EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 08.02.2024 | Ernst Hillebrand

Orbán is playing the long game

Hungary's prime minister failed to prevent the allocation of billions in EU aid to Ukraine. But he was likely focused on something else anyway

Viktor Orbán took a gamble... and lost. But the Hungarian prime minister was smart enough not to go all-in. He managed to avoid irreparable damage, giving up on a last-ditch attempt to veto the EU's aid programme for Ukraine.

Even before the vote took place in Brussels, Orbán knew that the odds weren't in his favour. In an interview with the French magazine *Le Point* two days before, he had already waived his white flag, claiming Hungary was being blackmailed by Brussels and that all the other EU countries saw things differently from Hungary. It's not easy being the black sheep of the family, he said. More than a question of support for Ukraine, for Orbán it was probably about something else, as is often the case with his European and foreign policy escapades: consolidating his political position in Hungary as the self-appointed guardian of the country's interests in a hostile world.

Mastering the game

Despite having been forced into a U-turn, the last week for Orbán hasn't all been that bad. He did manage to have his photo taken with the EU's big wigs: Scholz, Macron, Meloni, von der Leyen and Michel were all there — alongside the man himself, Viktor Orbán, the head of the Union's sovereigntist 'indomitable village'. He was able to spout his populist message of standing up for the little guy — that the EU should defend the interests of Europeans over those of Ukrainians, and not vice versa, and that it could spend the €50 bn on its own people. Within this feud about withholding EU funds for Hungary, he was able to achieve a few verbal concessions. But in view of the clear majority on this issue, there was no more that could be gained, and Orbán knew that, too.

With his 'Hungary first'

After all, he is a highly experienced politician who has seen pretty much everything and

policy, Orbán is as popular as he's ever been in the country.

everyone in European politics. When he first became prime minister in 1998, Ursula von der Leyen had not even entered politics, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz was trying to secure a parliamentary mandate as chair of the SPD's Altona group in Hamburg, and French President Emmanuel Macron had just started studying after failing the entrance exam twice for one of France's prestigious *Grandes Écoles*. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni was an up-and-coming, newly elected neo-fascist on the regional council for the province of Roma, and twenty-two-year-old now-President of the European Council Charles Michel began his political career serving on the regional council for Brabant-Wallonia. At that time, Orbán had been a member of the Hungarian parliament for eight years and one of the best-known faces of the anti-communist revolution.

With his 'Hungary first' policy, Orbán is as popular as he's ever been in the country. Many people have been turned off by the severely corrupt crony capitalism surrounding the prime minister's family since 2010. But at the same time, the narrative that Hungarian sovereignty and the self-determination of Hungarian citizens cannot be defended by anyone as much as Orbán and Fidesz prevails. Successive election victories like those seen by Fidesz – a party that has ruled with massive absolute majorities since 2010 – are not down to luck; they happen when politicians are able to correctly interpret and effectively influence the mood of a country.

Of course, this doesn't change the fact that the other EU Member States have made it perfectly clear to Orbán that they won't be letting the tail wag the dog this time. It seems that the EU is suffering from another case of Orbán fatigue, as Donald Tusk put it. It's worth asking ourselves what Orbán's end goal here might be. At the moment, almost all observers – including those closer to Fidesz – struggle to see any longer-term strategy in his play. By delaying Sweden's accession to NATO, he is creating considerable upset, not only among ideological opponents, but also among friends.

The best guess is that

Hungary is largely isolated within the EU after the opposition's election victory in

Orbán is simply playing for time, hoping that the next European elections, as well as the elections in the US and in France, will cause a significant shift in political weight in the Western hemisphere.

Poland and the divisions in the Visegrád Group following the Ukraine war. The ostentatious friendly gestures toward non-Western autocracies, from Turkey to Moscow and Central Asia to Beijing, do not deliver any greater dividends, neither politically nor economically. But they also create a growing mistrust of Budapest in conservative circles in the EU and NATO. Orbán's position on the Ukraine war is easier to understand: he has said from the outset that the main goal of Hungarian politics is not to be drawn into the conflict in its neighbouring country. This attitude secured him an overwhelming election victory in April 2022. Since then, he has advocated that the West's policy should be aimed at a ceasefire, as he considers Kyiv's plan for peace through victory to be hopeless against a nuclear-armed Russia. Orbán believes that the longer the war goes on, the more people will die — including members of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. But this position has also isolated the Hungarian government in the EU and NATO. None of this serves the country's interests.

'The more enemies, the more honour' (*viel Feind, viel Ehr*) never actually works — certainly not in politics and certainly not in the long term. The best guess is that Orbán is simply playing for time, hoping that the next European elections, as well as the elections in the US and in France, will cause a significant shift in political weight in the Western hemisphere. Orbán would then no longer be an ideological outsider but a man in the middle of a new mainstream led by Donald Trump, who, as we know, considers Orbán a 'great leader'.

That, too, is a huge gamble. Anything short of that and Hungary stands very much alone. But there's always a slim chance that Orbán will hit the jackpot.

Ernst Hillebrand

Budapest

Dr Ernst Hillebrand is head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in Budapest. He was previously Head of the foundation's International Policy Analysis Unit, the Central and Eastern Europe Unit and Head of the Warsaw, Paris, London and Rome offices.

-