

Putting on brave faces. Orbán's visit to Kyiv

Ilona Gizińska, Krzysztof Nieczypor

On 2 July, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and President Volodymyr Zelensky met in Kyiv. This was his first visit to Ukraine in seven years, taking place a day after Budapest assumed the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union. The two leaders discussed both bilateral issues, including the rights of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Zakarpattia, as well as the Ukrainian-Russian war. During a brief press conference, Orbán emphasised that he had encouraged Kyiv to call for a ceasefire, as this, in his opinion, could expedite peace negotiations. Zelensky, for his part, said that the dialogue, which was initiated during the visit could be used as a starting point for developing a comprehensive document that would regulate relations between Ukraine and Hungary.

Although no binding agreements were made, the tone of the discussions was surprisingly positive, which contrasts sharply with Orbán's previously unfriendly rhetoric towards Ukraine. The mere fact that the meeting took place in Kyiv is a step towards a new start in Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, which have been in deep crisis since Ukraine adopted its law on education in 2017. However, the visit does not mean that Budapest's foreign policy will change significantly or that it will discontinue its close cooperation with Moscow. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, on the day of Orbán's meeting with Zelensky, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó initiated a telephone conversation with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, during which they agreed on the need to advocate for the rights of all national minorities in Ukraine.

Hungary: a tactical adjustment

In recent months, the Hungarian government has softened its previously antagonistic stance on Ukraine. The first constructive move to this effect was Mr Szijjártó's visit to Ukraine in January this year. On that occasion he came to Uzhhorod, a town near the Ukrainian western border, where he met his Ukrainian counterpart Dmytro Kuleba and the Head of the President's Office, Andriy Yermak. Hungary is no longer blocking some key EU decisions regarding Ukraine – in February, it withdrew its veto on the Ukraine Facility and agreed to commence accession negotiations with Kyiv in June. However, Hungary still refuses to approve the allocation of additional tranches from the European Peace Facility for arms deliveries to Ukraine. This stance has forced EU member states to agree to allocate profits from frozen Russian assets to provide military support to Ukraine without Hungary's involvement. Orbán has also promised he will not stand in the way of any decisions on aid for Ukraine during the upcoming NATO summit, provided that Hungary is not required to participate in their implementation.

What made Orbán soften his anti-Ukrainian stance is most likely the increasing political costs of obstructing EU policies towards Kyiv. In December 2023, the Hungarian government attempted to leverage the threat of vetoing significant decisions concerning Ukraine to force EU institutions into concessions regarding frozen funds for Hungary (see '[Orbán's blackmail: Hungary threatens to block Ukraine's integration with the EU](#)'). However, standing in the way of EU initiatives only made Orbán more isolated amidst the united stance adopted by all the other member states. Therefore, it seems his visit to Kyiv was also intended to mitigate the concerns of EU member states following Budapest's assumption of the EU Council presidency and to show Hungary in a more constructive light. Orbán emphasised that he had come to Kyiv as a "representative of the EU" advocating for peace. This message is also directed at Fidesz's electorate, who have been subjected to harsh anti-Ukrainian propaganda in recent years, so this sudden policy shift might be problematic at home. It is worth noting, however, that Orbán's call for a ceasefire is not the position of either the EU or NATO.

The Hungarian Prime Minister's visit to Kyiv needs also to be viewed in the context of his ongoing efforts to garner allies for Fidesz in an attempt to consolidate the European political right. The newly formed group Patriots for Europe, announced by Orbán on June 30, currently includes three other parties alongside Fidesz: the Czech ANO, the Austrian FPÖ and the Portuguese CHEGA. However, political parties from three more member states must join the group so that it can be formally established in the European Parliament. This provides grounds to suspect that the Hungarian government has adjusted its policy towards Ukraine to gain room for manoeuvre in European politics, especially since even some parties known for their pro-Russian views, such as Marine Le Pen's National Rally, at least declaratively, support Ukraine. Now, with a softened pro-Russian image, the Hungarian Prime Minister may find it easier to build a broader right-wing alliance around Patriots for Europe, which is likely to become the new incarnation of the Identity and Democracy (ID) group.

