



Merkel and Orbán: splitting the EU?

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Divided in Unity

The EU plunged into an unprecedented crisis due to the inflow of the refugees and the terrorist threat, apparent to everybody after the Paris attacks. Member states are pulling into different directions, national solutions overwrite a potential common approach and a new dividing line appears: the unsolved North-South debate on the Euro-crisis is now complicated by the widening gap between East and West, threatening a common future of the EU.

The two poles of the present crisis are called Germany and Hungary. Germany - if benevolently, following a humanitarian agenda - took a unilateral decision when suspending the Dublin and the Schengen agreements and accepting (even inviting) hundreds of thousands of refugees without coordinating with the other EU-members. Hungary, on the other side, shut its southern border, and built a fence, without coordinating with its European partners and its own neighbors. One might argue that both countries had the right to react to the unprecedented challenge with national solutions, claiming that these lie within their sovereignty, but in fact, both methods lack of a long-term, European vision.

The broken Berlin- Budapest axis

Consequently, we can sense a growing disagreement, sometimes even outright animosity between Berlin and Budapest. Hungarian stakeholders openly criticize Angela Merkel and the current German refugee policy. Viktor Orbán called the refugee crisis “not a European, but a German problem”. János Lázár, the minister heading the Prime Minister’s Office qualified the German decision to accept refugees - following the chaotic scenes outside the Budapest Eastern Railway Station - as “unspeakable”. Lázár, who actually tries to position himself as a friend of German business in Hungary, and is keen on keeping close touch with German politicians, also complained that Germany wanted to force its will on Europe (in the debate on refugee quotas). Hungary’s negative (and occasionally very biased) image in the German media contributes to the ill-feelings towards Berlin in Hungarian government circles. The verbal warfare reached new dimensions as the highest ranking official attending the 25th (ceremonial) German-Hungarian Forum in Berlin was only an Undersecretary of State from the Hungarian, and a Head of Department from the German side. Both foreign ministers had been invited, but both declined to participate.



The political difference between PM Orbán and Chancellor Merkel is evident and it has been aggravated by Orbán's surprise move to side openly with Horst Seehofer and the CSU in a German domestic debate concerning refugees. One may wonder what sort of political advantage Viktor Orbán was expecting from such undiplomatic move. According to some rumors from Hungarian government circles, Budapest was betting on a toppling of Chancellor Merkel from her own party. Angela Merkel's position has been weakened by the uncertainties of how to handle the mass inflow of asylum seekers. Her isolation is growing in Germany and in Europe. The reaction from the Danish and Swedish governments to close the borders is evidently showing the desperation of the neighboring countries at the unilateral German move. Criticism is growing in the media and in the CDU, but as no potential candidates are on stage, it would be very early to speculate on Merkel's end. She is still the major asset of the CDU, and a challenge from Bavaria usually unites not only the CDU, but all other German political forces.

It is understandable that Viktor Orbán is seeking allies in Western Europe, but winning Munich may ultimately lead to losing Berlin. It is also understandable that there is a growing acceptance for Orbán's proposals concerning more border controls but his outright rejection of migration - and the generalization that all terrorist are migrants, totally ignoring Anders Breivik and the terror attacks in Norway - makes it almost impossible for any mainstream West-European politician to share a platform with him, since it would question fundamental values and the last four decades of openness of Western societies.

The Central European perspective

More support is given to the Hungarian approach in Central-Europe. Victor Orbán thus managed to split the EU, and vindicated a leading role for himself in the anti-refugee camp, opposing Germany. The split may become ultimately dangerous for Germany, which has so far considered Central Europe a safe backyard and an undisputed political and economic ally for Berlin. The favorable situation may change soon with the new Polish government, a natural ally for Orbán, and with the traditionally EU-skeptical Czech and the populist Slovak government, all siding now with Budapest. Orbán managed to reinstate the unity of the Visegrad States but this unity can prove to be temporary. Cracks could appear soon, e.g. when the EU starts negotiations about prolonging sanctions on Russia.



Nevertheless, an anti-German and an anti-European agenda could keep this alliance together on the long-term. Interestingly enough, all these countries are economically heavily dependent on Germany, and so far all are net beneficiaries of the EU structural and cohesion funds. They all supported the strict fiscal policy line of Berlin in the euro-crisis. A permanent split in Europe and a long-term feud with Berlin would not serve their interest, but an anti-German agenda could help mobilize frustrated voters any time. A quick move is necessary, as anti-EU slogans gain ground in Central Europe, and they are coupled with a growing anti-German feeling.

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