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He came in like a wrecking ball

Orbán's recent diplomatic antics have rattled the EU. But member states have the chance to end Hungary's Presidency within weeks — if they want to

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán kicked off Hungary's six-month Presidency of the Council of the EU with diplomatic moves that shocked the country's EU and NATO partners. He began by going to Kyiv for his first bilateral meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. There were no tangible results on disputes between the two countries, but Ukraine pledged to address Hungary's concerns related to the status of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia and the treatment of Hungarian companies. This led to cautious optimism regarding a rapprochement and a moderate pro-Western turn in Hungary's foreign policy.

A few days later, however, Orbán made a snap visit to Moscow that was not coordinated with Hungary's EU and NATO partners or Ukraine. This was only the first move that revealed his intention to abuse the Council Presidency by pretending to speak in the name of the EU, sowing confusion and harming EU foreign policy, and advancing the interests of Russia and the West's other illiberal rivals.

In clear ignorance of his lack of mandate

The EU treaties make it clear that the government holding the Council Presidency does not represent the EU in external affairs. This is the prerogative of the president of the European Council, the president of the European Commission, and the high representative for the common foreign and security policy. Still, Orbán has used the logo of Hungary's Council Presidency during his trips so far, repeatedly alluded to his position at the helm of the council and did not contradict President Vladimir Putin when he announced that he represented the EU during their meeting. Russian state propaganda also heavily exploited Orbán's visit and narrative, which perfectly matched the Kremlin's talking points.

Orbán framed his Moscow trip as the next stage of his 'peace mission'

after going to Kyiv, when, in fact, he clearly broke with the EU's position of not negotiating about Ukraine *without* Ukraine and kept the visit secret from Kyiv. European Council President Charles Michel, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the current and future high representatives, Josep Borrell and Kaja Kallas, criticised the trip, underlining Orbán's lack of an EU mandate and that the presidency does not represent the EU.

Orbán went directly from Russia to Azerbaijan to attend the informal summit of the Organization of Turkic States. From an EU perspective, the trip raised questions related to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Cyprus as representatives of the unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus were also present. This was brought up by Borrell as well as by the co-chair of the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) political group, Nicola Procaccini from *Fratelli d'Italia*. This shows Orbán's deteriorating relations not only with the EU mainstream but also with the ECR and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who were considered his allies before the recent European Parliament elections.

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From Baku, Orbán then flew to Beijing to meet President Xi Jinping. There, he praised China's central role in and commitment to achieving peace between Russia and Ukraine while remaining silent on Xi's decision to stay away from the Geneva peace talks in June. From China, Orbán travelled to the NATO summit in the United States, where he also met Donald Trump.

All of this was only the beginning. Throughout the rest of Hungary's Council Presidency, there will be more uncoordinated visits during which Orbán will disregard and damage EU positions — to Trump in the United States, to Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, and to Georgia and Moldova as they face tense elections in the fall.

As predicted, Orbán is showing that he will use the presidency for foreign policy trolling — not for superficial annoyance and disruption but in a strategic way. With his post-communist mindset, he has internalised that the turning point in the demise of empires and supranational institutions is when they start being a laughing stock. That is why he seeks to ridicule the EU.

With his erratic behaviour and multivector foreign policy, Orbán wants to show that there are no consequences for repeatedly breaching EU rules and undermining EU positions. This invites ridicule for the EU – internally and externally – by showing it is incapable of maintaining unity and that a rogue member state can act as a wrecking ball without suffering any negative consequences. One key question is why, witnessing this, should other countries – such as Belarus, Georgia and Serbia, to mention only some of its neighbours – heed what the EU says.

What can the rest of the EU do?

The most important strategic task facing the EU is to attach negative consequences to Orbán's behaviour. Right now, it is the other member states and the European Council that should do this, given that it will take months for the next European Commission and the new European Parliament to be fully operational. And, crucially, the reaction of member states is what matters to Orbán, given his disdain for supranational EU institutions.

The cancellation of Hungary's EU Council Presidency has been discussed numerous times over the past year. In June 2023, the European Parliament even adopted a resolution questioning the country's ability to fulfil the tasks of the presidency constructively and in good faith. The Meijers Committee, a prestigious lawyers' organisation in the Netherlands, has identified a legal way to deprive Orbán of the presidency.

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The other member states can cut Hungary's presidency short by applying the legal tools identified by the committee to bring forward Poland's presidency from 1 January 2025 to 1 September or sooner. In parallel, they should conclude the first stage of the Article 7 procedure against Hungary to justify breaking with the treaty-based principle of 'equal rotation' of the presidency.

In order to achieve this, the president of the European Council should file a motion on the basis of Article 236 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to change the calendar of the rotating presidency. The European Council members could then change the starting date of Poland's presidency to August or September through a simple qualified majority vote.

Concerning the Article 7 procedure, member states should file a motion to the Council Secretariat to put on the agenda of the next General Affairs Council meeting a vote about 'the existence of a clear risk of a serious breach to EU values' in Hungary according to Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union. This decision would require a four-fifths majority.

Both initiatives should ideally be led by France, Germany and Poland, supported by a large group of member states including the Baltic countries and countries from Central and Eastern Europe, like Czechia, Romania and Slovenia.

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Member states will never have a better window of opportunity to act — and they need to so now. In the radical-right part of the EU's political spectrum, the Meloni-Orbán relationship is strained, with the Hungarian leader's new Patriots for Europe political group luring ECR members. And the coming elections in Austria and Czechia will only bring more Orbán allies into power.

If they deliver an appropriate reply to Orbán's trolling and ridiculing of the EU, member states can end Hungary's Council Presidency within weeks. All that is needed is proper diplomacy and majority building in the European Council.

Reality is proving wrong the experts who argued that Hungary's presidency could only do very limited damage to the EU. For those who would still rather muddle through, the lesson from the last few days is that they should be prepared for more from Orbán.



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