

HUNGARIAN POLITICS IN-DEPTH

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ANALYSIS: FOR HUNGARY, A TALE OF TWO GERMANIES

From a Hungarian perspective, there seem to be two Germanies these days, which is somewhat ironic given that we are coming up on the 25th anniversary of the events that ended Germany's division. In the one Germany, high-ranking officials in one government party offer some of the harshest criticisms of the Orbán government in all of Europe. In the other Germany, high officials in another government party expressly laud Viktor Orbán and his policies or at least defend them in public.

The harsh criticisms are voiced primarily by Michael Roth, a social democratic undersecretary in the foreign ministry, and the SPD's point man on Hungary. In repeated criticisms of the Fidesz's governments policies, Roth has made clear that the German government is well aware and concerned about problematic developments with regard to democracy. While Roth's immediate superior, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (also SPD), is less explicit in his own warnings, he too has called on the Hungarian government to respect Europe's core values. And of course it is obvious that Roth's comments are also representative of the foreign minister's opinions.

At the other end of the German government's spectrum, leading figures of the right-wing CSU - the smallest coalition partner and sister party of Germany's main governing party, the Christian Democratic CDU - have emerged as Viktor Orbán's most enthusiastic defenders on the mainstream right in Europe. In a highly symbolic political message, CSU chairman and Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer, one of Germany's most influential politicians, sat down to give a joint interview with Viktor Orbán. While their answers were suffused with implicit (e.g. the EU and the values underlying it, including democracy) and explicit (the euro) disagreements, on the whole Seehofer gave Orbán's democratic credentials an unqualified

endorsement, which these days even most conservative politicians would rarely be willing to do.

Crucially for Orbán, the EPP group in the European Parliament is also led by a CSU man, Manfred Weber, who was one of the most vocal defenders of Fidesz even before he became the leader of the largest group in the EP this year. Nonetheless, it must be added that Weber's elevation to this post is still somewhat of a loss for Orbán: though Weber is among Fidesz's most vocal allies among mainstream politicians in the EU, he can seem downright distant at times as compared to his predecessor Joseph Daul, who seemed personally enamoured of Orbán. Weber is of course also to some extent dependent on Fidesz. After losing mainstream conservative delegations from the UK, Poland and the Czech Republic to euro-sceptic groups, the EPP can ill afford to forgo further conservatives - even if they are merciless critics of the EU, as Fidesz is - if it wants to retain its paper-thin edge over the social democrats as the largest EP faction.

In another ironic twist, Seehofer is among those who push the German government towards taking a tougher stance against the Russian government, while some prominent SPD politicians are counselling more caution and greater understanding for Russia's geo-strategic interests. Given that Orbán is widely regarded as one of the few allies of Putin among European leaders - which has added to the rift between Hungary's government and the West, especially the US - CSU and SPD might both have come down on the opposite ends of the Hungary issue had the party alignments been different, for example, i.e. if a left-wing government were engaged in Fidesz-like practices.

While her coalition partners send deeply conflicting messages about Hungary (and Russia), Chancellor Angela Merkel sits atop the confusion like a sphinx, keeping everyone guessing on where Europe's most powerful politician really stands on the Orbán issue. This is of course not an unusual position for Merkel, who often prefers to wait out developments. In her most intense criticism of Orbán to date, she stressed that she does not agree with everything Orbán does, which may be strong language diplomatically but is nonetheless virtually meaningless. Her professed dislike for Orbán's style of leadership may have been more stinging personally, but Orbán does not need to be loved. More importantly, recent speculations about an official visit to Hungary next February would provide a crucial boost for the Hungarian PM, who is widely seen as having manoeuvred Hungary into international isolation. What better to counter this impression than a friendly visit by Europe's most powerful politician?

Nevertheless, Merkel's public silence does not necessarily imply that German foreign policy is not actively pushing Hungary into a more mainstream European direction. What is obvious is that there has been a major shift in the Hungarian government's recent communication, as the anti-western rhetoric and pro-eastern/Russian course is replaced by unusually firm commitments to the West overall and NATO and the EU in particular. This has been complemented by a charm offensive geared specifically towards Germany, whose leaders

Fidesz now courts avidly. After a slew of complimentary statements about Germany by leading Fidesz politicians and Orbán's abovementioned interview with Seehofer, the Hungarian government also awarded seven German politicians - mostly conservatives, but also two liberals - with Hungarian orders of merit.

While Hungary has generally tried to avoid antagonising Europe's most powerful country and Hungary's most important trading partner, this level of enthusiasm is unusual and uncharacteristic of the Fidesz government. As recently as last spring, Orbán felt quite comfortable ignoring carefully worded German advice on the memorial for Hungary's WWII victims, which in an act of historical obfuscation squarely lays the blame for all atrocities committed at the time at the German door.

Citing an unnamed high-level source in Fidesz, the Hungarian weekly HVG names decisive German pressure as the underlying cause of this shift. Allegedly, the Germans made clear that they were fed up with Hungary's wayward ways and wanted Orbán to fall back in line, especially on Russia. That makes sense, for there was little indication previously that Hungary would suddenly seek to normalise its relations with the West. In his July speech on illiberal democracy, for instance, Orbán was still merrily burying the West. The threat of Angela Merkel adopting an openly critical stance towards Orbán might carry sufficient weight to induce such a change, however. And the promise of an official visit in the near future is also an indication that Merkel knows how to combine the stick with the carrot.

At the same time, this success is also a testament to the enduring notion that the EU is much more of an interest-based than a value-based community, which even Horst Seehofer strenuously denied in his abovementioned joint interview with Orbán. There is namely no indication at this point that this change will also lead to a reversal of controversial domestic policies. Even though strictly speaking even the internal conduct of fellow EU members is no longer just a foreign policy matter, for the most part that is exactly how EU members tend to relate to one another.

Of course we do not know if Merkel's pressure - if that is indeed the cause of the Hungarian foreign policy shift - also implies concessions on domestic policies. Even if it does, it will likely allow Orbán to save face by instituting those more quietly. What is obvious, however, is that German pressure was not triggered by a concern for Hungarian democracy and is not primarily aimed at remedying such concerns, either. Still, in the most optimistic interpretation it does suggest that Germany is in a position to achieve major shifts in Hungarian policy. Moreover, it would be an affront to Merkel if Orbán timed another assault on the rule of law to coincide with her visit, so if the chancellor does commit to upgrade Orbán's international status with a visit, she might at least delay further controversial measures.

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