

Everything that hinders European integration of Ukraine is contrary to the interests of Slovakia and Hungary (or on the inability to learn from our own recent history)

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In response to the adoption of the education law by Ukraine in September 2017, which introduced compulsory teaching in Ukrainian at secondary schools, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto declared: “Hungary would veto any EU measures that could foster Ukrainian integration” (cited by Natalia Zinets, Krisztina Than, “Hungary threatens to block Ukraine's EU progress in language row”, *Reuters*, September 26, 2017). Although the Venice Commission did not find that the law is in conflict with Ukraine’s international obligations in the field of protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities (see Venice Commission Opinion: Opinion No. 902/2017 of 11 December 2017: CDL-AD (2017) 030), Hungarian diplomacy has acceded to coercive measures against Ukraine. Although the Hungarian Foreign Minister in his initial reaction to the Ukrainian law on education spoke of blocking Ukraine’s cooperation with the EU, this has so far manifested itself mainly in blocking Ukraine’s cooperation with NATO. Since late 2017 Hungary has been blocking NATO-Ukraine meetings at the presidential, ministerial and flag-officer levels, jeopardizing NATO-Ukraine cooperation.

At the same time, since 2017, Hungary’s approach towards Ukraine has weakened cooperation in the V4 plus Ukraine format. Also due to the position of Hungary, the Slovak Presidency of the V4 (July 2018 - June 2019) had to withdraw from the plan to organize a summit of Prime Ministers in the V4 format plus Ukraine, because within the V4 the principle of consensus applies to joint decisions. Also due to Hungary’s attitude towards Ukraine in the last three years, the possibility of introducing the “V4 minus 1” format at the expert level in the V4 began to be considered in case one of the Visegrad countries blocks cooperation with third countries in the “V4 plus 1” format provided that the other three countries are interested in such cooperation. Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic do not share Hungary’s current approach to Ukraine; on the contrary, they consider it counterproductive. I dare say that the Hungarian approach towards Ukraine is contrary to Hungary’s own long-term interests. Everything that hinders Ukraine’s European integration is contrary to the interests of Hungary, and the same is true of the other V4 countries, including Slovakia.

There are many arguments supporting this statement; in this post I will mention only one of them. Blocking Ukraine’s European integration also means blocking the development of Hungary itself and, above all, condemns to permanent economic backward the region of north-eastern Hungary on its border with Ukraine, which is actually one of the poorest regions in Hungary. Ukraine’s European integration, and in particular the implementation of Ukraine’s Association Agreement with the EU, represents an additional impetus for the development of Hungary itself. It is irrational to pursue a policy that hinders Hungary’s development. Hungarian politicians could and should have a better understanding of their own ancient and very recent history. This includes understanding of the importance and meaning of Hungary’s European integration to its own development. Suffice it to point out one of the consequences of Hungary's integration into the EU, including its own association process.

The Association Agreements of Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia with the EU concluded in the early 1990s, which included liberalisation of trade with the EU, caused, in recent decades, the dynamic development of the regions of Germany bordering Poland and the Czech Republic as well as regions of Austria located on borders with the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Research on the effects of EU-15 expansion, including the effects of

trade liberalisation stimulated by the Association Agreements of former communist countries in the region of Central Europe on the development of the regions on the former external border of the EU prior to EU-15 and EU-25 expansion in 2004, clearly shows that the main “winners” of the integration process of the V4 countries with the EU in terms of regional development were the border regions of those V4 countries on the borders of the former EU-15, likewise also those German and Austrian regions on the other side of the borders. In comparison with other regions in the V4 countries, the regions located on the borders with Germany and Austria over the past 30 years have shown much greater economic growth than regions situated in the internal territories of the V4 countries, Germany and Austria. At the same time, this research shows that the location of regions on the external border of the EU is a factor that contributes to their economic marginalisation and lagging behind in terms of socio-economic indicators of their development. The implementation of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement will create comparable foundations for the economic development of cross-border cooperation on the borders of Ukraine with the EU, including the border with Slovakia and Hungary.

Hungarian politicians could and should learn from their own history if they do not want to repeat the same mistakes of Hungarian politics indefinitely. Self-harm caused by the inability to reflect on one’s own historical experience, unfortunately, still persists in Hungarian politics, and definitely, does not serve the interests of Hungary.