Ukraine, Hungary clash as NATO discusses Ukrainian membership

Jason Melanovski
7 December 2020

A long-running dispute between Ukraine and Hungary has worsened in recent weeks as the two right-wing governments continue to trade accusations over the status of ethnic Hungarians living in the Zakarpattia region of western Ukraine. The region, which had earlier been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, is today home to 1.26 million people, with 80.5 percent ethnic Ukrainian and 12 percent ethnic Hungarian residents.

Kiev and Budapest have been at odds over the status of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Zakarpattia since 2017, when the right-wing nationalist government of former President Petro Poroshenko introduced an undemocratic language law that limited the ability of ethnic minorities to be instructed in their native language and 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 the country's other sizable ethnic minorities. Several European Union (EU) member countries, Hungary, Greece, Romania and Bulgaria, all filed complaints with the Council of Europe and the OSCE.

The right-wing government of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, which has used the issue of ethnic Hungarian communities throughout Europe to expand its influence since it came to power in 2010, responded to the language law by distributing Hungarian passports to ethnic Hungarians within Ukraine. Hungary has repeatedly threatened to block Ukraine's further integration into NATO and the EU and regularly cancels full NATO-Ukraine meetings over the language issue.

The most recent catalyst for a further breakdown in relations was a video on Facebook which showed local government officials in the western Ukrainian town of Siurte apparently singing the national anthem of Hungary during a meeting. Whoever posted the video purposely edited out the officials first singing the Ukrainian national anthem prior to the Hungarian.

The video was quickly exploited by right-wing Ukrainian nationalists who viewed the anthem singing as a deliberate provocation ordered from Budapest and pointed out that the meeting had taken place on November 21, which is known as the "Day of Dignity and Freedom" in Ukraine. The recently created holiday celebrates the anniversary of the beginning of the right-wing US- and EU-backed "Euromaidan" protests in 2013 that later led to the coup against the democratically elected President Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014.

In response to the video, on November 30 the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) raided the offices of Hungarian political and civic organizations in the Zakarpattia region. The SBU claimed that they "were suspected of conducting subversive activity to the detriment of Ukraine in the interests of a neighboring country."

As a result of the raids, the SBU claimed, "During searches, law enforcement officials discovered printed materials promoting a so-called 'Greater Hungary' and the creation of an ethnic autonomy in Zakarpattia." Kiev also directly accused Hungary, a NATO member since 1999, of supporting Hungarian separatism and stated that it was investigating the Hungarian organization's "complicity in a foreign government's subversive activities to the detriment of Ukraine, including by committing high treason."

Following the incident, Budapest summoned the Ukrainian ambassador to lodge a protest over the raids. In response, the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs

© World Socialist Web Site

Dmytro Kuleba summoned the Ambassador of Hungary to Ukraine István Íjgyártó to call Hungary's claims of persecution "groundless speculation."

Earlier in October, Kuleba had filed a complaint with Íjgyártó over the supposed interference of Hungarian officials into local elections in the Zakarpattia region.

Two Hungarian government officials were refused entry into Ukraine in November after they were accused of campaigning for the Party of Hungarians of Ukraine in local elections.

The Zakarpattia region is strategically important to Kiev. Ukraine's natural gas transit system has its westbound outlet there *en route* to the European Union and the region directly borders the EU and NATO member countries Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania. As a result, the region is also home to sizable non-Ukrainian ethnic communities, which are suspect in the eyes of the right-wing nationalist forces that came to power in Kiev in 2014.

The fallout between Ukraine and Hungary came at a particularly inopportune time for the government of President Volodymyr Zelensky as it took place just prior to a meeting of NATO Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Brussels on December 1-2.

Despite coming to power with pledges to end the now over six-year-long conflict in eastern Ukraine that has claimed the lives of over 14,000 people, the Zelensky government has doggedly pursued full NATO membership just as strongly as the previous regime of the right-wing nationalist Petro Poroshenko.

This past week Ukrainian Defense Minister Andrii Taran stated that he expects Ukraine to receive a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the next NATO Summit in 2021. Taran also called upon NATO member states to accept Georgia as well and claimed that "Ukraine's and Georgia's potential membership in NATO will have a significant impact on Euro-Atlantic security and stability, in particular in the Black Sea region."

Prior to the 2014 US-backed coup, Ukraine had maintained a nonaligned status in regards to NATO, but after the coup the government embarked on a course of integration with NATO. In February 2019, the Ukrainian government passed a constitutional amendment, stating its commitment to join both NATO and the EU, and in June of this year it became a member of NATO's Enhanced Opportunities Partnership program.

At the recent NATO ministers of foreign affairs meeting, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg spoke directly on the dispute between Hungary and Ukraine, hinting at the deep crisis within NATO over the potential membership of Ukraine. He said, "I will not go into the details of a classified discussion at the NATO ministerial meeting. But what I can say is that it's well known that there is a bilateral dispute between Hungary and Ukraine. And I hope that the two countries will be able to solve this bilateral dispute. But I think the meeting today demonstrates that we are able to continue to, of course, strengthen our partnership with Ukraine. We are able to provide more support, and we also are able to meet at the ministerial level to discuss issues of common concern."

For Hungary, the meeting in Brussels was an opportunity to further condemn Kiev in front of its NATO allies. Speaking via video, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó ominously stated, "Ukraine, a country not a member of NATO, has launched an attack against a minority group originating from a NATO member country. This is obviously a scandal, and it is unacceptable in the 21st century," Szijjártó said. "Especially from a country claiming to want to draw closer to NATO."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site