Ukraine: a pretended openness

The Ukrainian government had been seeking Orbán's visit for several months in an attempt to convince the Hungarian leaders to soften their opposition to Ukrainian efforts to integrate with the EU. Since Kyiv applied for membership in February 2022, Hungary has been blocking its progress, as well as other EU decisions favourable to Ukraine. This is due to Budapest's pro-Russian policy and the strained relations with Kyiv, which have been exacerbated by disputes over the rights of the Hungarian ethnic minority in Zakarpattia since Ukraine adopted the law on education in 2017 (see '[Ukraine-Hungary: the intensifying dispute over the Hungarian minority's rights](#)'). Although Ukraine realises that high-level talks will not lead to a breakthrough, its government has used Orbán's visit to demonstrate to EU partners its openness to resolving the main contentious issues and to show that the deadlock in the talks over minority rights is the result of Budapest's confrontational policy.

Over the past few months, the Hungarian government has insisted that before such a meeting can be scheduled, Ukraine should first implement the 11 points that were presented in Uzhhorod concerning amendments to legislation on the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine. These points were presented after Kyiv fulfilled Hungary's most important demand in December 2023 and refrained from increasing the share of the Ukrainian

language in schools (see *'Ukraine: another amendment to the law on national minorities'*). On 25 June in Brussels, when accession negotiations with Ukraine were formally opened, Deputy Prime Minister Olha Stefanishyna confirmed her country was ready to implement the points Hungary had submitted. This statement was preceded by several weeks of private negotiations by bilateral working groups on Hungarian demands. However, it appears that this declaration was driven by immediate necessity, as from Kyiv's perspective, at least some of these demands go too far. These include extending special status to regions in Zakarpattia where the Hungarian minority constitutes less than 10% of the population or guaranteeing a seat in Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine to a representative of the minority.

Orbán and Zelensky did not address the issue of Hungarian minority rights in detail during the press conference. They announced that it should be regulated in a bilateral cooperation agreement which would encompass the entirety of Ukrainian-Hungarian relations. However, they did not provide details regarding the nature of this agreement or a timeline for its development. Therefore, it is expected that negotiations preceding the agreement will be quite a lengthy process.

The positive atmosphere of the visit was overshadowed by the Hungarian Prime Minister's proposal for a ceasefire and for Kyiv to start negotiations with Moscow. Orbán claims that Zelensky rejected this proposal during their meeting, yet during the press conference Zelensky reminded Orbán that a Hungarian representative had signed the final declaration of the peace summit held from 15–16 June in Switzerland (see *'Pax Ukrainica. Ukraine's hopes and expectations ahead of the summit in Switzerland'*), thereby suggesting that Budapest had supported resolving the conflict on Ukraine's terms.

Prospects

The Orbán–Zelensky meeting in Kyiv marks a first step towards improving the strained relations that have persisted for years, though fundamental differences between Hungary and Ukraine remain. Budapest will not abandon its close cooperation with Moscow and will continue to oppose military support for Kyiv. Ukraine, however, will not make any further substantial concessions regarding its policy towards the Hungarian minority, especially while the war continues. The announcement of a formal arrangement of bilateral relations (such as signing a bilateral treaty) is more a declaration of intent than a real plan with a specific timeline. Although the high-level meeting might facilitate cross-border or economic cooperation, both sides aim to use the initiation of dialogue primarily to achieve immediate political objectives. Easing current tensions with Ukraine is beneficial for Orbán, given his ambitions in European politics and increasing pressure from the US.

For Zelensky, the key issue remains neutralising Hungary's opposition to Ukraine's integration into the EU, since the principle of unanimity will apply in subsequent stages of accession negotiations. The Ukrainian government is aware that the Hungarian government leverages the minority issue and regularly blocks EU military aid refinancing for Ukraine, as well as Ukraine's efforts to integrate with the EU and NATO, to advance Hungary's own domestic and foreign policy interests. Kyiv realises that Orbán's stance will not change, and bilateral relations will not improve, even if it fulfils all of Hungary's demands. At the same time, Ukraine will strive to avoid antagonising relations with Hungary and refraining from outright criticism, especially with Hungary's upcoming presidency of the EU Council being a key factor. Although this presidency will not directly affect the pace of Ukraine's EU

integration process (during which the European Commission will conduct a screening to assess the compatibility of Ukrainian legislation with EU law), it could provide Hungary with an additional opportunity to challenge the rationale of EU support for Ukraine in the war with Russia and Kyiv's readiness to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures.