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Threats to Kick Hungary Out of EU Highlight a Deep Crisis of the Union

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Emotions are running high as the date of the Hungarian referendum (Oct. 2) draws near - when they will decide whether the European Commission's mandatory refugee quota is compatible with the country's laws. Luxembourg's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Jean Asselborn, implored his colleagues in the European Union to boot Hungary from the EU, claiming that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's policies are in conflict with EU values.

Asselborn is a prominent figure in the informal hierarchy of European bureaucracy. «We cannot accept this gross violation of the European Union's founding principles», he stated in an interview with Germany's Die Welt. «...Hungary's temporary or perhaps permanent expulsion is the only way to preserve the cohesion... of the EU».

The Hungarians were swift to respond. Hungary's minister of foreign affairs, Péter Szijjártó called his colleague from Luxembourg a lightweight politician who is «tirelessly working to destroy European security and culture». Szijjártó stressed that it is within a state or nation's sovereign rights to secure its borders and to make decisions about admitting migrants. «And no official in Brussels or foreign minister of Luxembourg can take away this right», noted the Hungarian minister. These are very forceful words and they undoubtedly reflect the position of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, but are they enough to influence the European Commission's plans to issue orders about how to allocate refugees among the EU member states?

In any event a conflict is brewing, with implications beyond that of a dispute between Budapest and Luxembourg or Budapest and Brussels.

First of all, no one is clear about the mechanism for any possible «punishment» of Hungary (if things get that far). Article 7 of the Treaty of Lisbon does not give the EU the power to expel a state from its ranks, but only to «suspend the privileges» associated with that membership. Moreover, such a decision must be made unanimously (via consensus) at the level of the European Union Council, which makes taking this step a formidable, if not impossible, task: Hungary's stance on migration is to some degree shared by many countries in Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe.

Second, it is hardly a coincidence that the statements by Luxembourg's minister of foreign affairs that are so sharply critical of Hungary appeared in the pages of Germany's leading newspaper. After all, that is where the problem of migration has become such a hot-button topic as the parties battle it out during the regional elections, and the situation will be no different when votes are cast next year for the Bundestag.

After her party's recent crushing defeat during the state parliamentary elections in Mecklenburg–West Pomerania, Angela Merkel urgently needs to fine-tune her migration policy - or else find someone to else to take the blame. And Hungary would be the perfect candidate for that, given the historically difficult relationship between Germany and Hungary and the fact that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán holds his own dissenting opinion about the most important issues of European integration as well as about relations with Russia.

Third, Budapest is not alone in its criticisms of the immigration policy of Brussels and Berlin. A consensus has effectively emerged within the ranks of the Visegrad Group, which Angela Merkel could plainly see for herself after spending late August negotiating with the heads of the governments of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. The V4 have expressed their disagreement with the migration policy that Germany is imposing on the European Union, which includes the quota system.

Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka in particular has stated, «*The Czech Republic cannot agree to any system based on a mandatory quota to forcibly allocate refugees*». Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has stressed that the European Union is not currently prepared to solve a number of problems: «*The EU has lost its ability to adapt - we do not know how to respond to migration and terrorism*».

And in light of the worsening relationship in recent months between Poland and Germany, Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski has gone a step further, accusing Berlin of ignoring the interests of other EU member states. «*Often we see Germany pursuing its own goals ... Of course, every country has the right to safeguard its own interests, but there are circumstances under which we would expect a certain degree of compromise*», commented Waszczykowski.

It is interesting to watch the Visegrad Group grow closer to Austria as the disputes over migration escalate. Austrian Defense Minister Hans Peter Doskozil has already called Berlin's approach to the migration crisis «irresponsible». Some are apt to see signs here that an anti-German bloc is coalescing within the European Union, in which Vienna is ready to call the tune. Not surprisingly, the foreign minister of Luxembourg - a member of yet another informal union within the EU (the Benelux) - has seen a direct threat in the statements by spokesmen for the governments of Central and Eastern Europe.

And in conclusion, the final factor. An informal EU summit was held on Sept. 16 in the Slovak capital of Bratislava. Slovakia, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the EU Council, has a stance on migration issues that is perhaps even more at odds with Brussels than that of Hungary. Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico «*always cautioned the EU about uncontrolled immigration bringing terrorism*», writes Austria's *Die Presse*.

So Hungary's hypothetical boot from the EU will not resolve the problem of Europe's shaky unity. Rather one should expect the ruling groups in some of the leading European countries to soon be ousted from power. Including in Germany.