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European leaders try to stop Orbán derailing Ukraine's EU accession bid

Європейські лідери намагаються перешкодити Орбану зірвати заявку України на вступ до ЄС

Журналісти британської газети «The Guardian» Шон Вокер, Ліза О'Керролл та Лілі Байєр коментують рішення прем'єр-міністр Угорщини Віктора Орбана заблокувати заявку України на вступ до ЄС. За їх словами, багато хто в Брюсселі вважає, що В. Орбан повторює улюблену тактику жорсткої гри, щоб досягти вигоди від партнерів по ЄС. Зокрема, впродовж багатьох років В. Орбан заявляв, що головна проблема Угорщини у відносинах з Україною полягає в тому, що вона хоче, щоб Київ надав більше прав угорській меншині. Парламент України має розглянути законопроект, який відповідь на більшу частину побоювань Будапешта, але В. Орбан тепер критикує Україну у більш загальних термінах. Директор Інституту центральноєвропейської стратегії Дмитро Тужанський заявляє, що з 2017 р. В. Орбан та його команда використовували права меншин як привід, а тепер раптом він каже, що Україна не готова до вступу в ЄС і Україна "не є демократичною". Д. Тужанський вважає, що це чистої води політичний шантаж.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/06/ukraine-eu-accession-viktor-orban>

Hungary's PM, the union's most pro-Russian leader, wants the issue off the agenda of a summit next week

European leaders are scrambling to rescue a plan to begin European Union accession negotiations for Ukraine, as Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, vows to block the decision at a summit of EU leaders next week.

The French president, Emmanuel Macron, is due to host Orbán for dinner in Paris on Thursday, while the European Council president, Charles Michel, was in Budapest last week looking for a way out of the impasse.

Orbán, widely seen as the EU's most pro-Russian leader, has said repeatedly that he will not support Ukraine's path to accession at this point. On Monday, he sent a letter to Michel demanding to take the issue off the agenda at the leaders' meeting next Thursday and Friday.

"The obvious lack of consensus would inevitably lead to failure," if the issue remains on the table, Orbán wrote in the letter, a copy of which has been seen by the Guardian.

Many in Brussels believe Orbán is repeating a favoured tactic of playing hardball to seek gains from EU partners, before eventually falling into line. However, political and diplomatic sources in Budapest said they did not believe the Hungarian leader was likely to relent this time.

"After he sent the letter saying that we shouldn't discuss the issue at all I don't see a sudden backtracking," said Ágoston Mraz, director of Nézőpont, a thinktank close to Orbán's Fidesz party. "In politics you can never say never, but as far as I see it, there is no chance."

The European Commission recommended in November that formal EU membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova should begin, which its president, Ursula von der Leyen, described as a response to "the call of history".

The decision to recommend proceeding with Ukraine's candidacy was a rare bright spot for Kyiv, coming at a time when the situation on the battlefield looks increasingly intractable and with the Biden administration's ability to continue sending funds to Ukraine looking increasingly shaky.

If agreed, the move would be just the first step in a long journey. Michel has spoken about accepting Ukraine into the EU by the end of the decade, though the process usually takes longer.

Orbán has long been at loggerheads with Brussels over various issues, including democratic backsliding and the erosion of judicial independence in Hungary, which led to the freezing of tens of billions of euros of funding for Budapest. There are signs that some of that money may soon begin to flow, which may help to win Orbán's grudging approval for a big EU financial aid package for Ukraine, something he has also spoken against. But the funds alone are unlikely to prompt movement on the accession issue, sources said.

For years, Orbán has said Hungary's main issue with Ukraine is that it wants Kyiv to provide more rights to its Hungarian minority community. Ukraine's parliament is due to consider a bill that answers most of Budapest's concerns on Friday, but Orbán has now moved the goalposts, criticising Ukraine in more general terms.

Dmytro Tuzhansky, director of the Institute of Central European Strategy in the Ukrainian city of Uzhhorod, said: "Since 2017, Orbán and his team have used minority rights as a pretext. Now, suddenly, he is not putting the link there any more, and he's saying it's because Ukraine is not ready, Ukraine is not democratic. It's pure political blackmail."

Orbán has often pursued a rogue foreign policy at odds with Hungary's status as a Nato member, frequently criticising Ukraine while maintaining economic ties with Russia. In October, he was the only EU leader to travel to a summit in China, where he met Putin, drawing sharp criticism from other EU leaders. He is one of the few European leaders not to have travelled to Kyiv since the beginning of the full-scale invasion and is widely disliked in the Ukrainian capital.

"If a member of an alliance breaks the rules and tries to publicly demean the decisions taken by this alliance and subject them to doubt, this is an internal EU discussion to be had privately," said Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in an interview in Kyiv. "If you are a member of a community you should share the values of the community, and if you don't, you should leave this community."

Orbán has a long history of pushing the EU to the brink before eventually folding, and a last-minute U-turn cannot be ruled out, but the signs so far are not positive. On Wednesday, Orbán's Fidesz party submitted a resolution to parliament calling on the government not to support the start of talks on Ukraine's accession.

A senior European official said: "I think this time nobody really knows how it will all end and the possibility of no agreement is 50/50. The behaviour and positioning of Orbán is worse than ever before and there is a risk that he is not bluffing and in fact is aiming at collective failure.

"The question is also if the EU or key member states have any sufficient leverage to change the situation. We will see how tomorrow's meeting in Paris goes."

There is hope that even if Orbán blocks accession in December, he will acquiesce later on, but another senior official said if the decision does not come now, it might be harder to push it through next year as attention turns to the election campaign for the European parliament. “Political windows don’t stay open for ever,” they said.

Additionally, with every passing month, amid elections in various EU member states, the memory of the first days of the war and the firm desire to help Ukraine may fade. “You have people at the table who were not there when Zelenskiy was beamed into the European Council [just after the Russian invasion last February] and said: ‘This may be the last time you will see me alive.’ This had a big psychological impact and these memories are now fading,” said the official.