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Orbán's vision for Europe

Can Hungary lead Europe effectively while also balancing national interests with contentious issues like EU enlargement and relations with Russia?

'In 1989, we thought Europe was our future. Today, we know that we are the future of Europe.' (Viktor Orbán, 2019)

Hungary's assumption of the rotating EU presidency raises at least three main questions. First of all, can a country that is now described as 'semi-authoritarian' by several institutes monitoring the state of democracy be fit to chair an institution based on the rule of law, the separation of powers and accountability? The short answer is: that might have been considered (and was not) in the days when Orbán's illiberal democracy was isolated on the European scene. There were populist nationalists elsewhere, but not in power. This has now changed, making any move to circumvent the Hungarian presidency a purely rhetorical one.

Another question concerns the capacity of the Hungarian presidency to shape, or at least influence, the European agenda. A presidency usually acts as an honest broker, seeking consensus. Not sure this will be the case this time. Hungary's stated priorities include European competitiveness; few will question the importance of the subject, though they may turn to the recommendations of an important recent report by Enrico Letta, Italy's former prime minister, rather than Hungarian admonitions about removing bureaucratic barriers. Budapest's opposition to the Green Deal or the Migration Pact is likely to test the new Commission's ability to implement both. But the presidency will also be at odds with the EU consensus on other issues, including Russia, EU enlargement to Ukraine, China, and the US/Trump.

Orbán and the war in Ukraine

Since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Hungary has been dragging its feet on sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine. How could the Hungarian presidency become the coordinator of a unified EU response? Orbán's first visit was to Kyiv on 2 July to meet

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The official purpose was to discuss the 'possibilities of achieving peace', while listing a series of Hungarian demands concerning the improvement of the protection of minorities (Hungarians, in particular) as a condition for Ukraine's possible rapprochement with the EU. Orbán is now on his way to Moscow for talks with Vladimir Putin in an attempt to 'mediate between Russia and Ukraine' — a move that is likely to cause fury in Brussels.

Orbán, a would-be adept of realpolitik, believes that Ukraine cannot win the war and that it is therefore necessary to bring the conflict to an end, presumably with the acceptance of some territorial losses. Orbán's position, however, is not (as often portrayed) a simply 'pro-Russian' one. Neither he, who famously demanded the departure of Russian troops in Budapest in June 1989, nor the Hungarians in general are Russophiles; they remember their history (1848, 1956). But Orbán has deliberately tapped into a widespread feeling in society ('let's stay away from this conflict', 'it's not our war') and at the same time profited from the economic advantages to be gained from his open indulgence of Putin (cheap supplies of oil and gas).

This, of course, makes it all the more difficult to help formulate a European policy on Russia and the need for strong support for Ukraine. Imagine the dialogue in the EU Council between the 'appeasing' Hungarian PM and the newly appointed High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas — a staunch opponent of Russian imperialism.

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Hungary claims to be in favour of EU enlargement to the east, but not to Ukraine. The promise of EU membership was meant as a political and symbolic form of support for a country under attack. Such talks are 'premature' for Orbán; besides Hungarian farmers would lose out, and cohesion funds for Ukraine would come 'at the expense of Hungarians', he said last December. Instead, he favours enlargement towards the Balkans, which for him means Serbia, where his alter ego, President Aleksandar Vučić, practises a similar brand of illiberal democracy.

'Over there MAGA, over here MEGA' — Orbán's presidency motto 'Make Europe great again', is a clear echo of Donald Trump's American version. His 'Trumpism' for Europe is presented as an investment in the Hungarian version of a 'special relationship' with the US. The rest of Europe shudders, and the Ukrainians have good reason to fear Trump's return to the White House — who is claiming to fix the Ukrainian war

(with Putin, who else?) in 24 hours.

A new political landscape in the EU Parliament

'We should try to go ever further in, we should occupy positions, we should gather allies, and we should mend the European Union', Orbán said at the end of last year; 'It's not enough to be angry. We need to take over Brussels.' Well, he is now 'in charge' for the next six months. Whether this will one day lead to a 'hostile takeover' is another question. It will depend less on Orbán's Hungary than on the political realignments currently underway in Europe.

The European elections have altered, though not fundamentally upset, the political balance in the European Parliament. From Orbán's perspective, they have brought two important elements: A general shift in the centre of gravity of European politics to the right, with a strong showing by populist and nationalist parties, as well as a confirmation of Fidesz' power at home. After 14 years in power, Fidesz is still standing strong with 44.7 per cent, compared to the mere 14 per cent gained by Macron's party in France or Scholz's SPD in Germany. Both elements have strengthened Orbán's ambition to become a major player in the new political landscape emerging within the EU.

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Still, the breakthrough of a new party, the Respect and Freedom Party (Tisza), launched by Péter Magyar in March, with 30 per cent of the vote, has given rise to a new opposition force whose political profile is still difficult to define. However, the fact that the party has joined the European People's Party (EPP) in the European Parliament, replacing the expelled Fidesz, provides some indication.

Yet, Tisza's ultra-rapid breakthrough did not come at the expense of Fidesz, but, for the most part, at the expense of the traditional (liberal or left-wing) opposition. Magyar thus became a potential challenger to Orbán — that is, if the old, exhausted and fragmented opposition can be brought together with the new one.

Reshaping European politics

In the short term, therefore, Orbán's significance may be less for his obstruction of EU enlargement to Ukraine (a long-term project in any

case) than for the role he wants to play in reshaping European politics. His sympathies, as he told *Le Point* in a recent interview, lie with two female politicians: 'The future of the Sovereignist camp in Europe, and of the Right in general, now rests in the hands of two women. Everything will depend on the ability of Marine Le Pen in France and Giorgia Meloni in Italy to cooperate.'

Having been ousted from the EPP, his protector as the country was sliding into what he called 'illiberal democracy', Orbán's Fidesz finds himself in the company of two other Central European 'expelled' populist leaders: Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico, who has been expelled from the European Social-Democrats' club, and Andrej Babiš, who is likely to win the next general election in the Czech Republic and is now leaving the European Liberals (Renew Europe). In them, he finds two new populist Visegrad partners, both willing to turn a blind eye to Putin's war.

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Fidesz now finds itself embroiled with Orbán as the 'honest broker' among the right-wing populist nationalists in the context of a relative weakening of the Franco-German 'tandem', which may even worsen further as a consequence of the ongoing French elections. The party is at the crossroads of two groups in the European Parliament: the European Conservatives and Reformists group and the Identity and Democracy group. Despite the creation of his own group 'The Patriots for Europe', Orbán's ambition still remains to bring these two groups together so that they can explicitly steer a new course for Europe.

Not so fast, though.

The nationalist populists are on the rise, but divided, and the centre still holds with the prevailing coalition of the centre-right (EPP), social democrats (S&D) and liberals (Renew). Besides, when you receive three per cent of your GNP in European funds, as Hungary does, you think twice before slamming the door. After the failures of Brexit (initially applauded by Orbán) and two wars on the EU's periphery, the populist sovereignists find themselves with the wind of discontent in their sails, all dressed up and nowhere to go.



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