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'The Shadow of an Axe': Exploring the Hungary-Azerbaijan-Armenia Diplomatic Tensions

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ANDRAS RACZ, SEP 30 2012

In 2004, an officer of the Azerbaijani armed forces, Lt. Ramil Safarov[2] murdered an Armenian fellow officer in Budapest while participating in a NATO Partnership for Peace training. He was sentenced – by a Hungarian court – to lifelong imprisonment, to be served in Budapest. After several unsuccessful attempts from Azerbaijan to get Safarov extradited, finally on 31st August 2012 Hungary transferred Safarov to Baku, after being promised by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Justice that the sentence was not to be changed and Safarov would remain in custody. However, he was pardoned by President Ilham Aliyev immediately after his arrival in Azerbaijan, and has become a widely celebrated national hero.

On the same day, the outraged Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan suspended diplomatic relations with Hungary. The subsequent scandal has been unprecedented in the modern history of Hungarian diplomacy: the Hungarian honorary consulate in Yerevan was attacked, several protest demonstrations were held in front of Hungarian embassies by local Armenian diaspora members, and the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has become target of a strong media campaign both at home and abroad.

This paper aims at providing an overview of the background motives of the Hungarian government behind the transfer, and also of the reactions to the issue. Hence, the main research question to answer is why Hungary decided to transfer Safarov to Azerbaijan? The question is particularly relevant because the Hungarian state administration was well aware of the possibility that Safarov might be freed: this was the very reason why several earlier Azerbaijani transfer requests had been turned down. Hence, the article deals mostly with the domestic Hungarian context of the issue, and not with the already well-discussed international reactions and consequences.

Azerbaijan in Hungarian Foreign Policy

In order to understand the background motives behind the transfer, one needs to take a closer look on the Hungarian foreign policy objectives regarding Azerbaijan. The government of Viktor Orbán, in power since 2010, announced the doctrine of ‘Eastern opening’, which means the re-positioning of the Hungarian foreign trade towards countries of the East, and the increased activity to attract investments from Eastern regions. The primary intention is to counter-balance the consequences of the financial crisis in Western Europe that hit Hungary particularly hard. According to a recent interview by Péter Szijjártó, State Secretary for Foreign Affairs and External Economic Relations of the Prime Minister’s Office, who is responsible for the ‘Eastern opening’, the policy focuses on three countries of the former Soviet Union: Kazakhstan, Georgia and Azerbaijan.[3][4]

Azerbaijan has started to gain importance for the Hungarian foreign policy already in 2006-2007, due to the large energy reserves of Baku, and the gas supply diversification possibilities offered by them, the most important of which was, of course, the Nabucco project. In 2007 a large-scale Nabucco conference was organized in Budapest with the participation of Azerbaijani Minister for Energy Industry Natiq Aliyev. In 2009 a Hungarian embassy was opened in Baku, and in the same year at the second Nabucco conference President Aliyev gave a speech as well. Several high-level Hungarian officials visited the Azerbaijani capital, including former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Kinga Göncz, former Minister of Economics János Kóka, prominent leaders of MOL

Hungarian Oil and Gas Company, and many others.[5] All in all, Azerbaijan has already been a country of key importance for Hungary well before Viktor Orbán came to power. However, before 2010 Hungarian interests had been focused primarily on energy issues.

The new element reflected by the 'Eastern opening' is the broadening of Hungarian policy interests: besides the traditional energy security element, the new agenda includes attracting Azerbaijani investments in Hungary, looking for/securing Azerbaijani contracts for Hungarian construction companies, establishing a Hungarian trading house in Baku, and many other issues, as reported during the last visit of State Secretary Szijjártó to Baku.[6]

Besides, according to a Reuters news agency report in early August 2012, there were negotiations going on between the Hungarian and Azerbaijani governments about a possible issuance of Hungarian state bonds denominated in Turkish lira and Azerbaijani manat, by using a major Turkish broker firm.[7] Reportedly the plan was that Azerbaijan was to buy these bonds in the value of 2-3 billion euros through Turkey, thus contributing to the financing of the Hungarian budget. This action would fit the efforts of the Orbán-government to find alternative, non-Western sources of state debt financing. However, the competent Hungarian state debt agency denied the plans and stated that 'the Hungarian state is not planning to publicly issue foreign currency denominated government papers before a successful closure of negotiations with the IMF and the European Commission.'[8]

The transfer of Ramil Safarov and the Immediate Reactions

Though various Armenian newspapers had reported the possible transfer of Safarov[9] earlier, the transfer itself caught the Hungarian public by surprise. The first official communiqué, released by the Ministry of Public Administration and Justice responsible for the transfer, informed the public about the move only, and emphasized its legality.[10] The shock was made even bigger by the 31st August late night decision of the Armenian National Security Council to suspend diplomatic relations with Hungary. Crisis was further deepened by the reaction of the U.S. National Security Council that condemned the move, and expressed the concerns of the U.S. government over the increasing regional tensions.

