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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's official visit to Russia

On 5 July 2024 Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and representatives of the Hungarian government made an official visit to Russia, where they met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. During the official part of the meeting, they discussed both Hungarian-Russian bilateral relations and the international situation. V. Orbán, although not delegated to represent the entire European Union, used Hungary's role as a country that holds a 6-month presidency in the Council of the European Union to "take real steps toward peace". It is important to highlight that the visit to Moscow came just days after V. Orbán had been to the capital of Ukraine, Kyiv.

Organization and course of the meeting. The decision to visit Moscow was made while V. Orbán was still in Kyiv. Even then, the Prime Minister had the meeting organized by Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó¹, who held a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov. The Hungarian side was keen to keep the visit secret, so the message about the conversation, which appeared immediately afterward on the Russian Foreign Ministry website, was quickly removed (presumably at Hungary's request), only to reappear a day later. The public part of the meeting in Moscow was held in the form of a consultation between V. Orbán and V. Putin and representatives of their governments (the whole event was available to the public by online broadcast). During the meeting, the good bilateral relations and Hungary's contradicting position (compared to other Western countries) on the war in Ukraine, were repeatedly emphasized. The Hungarian prime minister stated that "Hungary is one of the few countries that can hold talks with both sides of the conflict," with which he made a direct reference to his visit to Kyiv a few days earlier ("[IEŚ Commentaries, no. 1159](#)"). Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov assured via Rossiya 24 TV that "the visit took place on Hungary's initiative," an implication of V. Orbán: "Peace will not come by itself, that is why it is necessary to take real actions. During the Hungarian presidency of the EU we will take the first steps toward peace"². The official talks focused on the peace plan for Ukraine, the terms of the ceasefire, and the economic situation. V. Putin stressed that he "expects Hungary to present its position on Hungarian-Russian issues as well as the positions of the European partners he (V. Orbán author's note) represents"³, suggesting that he treats the Hungarian prime minister as an EU envoy. As V. Putin stated, "I understand that you came here not only as a partner but as a representative of the EU presidency"⁴. Although V. Orbán maintains that he did not represent the position of the EU⁵, direct references to the fact that Hungary holds the presidency in the Council of the EU created just such an impression.

Context of the visit. The meeting between representatives of the governments of Hungary and Russia took place in the context of Hungary's presidency of the Council of the EU, which began on 1 July 2024 ("[IEŚ Commentaries, no. 1154](#)"). For months, the Hungarian prime minister has stressed the lack of real EU action to achieve peace. At the same time, he addressed V. Putin at the meeting: "Hungary is grateful that even under these conditions (i.e.,

¹ Orbán in Moskau: Das erste Interview nach dem Putin-Gipfel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desk%20op&v=3-KbKJfPM1I> [7.07.2024].

² Orbán Viktor a Kossuth Rádióban (2024. július 5.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW2aCkk99Xs> [5.07.2024].

³ Putin Meets Orbán in Kremlin to discuss the Ukraine situation, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGtN_jhOw5M [5.07.2024].

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Post with interview of V. Orbán, https://twitter.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1809116147926614478 [7.07.2024].

the war in Ukraine and the sanctions of the West – author’s own note) you were willing to host me, and I must say that there are only a few countries that are able to talk to both sides (of the war in Ukraine – author’s own note), Hungary is unfortunately in the minority”⁶. During the visit to Moscow, accompanying V. Orbán, P. Sziijártó appealed to the NATO partners: “the last two and a half years have shown that the war in our neighbourhood is unsolvable on the battlefield. A ceasefire and peace talks are needed as soon as possible to end the suffering of the people. We hope that today’s meeting in Moscow can bring peace closer”⁷. It should be recalled that a little over a month earlier, during his visit to Minsk, P. Sziijártó undermined NATO’s unity, accusing partners of “war hysteria” and “striving for another war” (“[IEŚ Commentaries](#),” no. 1138).

The news of V. Orbán’s visit to Moscow was kept secret not only from the media but also from his European partners and stirred up a lot of controversy. Information on the subject appeared in the media a day before the scheduled departure for Moscow and forced a reaction from senior EU representatives. Charles Michel assured that the rotating EU presidency has no mandate to hold talks with Russia on behalf of the EU, and moreover, no discussion of Ukraine will take place behind its back⁸. The EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (HR), Josep Borrell, also issued a similar statement⁹. Among others, Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, the incoming HR, and other EU prime ministers expressed their critical positions. All condemned Russian aggression and reaffirmed the EU’s unity with Ukraine. Only Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico took the opposite view, expressing approval for a Hungarian “peace mission” to Moscow.

