

The game to exclude Fidesz from the European People's Party

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On 4th March the president of the European People's Party (EPP) Joseph Daul announced the launch of a procedure which could lead to Fidesz being suspended or excluded from the party. The related motion was supported by 13 parties from 10 countries and will be debated by the EPP's Political Assembly on 20th March. To date, these parties, which have 58 delegates in the 262-seat assembly, have backed the exclusion of Fidesz from the party, whereas parties having 48 delegates, such as the French Republicans and Forza Italia, have defended Viktor Orban's party. The matter will be decided by means of an absolute majority of votes. Germany's CDU has not presented its position, Orban's close aides talked to the party's president on 27th February. Several days later, in an interview given to the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban called the EPP members who sought to exclude Fidesz from the party the 'left-wing's useful idiots'. Orban also announced that he would put an end to his government's media campaign criticising the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (an EPP member). He is yet to fulfil this promise. On 5th March, in the German tabloid *Bild*, the leader of the German group in the EPP, and the CSU's vice-president Manfred Weber gave Fidesz a three-point ultimatum (stopping the anti-EU billboard campaign, apologising to EPP members and ensuring the functioning of the Central European University in Budapest). If Fidesz fails to comply with the ultimatum by the end of March, the chasm between the EPP and the Hungarian party looks set to become a fact.

Commentary

- The future of Fidesz depends above all on the outcome of the discussion in the CDU/CSU and Budapest's willingness to make concessions. The escalating dispute regarding Fidesz's membership in the EPP is an important disturbance in the campaign for the European elections for German's CDU and above all – the Bavarian CSU which works with the Hungarian party. The reproach that he has been tolerating Orban's politics for too long makes it more difficult for Weber to take the position of the president of the European Commission. Weber wishes to distance himself from Orban in terms of his image but not at the expense of the EPP's cohesion. For this reason, not long after he had given Fidesz the ultimatum, Weber offered the Hungarian party solutions which would enable it to meet his demands without substantial reputation-related losses (for example, through the support given by a Bavarian university to ensure the functioning of

Central European University in Hungary). Weber is also compelled to take the opinions of the EPP's most liberal wing into consideration since its representatives might defect to the ALDE liberal grouping following the European elections if Fidesz remains in the EPP.

- The exclusion of Fidesz from the EPP would lead Orban to attempt to establish a new faction in the European Parliament together with Poland's Law and Justice party (PIS), Austria's FPÖ and Italy's Lega Nord. Orban has been talking about this possibility for several months but he would prefer to make the decision after the European elections. Officially, Orban has been arguing that his ambition is for Fidesz to remain in the EPP and to shift the party from the centre to a conservative position. Regardless of the decision about Fidesz, a conflict with a section of the EPP does not pose a threat to Orban's party in Hungary. If Fidesz stays in the EPP, it will be presented by the pro-government media as a success for Fidesz and its vision of Europe. If the party is excluded from the EPP, it will be portrayed as a pyrrhic victory of the left-wing liberal pro-immigration forces linked with George Soros. The defence of Hungary and Europe against immigrants has been the focal point in Fidesz's electoral campaigns and messages conveyed by the media since 2015.