Communication by the Hungarian government was initially – for almost two days – somewhat stunned. However, the pro-government newspaper *Magyar Nemzet* published a leaked letter already on 1st September that had been sent to the Hungarian government from the Azerbaijani ministry of Justice on 15th August 2012. In the letter[11] Azerbaijani Deputy Minister of Justice Vilayat Zahirov "informed" the Hungarian Ministry of Public Administration and Justice that the execution of foreign courts' decisions in Azerbaijan is `in accordance with Article 9, paragraph 1, point a) of the European Convention`[12] thus the sentence is to be carried out without any change or any new judicial procedure.

Thereafter, Hungarian official government communication started to focus on stating that the Azerbaijani letter could be perceived as a guarantee, and Budapest did not expect the release of Safarov at all.[13] Various Hungarian officials, including State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Zsolt Németh and others openly accused Baku of cheating when Safarov was pardoned and released.[14] Besides, official communication kept emphasizing that the release was fully in accord with international law. In addition, the Hungarian government consistently denied the existence of any secret deal behind the transfer of Safarov.[15] Prime Minister Orbán said on 3rd September that Hungary acted in accord with international law, and perceived the whole issue to be a problem of two different states (e.g. of Armenia and Azerbaijan) with which Hungary has had nothing to do. Since then, the official Hungarian government communication has handled the problem as a 'non-issue.' If there are any declarations at all, mostly the legality of the procedure is emphasized, and the importance of international reactions is somewhat downplayed.

Contrary to the initially dazzled Hungarian government communication, the non-governmental sector started to express its solidarity with Armenia almost immediately after the transfer of Safarov. Already on 2nd September Roman Catholic Archbishop Péter Erdő sent a letter to the Armenian Christians, expressed his solidarity with Armenia, and condemned all forms of ethnic hatred and violence. Hungarian Protestant church leaders sent another letter, to Patriarch of Armenia Karekin II, in which they declared that without questioning the legality of the decision of the Hungarian government, they condemned its consequences.[16] On 4th September a large solidarity

demonstration was organized in Budapest in protest to the decision on the transfer of Safarov.[17] Besides, several dozen public figures and thousands of individuals expressed their solidarity with Armenia, and distanced themselves from the government. All in all, the transfer of Safarov induced an unexpected outcry of protest in the Hungarian society, and directed public attention to the generally rather neglected Nagorno-Karabakh situation.

However, as pointed out by several Hungarian political analysts, most domestic opposition parties and movements – except the strongly pro-Turkish rightist radical party Jobbik that strongly favors Azerbaijan[18] – have taken a pro-Armenian stance mostly due to their domestic political motivations, and not because of any inherent, lasting solidarity with Armenia.

How the Transfer Decision was Taken?

Regarding the administrative aspects of the decision-making, when the possibility of the transfer was discussed inside the Hungarian administration, literally every competent government agency, e.g. the Ministry of Public Administration and Justice, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and others as well were very much against the deal.[19] The arguments reportedly focused on the possibility that Safarov could be released; regional tensions may increase, and international reactions could be harshly critical. However, in spite of all opposing opinions, the Prime Minister finally decided on the transfer, which was promptly executed by the administration.

The personal involvement of the Prime Minister in the transfer was confirmed by numerous government sources. Minister of Foreign Affairs János Martonyi declared in several interviews that the decision was taken by Viktor Orbán, and he ordered the administration to proceed with the transfer. Moreover, on 11th September Hungarian online newspaper origo.hu published an article about a meeting of the governing party Fidesz, where party members asked Orbán about the Safarov case. According to the article,[20] Orbán described the transfer as *'not the price, but the basis*' of improving relations with Azerbaijan. Besides, the article also stated that when the concrete order was given to the Minister of Public Administration and Justice to proceed with the transfer, Orbán ignored the repeated warnings of the ministry staff. Regarding the diplomatic scandal, the Prime Minister bluntly reacted that it would just pass, and there was no need to worry too much about it. The very fact that neither the government, nor the Fidesz party demanded any correction of this article, generally confirms its content.