Determinants of Hungarian policy toward Russia. Due to its geographic location in the Pannonian Basin, its short border with Ukraine, and its considerable distance from the front line, Hungary does not feel the threat of a military attack from Russia. Moreover, they are energy-dependent on fossil fuel supplies from Russia. Energy imports directly condition Hungary’s policy toward EU sanctions against Russia. The government of V. Orbán led the effort to take Hungary out of the ban on imports of Russian energy resources, arguing that as a landlocked country, it has difficulty diversifying. At the same time, he has not curtailed energy ties with Russia, but on the contrary, Hungary supports infrastructure projects to facilitate the export of Russian oil to Serbia (“[IEŚ Commentaries](#),” no. 807) and the construction of a second reactor at Paks by Rosatom. This strategy guarantees low energy prices for Hungarians, which directly translates into voters’ support for the Fidesz party. State giant company MOL, which, among other things, processes Russian oil, generates profits that help balance the state budget. Bank OTP¹⁰, which earns part of its income through its presence in the Russian market, also remains a strategic player. OTP Bank was on Ukraine’s list of “war-sponsoring” companies, which was one of the reasons for strained Hungarian-Ukrainian relations. Another determinant is V. Orbán’s use of Ukraine’s difficult position in negotiations with its representatives, especially in the context of minority rights. The Russian factor thus becomes a potential bargaining chip. Moreover, the policy of V. Orbán is based on the assumption that Russia

⁶ Putin Meets Orbán in Kremlin to discuss the Ukraine situation, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGtN_jhOw5M [5.07.2024].

⁷ P. Sziijártó’s social media, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/ZpgvA7CEZZcGGvAg/> [5.07.2024].

⁸ Charles Michel’s social media, <https://x.com/CharlesMichel/status/1808901878140330222> [5.07.2024].

⁹ Russia: Statement by High Representative on the visit of Prime Minister Orbán to Moscow, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/russia-statement-high-representative-visit-prime-minister-orb%C3%A1n-moscow_en?channel=eeas_press_alerts&date=2024-07-05&newsid=0&langid=en&source=mail [6.07.2024].

¹⁰ Hungary’s Gedeon Richter also operates in the Russian market but is less susceptible to Russian blackmail due to the non-alternative nature of its products.

cannot be defeated, so dialogue must be worked out¹¹. Hungary's foreign policy is also characterized by a general conflict reluctance with regional powers and building a multi-vector policy. Russian-Hungarian relations are also affected by V. Orbán's policy based on building broad ties with conservative and illiberal politicians. He articulated his belief in the failure of liberalism most clearly in a speech in Romania's Băile Tușnad in 2014¹², and his open relations with the regime in Russia are part of a broader trend of building an international anti-liberal coalition.

Conclusions

- Two consecutive visits to Kyiv and Moscow create a false symmetry in the international perception of Ukraine and Russia. V. Orbán is creating, consciously or not, an opportunity for the Russian side to dilute responsibility for the war, and the Hungarian prime minister's actions are being used for Russian propaganda to deny Russia's diplomatic isolation.
- The Hungarian government is pushing a "peace mission" and, exceeding its powers of the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, is bringing state foreign policy priorities to the EU level. As part of the "peace mission," the government of V. Orbán has also met with the Chinese president and is meeting with NATO heads of state at a summit in Washington, and it is possible that in the coming weeks, it will also hold a meeting with Donald Trump, who, according to V. Orbán is the only guarantor of peace.
- From the perspective of V. Orbán, failure to consult the Moscow visit with the EU and calling V. Putin a "friend" are aimed at testing how far Hungary's NATO and EU allies' tolerance goes. This strategy is repeated every time V. Orbán wants to achieve an ad hoc political goal. The Hungarian prime minister is aware that repercussions are unlikely to await him from Western countries, so he will continue his multi-vector policy under the banner of a "peace mission" aimed at gaining advantages in bilateral relations with partners such as Russia and China and building domestic support in Hungary.

¹¹ Tucker Carlson interview with V. Orbán, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAAHY-Ftc-8> [8.07.2024].

¹² See V. Orbán's speech: <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp> [8.07.2024].