is a narrative that meshes far better with the course of events than the government's claim. Under Fidesz, the government has strongly intensified relations with oil-rich Azerbaijan, including state visits and agreements. Whether or not there was a specific quid pro quo involving Safarov or whether his transfer was merely intended as a signal of general goodwill between the two nations is largely irrelevant as long as one assumes – reasonably – that without the context of intensifying relations he would not have been extradited.

Signs of a new foreign policy?

Until now, Orbán's repeated bashing of the West, his prophecies on the decline of the latter and his insistence on reorienting Hungary towards the East might have seemed like rhetoric, but Safarov's release marks one of the most open steps in turning rhetoric into policy. The decision is openly accommodating of the Azeri government's peculiar attitude towards a nationalist killer, and makes clear – not for the first time, witness the harassment of Tibetans during the visit of the Chinese prime minister – that the Hungarian government will gladly gloss over justice or human rights and similar considerations in the interest of furthering Hungary's material interests through bilateral ties. The notion that Hungary's debt could be refinanced in the East – in particular China – has been raised before, after all.

Of course such a “realist” view towards foreign policy is not necessarily unusual, neither in the West nor in Hungary. The previous governments, it may be worth recalling, were also busy cosying up to Russia and China, and PM Ferenc Gyurcsány memorably raised eyebrows among Hungary's European partners by committing to Russia's South Stream gas pipeline, arguing that it would be built more quickly than the EU's Nabucco pipeline. Nevertheless, a fair comparison should also note that despite Azerbaijani entreaties to this effect, the previous government had refused to let Safarov go. It appears possible therefore that the Orbán government wishes to give greater consistency and substantive heft to the previously haphazard eastern strategy, and needs it to be accompanied by commensurate gestures towards governments that appreciate partners who are less concerned with traditional western sensitivities. Those who think that further steps in this direction will raise protests in what is essentially a slightly less developed, but nevertheless western country, might heed Orbán's much debated reminder uttered a few weeks ago: Hungarians are a people of “semi-Asian origin” that need to be guided by force.