

Policy Position

What the EU should do about Viktor Orbán

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The European Council summit on March 20 ended, like the one two weeks earlier, with two conclusions: one adopted by all 27 member states and another on Ukraine, approved by 26 leaders without Hungary to bypass Viktor Orbán's veto. While in this case only with symbolic consequences, the pro-Russian, authoritarian-leaning government in Budapest regularly undermines the EU's ability to act. This is not a new problem. But in a radically changed global landscape, the EU must finally address it. It should do so in three steps: withholding EU funds, politically isolating Hungary, and suspending its voting rights.

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The EU has an Orbán problem. This has become evident time and time again, most recently at the European Council [summit](#) on March 20 and the [special EU summit](#) two weeks earlier. While all 27 members agreed on defence, migration, and competitiveness, Viktor Orbán blocked the conclusions on peace negotiations and Ukraine aid twice. At both summits, these sections were adopted by 26 leaders – without Orbán.

The Hungarian vetoes were not an isolated incident. Even though in these particular cases they had only symbolic consequences, they represent a larger problem the EU has with the authoritarian-leaning, pro-Russian government in Budapest.

Domestically, Orbán's government has systematically attacked democracy, human rights, and the rule of law for years. The European Parliament now [classifies](#) Hungary as an "electoral autocracy." At European level, Orbán not only deliberately undermines the EU's ability to act with increasingly frequent blockades, but also actively works against the Union's collective

interests. His so-called “peace mission” to Russia in July 2024 during the Hungarian EU Council presidency was an abuse of the rotating presidency and a symbol of his appeasement policy toward Putin, undermining European unity.

This presents the EU with a fundamental problem: In areas where the unanimity principle applies – such as foreign and security policy – it cannot act without Orbán. But acting with him is not possible either.

Calls to expel Hungary from the EU are neither feasible nor desirable. The EU treaties provide no mechanism to exclude a member state against its will. Moreover, the consequences of an EU exit are so severe that, even if such an option existed, it should not be imposed on any country from the outside. After all, excluding Hungary from the EU would also mean excluding its citizens from the Union, who, at the end of the day, are also EU citizens with all the corresponding rights.

Instead, the EU should pursue a strategy of three steps against Orbán.

First, the EU should continue to freeze EU funds against Hungary to pressure the government into implementing rule of law reforms. Hungary depends on EU funding. Currently, around €22 billion in EU funds are still being withheld due to serious rule of law violations in the country. That amounts to roughly 11% of Hungary’s GDP [in 2024](#). This is a substantial sum, particularly since borrowing on financial markets to offset the missing EU funds is expensive for the Hungarian government. The EU should continue to leverage this tool. Funds from the next long-term EU budget should only be released in exchange for restoring the rule of law. The same should apply to potential joint financing instruments for defence spending that are currently under discussion.

Second, the other member states should politically isolate Orbán. This also means thinking in flexible formats and finding alternative solutions with 26 member states. Supporting such an approach is the fact that discussions are already underway about “coalitions of the willing,” which would include non-EU countries like the UK for defence cooperation. Contrary to some concerns, this would not tear the EU apart. The opposite is the case: a differentiated integration, where a group of willing and capable member states moves ahead, has long been part of European history. Examples include the phased introduction of the euro, the Schengen agreements on free movement, and opt-outs in migration policy. Allowing a single member state to repeatedly hold the EU hostage would be far worse. It is important, however, that even in forms of differentiated integration, the EU institutions in form of the European Commission and Parliament are involved.

Third, the EU should strip Hungary of its voting rights in the EU Council. Under the so-called Article 7 procedure, member states that severely and persistently violate the EU’s founding values can have their membership rights, including voting rights, suspended. The European Parliament initiated the procedure against Hungary already back in 2018. The procedure has since been blocked due to the unanimity requirement in the European Council, also because Poland sided with Hungary until October 2023. In addition, it requires significant political capital for EU member states to be willing to sanction one another. However, given the existential defence and geopolitical threats the EU is facing, the heads of state and government must now finally take decisive action.

Specifically, the Council should initiate the first step in the two-stage process to suspend Hungary’s voting rights. This would initially require only a four-fifths majority – 21 member states – to determine the clear risk of a serious breach of EU values. Only in the second step would unanimity (excluding Hungary) be needed to determine the *existence* of such a

breach, which would form the basis for the suspension of voting rights. While it is uncertain whether this would lead to an actual suspension in the end – especially as Orbán has found a new ally in Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico – the other member states would send a strong signal that they will no longer tolerate Orbán’s transgressions and that stripping him of his voting rights is a real option.

By implementing these three steps - withholding EU funds, isolating Hungary politically, and suspending voting rights - the Orbán government would effectively be excluded from EU decision-making processes and lose important financial benefits.

Such decisive action against Hungary could serve as a blueprint for dealing with other right-wing populist and Eurosceptic governments seeking to undermine the EU. But to free itself from the grip of authoritarian governments in the long run, the EU must eliminate the root causes for its own vulnerability to blackmail. This means reforming its decision-making procedures and reducing veto powers by abolishing the unanimity principle.

The problems with Hungary are not new. But in a radically changed global landscape, the EU can no longer ignore them. If Europe does not ensure its own ability to act now, it risks the very existence of the Union.

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