

Hungary and Russia

by George Friedman - March 7, 2023

The Russian government has informed Hungary that its diplomats entering Russia will have to pay a fee rather than pass into Russia without paying for visas. Since levying a minor charge on diplomats entering countries is fairly common, Russia's move seems inconsequential. However, Russia also said that the fee will be levied until the Hungarians rectify certain violations of an agreement, which is presumably the agreement governing diplomatic relations.

What makes this significant is that Hungary, fairly alone among European nations, has developed a singularly friendly relationship with Russia. Recall that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban visited Moscow shortly before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Orban was seen conversing with Russian President Vladimir Putin about war and making a deal for a large amount of Russian natural gas to be delivered to Hungary. More important, Hungary refused to join the coalition coalescing to resist Russia. As recently as last week, Orban said that the fight between Russia and Ukraine is not a matter of concern to Hungary. Hungary was therefore the country in Europe least committed to supporting Ukraine and most enjoying its relationship with Russia.

This is what elevates a seemingly trivial bureaucratic misunderstanding to something noteworthy. Russia has no positive relations with members of the EU aside from Hungary, and it's odd that Moscow would allow any doubt to be cast on that relationship. It is not the importance of the policy shift; there is none. It is Russia's decision to impose this fee on a friendly nation, and then to publicize it, at a time when President Vladimir Putin needs to find a way to change Europe's point of view on the war.

Key to understanding this is understanding the Hungarian-Russian relationship. Hungary has strained relations with many of its neighbors, not to mention the European Union and NATO. The EU has sought to fine Hungary for violations of European rules concerning the organization of the judiciary, freedom of the press, immigration and other things. The EU has withheld some funds as punishment and has threatened to suspend others. In turn, Budapest has obstructed Finland and Sweden's NATO membership process. Perhaps most interesting, Orban visited the United States to attend meetings of conservative Republicans, many of them committed to former President Donald Trump. He has been a thorn in the side of the Western political establishment.

His reasons for doing this are partly ideological – he accepts the principles of American and European conservatives and, in accepting them, believes the West is corrupt and weak. When he saw that war with Russia was coming, he assumed the West would either fail to defend Ukraine or collapse in the face of Russian power. Like others, he expected Western help to be limited, Ukraine to be rapidly overrun by Russia, and a new political and institutional structure to be established in Europe. This reasonably led to moving close to Russia and separating himself from Western powers. The fact that his assumptions were wrong has forced him into a difficult position. If Ukraine falls, Russia will occupy the eastern border of NATO – a border shared by Poland, Hungary and Romania. The next Russian move, in the face of the defeat of NATO, would likely run through Hungary, whose terrain enables relatively easy passage. NATO would therefore have to deploy soldiers to Hungary to block Russia. Hungary is a marginal player in the Ukraine war, but if Russia overtakes Ukraine, moves into Central Europe and establishes a new balance of power, Hungary will be a key battleground – in which case Orban's relationship with Putin will mean little. So long as the Ukrainian war continues Hungary is secure. That changes if either Russia or the West scores a decisive victory. From Budapest's point of view, the situation can get out of control.

Ingratiating itself with the West, then, would make sense for Hungary. It knows it cannot control Russia, and that it will need to be at least congenial with the West if or when it wins in Ukraine. This is why Russia's decision to levy fines is strange. For now, Russia needs Hungary, and Hungary needs room to maneuver. It's unclear if this is meaningful, or if this little more than a slap on the wrist of a nation Russia values is part of a broader shift on the battlefield and thus on the global stage.

P.S. After completing this article we received an update that Orban is now calling for an immediate cease-fire and negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, and is preparing to go to Kyiv to meet President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and act as a kind of mediator.

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