All in all, the administration itself was very much aware of the possibility of the release of Safarov, and also of the possible regional-level and international consequences. This was confirmed by Orbán personally, when he said in an interview that all the consequences were foreseen and calculated with[21], though one may be tempted to evaluate this declaration simply as a face-saving move.

On the one hand, this demonstrates that the Hungarian administration system actually functioned rather well, as they properly forecasted most consequences, though they seemed to underestimate the strength of the Armenian diaspora. On the other hand, the fact that the will of the Prime Minister (and/or of his direct staff) could overwrite all the contrary recommendations of all the competent administrative bodies, demonstrates something that was characterized by a foreign diplomat as "The system still functions, but its backbone is visibly broken."[22]

Conclusions

The transfer of Ramil Safarov to Azerbaijan and his immediate release there has inflicted significant damage to Hungary. On the one hand, though the Hungarian government claims that it was aware of the possible consequences, the initially incoherent and dazzled government communication does not support this position. It is much more likely that though certain negative effects were foreseen – the competent administrative bodies were against the transfer, exactly because of the risk of a release – the domestic and international political avalanche created by the transfer was clearly not.

On the other hand, Azerbaijan clearly has a prioritized role in Hungarian Eastern policy. While in the second half of the 2000s this position was centered around issues of energy security, the agenda has become much broader during the Orbán-government. Currently, besides the traditional energy security motives, Hungary also has the ambition to

attract Azerbaijani investors, to secure contracts for Hungarian private companies in Azerbaijan, and Baku may also contribute to the financing of the Hungarian state debt in one way or another.

Hence, the answer to the research question is that the *Leitmotif* of the transfer was probably composed of two elements, a positive and a negative one. The positive component was the intent of the Prime Minister to demonstrate Hungary's goodwill towards Azerbaijan, which was strong enough to overwrite the preliminary warnings received from various levels of the Hungarian state administration. The negative element was that the Hungarian top leadership clearly underestimated the importance of the Safarov case, regarding both Baku and Yerevan. Had they have not, both the immediate release of Safarov and the radical Armenian reactions could have been easily predicted, as well as the subsequent increase of regional tensions, that induced harsh international criticism.

Besides the immediate consequences of the release, e.g. the Armenian suspension of diplomatic relations with Hungary and the international diplomatic outcry, the Safarov-case is very likely to have certain lasting consequences as well. First, following the scandal, it would require extreme care from Hungary to accept any kind of financial support from Azerbaijan, due to the probable accusations from the Armenian side of taking 'blood money' in exchange for Safarov. The same applies to the intended construction contracts and investment projects as well. Second, though the international community condemns Azerbaijan as well, the image of Hungary as a predictable and competent ally has clearly been seriously damaged. Third, the Safarov-case divided even the core domestic supporters of the Hungarian government (one needs to remember, for example, the letters of the Christian church leaders), and the issue is very likely to remain on the agenda of the domestic opposition as the 2014 parliamentary elections are slowly approaching.

All in all, it seems that with the transfer of Safarov to Azerbaijan, the Hungarian government maneuvered itself into a no-win position. Budapest has to cope with all the negative domestic and international consequences of the case, either without receiving any benefits in exchange, or if some material compensation is given, the political costs are most likely to exceed the possible financial benefits.

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András Rácz *is an Assistant Professor at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary. His main research interests are the foreign and security policies of post-Soviet states and the foreign policy of Hungary. The views presented here are solely of the authors own, and they no way represent either the official position of Hungary, or the Pázmány Péter Catholic University.*

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[2] Azerbaijani and Armenian names in the article are transliterated according to their pronunciations in English, while Hungarian names are left in their original forms.

[3] Hungarian Government (2012): *Közös alap jöhet létre Kazahsztánnal*. [A joint fund may be established with Kazakhstan] . Official website of the Hungarian government. 20 September 2012. Available: http://www.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/hirek/kozos-alap-johet-letre-kazahsztannal Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[4] Csuhaj, Ildikó – Edit, Inotai: 'Szijjártó Péter, az unortodox bizalmi ember.' [Péter Szijjártó, the unorthodox man of confidence] *Népszabadság*, 19 September 2012. Available: http://nol.hu/belfold/szijjarto_peter__az_unortodox_bizalmi_ember Last accessed: 20 September 2012.

[5] Hungarian Embassy in Azerbaijan (2012): *Politikai kapcsolatok* [Political ties] Available: http://www.mfa.gov.hu/kulkepviselet/AZ/hu/Bilateralis/politika.htm Last accessed: 20 September 2012.

[6] Today.az: *Azerbaijan's Market is Attractive for Hungarian companies*. 23 July 2012. Available:

http://www.today.az/news/business/110735.html Last accessed: 20 September 2012.

