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Orbán's heart may be in Moscow, but his ATMs are in Brussels and Berlin

Despite Orbán's objection, negotiations on Ukraine's EU membership will begin. The reform of the EU's critical decision-making system is next in line

On 14 December, the European Union decided to start membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant candidate state status to Georgia. The decision was kept under wraps until the last moment because despite the positive recommendations of the European Commission, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán opposed the start of negotiations with Ukraine.

The range of reasons given by the Hungarian side was wide and in part tailored individually for each of the parties involved. First, Budapest insistently and consistently pointed to the violation of the rights of national minorities in Ukraine. At the same time, Orbán's demands were changing: first, it was about making corrections to the 2017 Ukrainian Law on Education. The Hungarian government was not satisfied with the teaching proportions in the languages of national minorities. Then, the statements of Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó began to include demands to return to the 2014 norms. Probably, the Hungarian minister was referring to the scandalous Law 'On the Fundamentals of State Language Policy', that was adopted in violation of the regulations and cancelled by the Parliament in 2014 after the fall of the Yanukovych regime, and that, in 2018, was recognised by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine as unconstitutional and invalid.

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The Ukrainian Law on National Communities (Minorities) of 2022 had its share of adventures. At the request of the EU and Hungary, the Law was clarified and amended twice in 2023. Despite everything, Budapest remained dissatisfied. Even after appeals from Ukraine's Hungarian communities not to veto the decision to start membership negotiations, Orbán only emphasised that Ukraine's

membership in the EU was unacceptable.

His separate argument was the demand to synchronise Ukraine's progress in the EU with Georgia. Despite the fact that Budapest understood perfectly well that Georgia's movement to the EU would be slow under the current government.

When French President Emmanuel Macron tried to persuade Orbán to start negotiations with Ukraine, the Hungarian prime minister calibrated his arguments and spoke about corruption standing in the way of Ukraine's accession to the EU, as well as the threats that such accession would bring to European farmers. Obviously, Orbán knows that this is a sensitive issue for France and that it would resonate.

The conversation between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Orbán four days before the EU summit, when both politicians attended the inauguration ceremony of the Argentine president, did not seem to have had the desired result either. Orbán's position remained indestructible.

Moreover, the Hungarian prime minister was even able, albeit briefly, to secure Austria's support. There was a risk that along with Orbán, Austrian Prime Minister Karl Nehammer would veto the decision on Ukraine. Austria's motives were different from Hungary's. Vienna was eager to achieve the opening of membership talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the emergence of such an ad hoc alliance could significantly undermine European unity on the Ukrainian issue.

Excuses and power

This whole list of arguments revealed that Orbán was rather looking for excuses, while the reasons for his intransigence were different: money, power and, probably, obligations to Russia.

In favour of the latter argument, Orbán's intransigence increased after his meeting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin in China in October 2023. Cheap Russian gas, Rosatom funds for the development of Hungary's nuclear power plant in Paks and the ideological affinity between Putin and Orban are solid reasons that explain the prime minister's behaviour.

As far as power is concerned, perhaps never before has Orbán felt as powerful as he does these days. The red carpets of the Élysée Palace laid out for him on the eve of the crucial summit for Ukraine, the breakfast with the German chancellor, the French president and the head of the

European Council on the day of the summit, the entreaties and agreements – all this could not but please the ego of the Hungarian politician. Orbán probably felt he was the king of blackmail, like Conan Doyle's hero Charles Augustus Milverton. And like any blackmailer, he realised that every concession from the EU and Ukraine would open new opportunities for him.

Money also played no small part. Orbán's heart may be in Moscow, but his ATMs are in Brussels and Berlin. The Hungarian government, which is already teetering on the brink of losing its voting rights in the EU because of its violation of European norms, could not reach the funds blocked by the EU because of this. And Orbán's government needs them badly to fulfil its populist promises. Therefore, by threatening to veto the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine, as well as by blocking the €50 bn EU aid package to Ukraine, the prime minister also sought to 'unfreeze' European funds for Hungary (which, incidentally, he partially succeeded in doing – more than €10 bn for Hungary were unblocked at the insistence of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen). It looks like the Hungarians will continue to haggle over the European aid package. Now, Budapest has blocked the allocation of aid. The issue will be revisited at an extraordinary summit in January 2024. Orbán hopes that he will be able to 'unfreeze' additional European funds for himself, while EU leaders are looking for ways to circumvent Hungary's veto.

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As a result, Orbán did concede on a key issue. Negotiations on Ukraine's EU membership will begin. Having excellent political intuition and certain concrete results, Orbán seems to have assumed that his strategy is effective, and he can still resort to it many times during the negotiation process, bargaining political and financial bonuses for himself. Therefore, during the decision on Ukraine, Orbán left the room, and to save face, he indicated that he did not want to participate in making a wrong decision.

But the game of the Hungarian king of blackmail, like any blackmailer, is risky. Firstly, Moscow may decide that 'the partner is not honouring the agreements', and therefore it is inappropriate to support him. Secondly, Brussels, Berlin and Paris may not forgive the humiliation Orbán has inflicted not only on individual politicians but also on the entire European decision-making system. Why pay more when you can finally trigger the procedure of Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, which for violating the European principles (freedom, democracy, respect

for human rights and fundamental freedoms and the rule of law) will deprive Hungary of the right to vote and the possibility of future malfeasance?

Besides, in general, the reform of the critical decision-making system in the EU seems to be a settled issue, and its trigger was Hungary's behaviour. Using the example of Budapest, the EU has realised that the growth of populist ratings in individual member states contains significant risks for the future of the European Union. Viktor Orbán's behaviour may be only the first warning sign, and, therefore, the issue of creating safeguards arises as a conscious necessity.



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