

Gergely Rajnai

Motivations of defiance

Viktor Orbán has been a controversial figure in European politics for the past decade. He has collided with the European Union on numerous occasions: there were clashes about [the media law](#), [the new Constitution and its amendments](#) and [migration policy](#), to name just a few contentious topics. These conflicts have led to constant speculation within and outside the European People's Party that his party (Fidesz) might be forced to leave the largest group in the European Parliament and join a less mainstream group (the EPP remains torn and continues to [mull over](#) what to do about this issue).

These confrontations have mostly been [interpreted](#) from the perspective of European values and Orbán's opposition to them, as well as clear [examples of populism](#) gaining ground all over the world; i.e. as signs of an ideological conflict. However, it would also be interesting to take a look at why this conflict has come to the forefront. What motivated Hungary, a small state (less than 10 million inhabitants) with an economy that is relatively weak among EU member states (in the bottom third based on GDP per capita) to go against the European mainstream?

Small countries without a thriving economy are usually unable to influence the international arena; their actions are largely determined by external factors (mostly the actions of great powers). These states usually follow the lead of a great power to obtain protection and other potential rewards from them. Post-communist Central European states (including Hungary) have almost invariably opted for this strategy since the 1990's, seeking the approval of the West, trying to meet any expectation the European Union or the United States had for them politically, militarily, economically or otherwise. They did so hoping that this would allow them to catch up to the West soon, and their economies would rival that of other EU member states.

These hopes remain mostly unfulfilled to this day, and may have been far-fetched from the beginning in light of the structural disadvantages these countries had compared to their Western counterparts. Nevertheless, more and more citizens of these countries have become increasingly dissatisfied with the lack of progress, and while the European project remains relatively popular in the region, the role of 'silent follower' is seen as a failure by an ever-growing portion of the electorate. The identity of these voters, which was based on the promise of catching up to the West, has been getting

weaker and weaker through the years. Reaffirming this identity required action by these countries that was different from the follower attitude adopted for decades.

Governments of this region faced a challenge of what action to take given the geopolitical constraints of their nations. Viktor Orbán took a gamble to shed those constraints, and attempted to reaffirm the identity of his voters by presenting himself as a leader who does not follow the West, but is able to shape Europe. That was impossible without leaving the mainstream, however, switching to an ideology that had almost no traction in the West at the time (that has since been labelled populist), where he could be seen a leader of a movement throughout Europe. While this resulted in clashes with Brussels and the West by design, which in certain cases made it difficult to articulate national interests internationally, it marked a clear split from the earlier strategy of following the lead of the West.

This split allowed Orbán to portray a picture of a new international scene, where Hungary, not being able to catch up to the West by following, has instead become a political trendsetter for the West. The spread of the populist movement across Europe (even though it is still a minority overall) creates a perception that while economically, Hungary (and the

region in general) has not been able to catch up to the West, politically, it is the West that is playing catch-up to Hungary. It does not matter how objective that perception is, what matters is that it is real for many disgruntled voters whose identity has been reaffirmed by it.

Creating this perception was the main aim of the shift in strategy by the Hungarian government. It was motivated mostly by the geopolitical constraints of a small state and the growing dissatisfaction with the relationship to the West due to the lack of (economic) results. The actions of the Hungarian government over the last decade provide an example of how small states could create a situation where they are not followers of great powers: this is not possible by following the mainstream, only by spearheading an alternative movement that could create a perception of being an important international player. This perception could reaffirm the identity of a significant voting bloc, and strengthening identity is one of the main goals of any politician. This was the main motivation of the shift in Hungarian foreign policy.

The takeaway that can be applied in general is that while small states generally follow the lead of great powers (expecting certain rewards in return), when the expected rewards are lacking for a certain amount of time, some of these states can

be expected to deviate from the follower strategy in order to strengthen their waning identity. Small states can only be perceived as leaders if they do something out of the box and against the mainstream, which is not in the interest of great powers in general. While this strategy is risky, it could pay off domestically for political figures as a strengthened identity can be a solid foundation of lasting political support. Therefore, great powers should be paying attention to the rewards small states receive for meeting expectations at all times to avoid these defiant strategies. After all, in politics, perception is reality.