[7] Reuters: *Hungary in talks for lira sovereign issue in Turkey-officials* . 2 August, 2012. Available: http://www.sharenet.co.za/news/Hungary_in_talks_for_lira_sovereign_issue_in_Turkeyofficials/d54a148a3591e73d7491ab5eec4d1f2c Last accessed: 20 September 2012.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For example, see: Panarmenian.net: *Public figure: Azerbaijan willing to blackmail Hungary over the Safarov's case*. 30 August 2012. Available: http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/news/120972/ Last accessed: 21 September 2012. Note that this news was released actually one day before the transfer.

[10] Hungarian Government (2012): *Közlemény Ramil Sahib Safarov Azerbajdzsán részére történt átadásáról*. [Communique on the transfer of Ramil Sahib Safarov to Azerbaijan]. 1 September 2012. Available: http://www.kormany.hu/hu/kozigazgatasi-es-igazsagugyi-miniszterium/hirek/kozlemeny-ramil-sahib-safarov-azerbajdzsan-reszere-tortent-atadasarol Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[11] Magyar Nemzet Online: *Itt a bizonyíték – hazudtak az azeriek*. [Here is the evidence – the Azeris have lied] 1 September 2012. Available: http://mno.hu/belfold/itt-a-bizonyitek-hazudtak-az-azeriek-1102783 Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[12] Reference to the Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/en/Treaties/Html/112.htm Please note that in contrary to the text of the original letter, the Convention officially does not carry the word „European" in its title as it is explicitly expressed in the attached Explanatory Report submitted to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

[13] See, for example: Hungarian Government (2012): KIM: A hivatalos azeri levél garanciának volt tekinthető [Ministry of Public Administration and Justice: The official Azeri letter could be considered as a guarantee.] 3 September 2012. Available: http://www.kormany.hu/hu/kozigazgatasi-es-igazsagugyi-miniszterium/hirek/kim-a-hivatalos-azeri-level-alapos-garancianak-volt-tekintheto Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[14] Fidesz (2012): Németh Zsolt: jogszerű magatartást követtünk. [Zsolt Németh: We acted in line with the law] 5 September 2012. Available: http://www.fidesz.hu/index.php?Cikk=183945 Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[15] Fidesz (2012): Szijjártó: Egy nemzetközi jogi ügy és a gazdasági kérdések nem függenek össze. [Szijjártó: A Question of international law and economic issues are not interrelated] 4 September 2012. Available: http://www.fidesz.hu/index.php?Cikk=183910 Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[16] Hirado.hu: *Magyar egyházi vezetők együttérző levelei az örmény ortodox egyház fejének* [Letters of sympathy from Hungarian church leaders to the head of the Armenian church.] 2 September 2012. Available:]http://www.hirado.hu/Hirek/2012/09/02/11/Magyar_egyhazi_vezetok_egyutt_erzo_levelei_az_ormeny.aspx Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[17] Metropol.hu: *Tüntetés a Kossuth téren a Milla szervezésében* [Demonstration on the Kossuth Square organized by Milla] 4 September 2012. Available: http://www.metropol.hu/itthon/cikk/932662 Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[18] See comments of Gábor Vona, Chairman of Jobbik party on Facebook: Vona, Gábor (2012):*Véleményem az azeri-örmény-magyar konfliktusról.* [My opinion on the Azeri-Armenian-Hungarian conflict] 3 September 2012. Available: https://www.facebook.com/vonagabor/posts/10151247464269623?utm_source=mandiner&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=mandiner_201209 Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[19] Interview with Hungarian ministry official, Budapest, September 2012.

[20] Origo.hu*: A kockázatok ellenére döntött Orbán az azeri baltás gyilkos elengedéséről* . [Orbán decided about the transfer of the Azeri axe murderer despite the risks] 11 September 2012. Available: http://www.origo.hu/itthon/20120911-orban-viktor-dontese-volt-az-azeri-baltas-gyilkos-kiadatasa.html Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[21] ATV: *Baltásgate: Orbán szerint nem történt olya, amivel ne számoltak volna* . [Axe-gate: According to Orbán, nothing pre-calculated did not happen.] 11 September 2012. Available: http://atv.hu/belfold/20120911_orban_elismerte_o_adta_ki_az_utasitast_safarov_kiadatasara Last accessed: 21 September 2012.

[22] Interview with foreign diplomat in Budapest, September 2012.

About the author:

András Rácz is an Assistant Professor at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary. His main research interests are the foreign and security policies of post-Soviet states and the foreign policy of Hungary.