Relations deteriorate between Hungary and Ukraine

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The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry has expelled a consul of the Hungarian government for what it calls the illegal distribution of Hungarian passports to Ukrainian citizens.

In hidden camera footage posted to YouTube in September, Hungarian consular staff in the town of Berehove are shown distributing Hungarian citizenship documents and leading oaths of loyalty to the Hungarian state.

Under Ukrainian law, citizens are not permitted to hold dual citizenship. However, in practice, as a multi-ethnic country with a large number of Ukrainians living and working abroad, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens hold passports from Russia, Belarus, Poland, Romania and elsewhere.

In retaliation for Ukraine's expulsion of its government representative, Hungary announced that it would be kicking out a Ukrainian diplomat currently stationed in Budapest. It also threatened to block Ukraine's bid for NATO and EU membership.

The escalating tit-for-tat expulsions are a result of deteriorating relations between the two right-wing, nationalist governments over the treatment of ethnic minorities, laws on language rights and geopolitics.

Over 200,000 Hungarians live in Ukraine, with the majority residing in the Zakarpattia province. Prior to World War II this region was not considered part of then-Soviet Ukraine.

Discrimination against the Hungarian language has been presented by the government of Viktor Orban as the main reason for its increasingly negative attitude towards Kiev. In September of 2017, the Ukrainian government of Petro Poroshenko introduced a new, undemocratic language law that limited the ability of ethnic minorities to be instructed in their native language. It made Ukrainian the required language of instruction for all students in secondary school.

While the bill was clearly intended to target the use of Russian language in schools and "Ukrainianize" the country's Russian population, it also angered other ethnic minorities. In response to the changes in the language bill, EU members Hungary, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria all filed complaints with the Council of Europe and the OSCE. Hungary said that it will veto any vote in support of Ukrainian membership in the EU and NATO, unless the language bill is changed.

The enforced use of Ukrainian has been utilized by the Poroshenko regime and the country's nationalist thugs to attack ethnic minorities and whip up ethnic hatred of all things "anti-Ukrainian." This is part of the now over four-year-long war against the Russian-majority Donbass region of the country, which attempted to break away from Kiev in the wake of the anti-Russian coup that brought Poroshenko to power.

In September, the western city of Lviv banned all Russian-language books, movies and other cultural artefacts, despite the fact that a substantial minority of the population uses the Russian language in daily life.

Such actions have further emboldened right-wing thugs to attack those speaking languages other than Ukrainian in the public sphere. In September, a McDonald's worker in Kiev was accosted by a right-wing "activist" for speaking Russian while serving customers.

Although language has been the issue most prominently cited by the Western media as the source of tensions between Hungary and Ukraine, there are more fundamental material and strategic issues at play.

Despite being both an EU and NATO member, the anti-immigrant, far-right government of Orban has cultivated closer ties with Russia, much to the annoyance of the United States and other EU members.

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Hungary has been one of the only EU members to voice opposition to EU sanctions against Russia. It has continued to vote for their enforcement in the European Council, so as not to endanger its own status with the EU.

Hungary is also one of the few EU countries that has seen its trade increase with Russia, after initially falling as a result of the sanctions. The country expects its trade with Russia to nearly double in the coming year.

Orban and Russian President Vladimir Putin held face-to-face talks in early September over gas and energy supplies. Russia is set to build a “TurkStream” oil pipeline that, like the Nordstream pipeline in the Baltic Sea, will allow Russian oil to bypass Ukraine en route to Western Europe.

At the summit, Orban admitted that it was “no secret that when the gas pipeline from the south comes towards Hungary, we would like it to continue through Hungary. That would be a great opportunity for Hungary.”

Russia and Hungary also agreed to move forward with the building of two Russian-made nuclear reactors at the Paks Nuclear Power Plant in central Hungary.

The inflaming of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations takes place as the Azov Sea has becomes a new flashpoint between the Russian and Ukrainian militaries. Ukraine has accused Russia of carrying out aggressive actions against Ukrainian ships in the region and using the waters to supply Russian-backed separatists in the Donbass region.

In addition to already announced plans to build a naval base on the Azov Sea, Ukraine’s Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council (NSDC) Oleksandr Turchynov declared last week that the country intends “to conduct serious drills in the waters of the Azov Sea." For its part, Washington has supplied the Ukrainian navy with patrol boats.

Last month Ukraine conducted a series of provocative military exercises throughout the country with the support and involvement of the United States, which has military “advisers” all over the territory. Ukraine’s army sent troops towards the Hungarian border during the exercises, in an attempt to intimidate Budapest. Kiev denied that the exercises targeted Hungary, absurdly claiming that the show of force was meant to prevent Russia from invading Ukraine from the west.

While Trump is constantly lambasted by the Democratic Party for being insufficiently aggressive towards Russia, he has in fact gone further than former President Barack Obama in support for Kiev, including by sending the country Javelin anti-tank missiles.

In September, the US House of Representatives approved the 2019 draft military budget, which increases war funding for Ukraine to $250 million.

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