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Alice Weidel visits Budapest: Orbán's support for the AfD

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Between 11 and 12 February, Alice Weidel, the chancellor candidate endorsed by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, visited Budapest. During a nearly hour-long joint press conference, Viktor Orbán stated that he regarded all of the AfD's policy proposals – including its stance on migration and energy policy – as "good for Hungary". He emphasised the need to end the Russia-Ukraine war and accused the EU of seeking to prolong it, while also calling for an end to sanctions against Russia. Weidel focused on criticising previous German governments, blaming them for failing to control migration and for the rise in energy prices. She also stated that, for the AfD, Hungary serves as a model to follow and as a "symbol of sovereignty and independence".

Weidel's meeting with the prime minister of an EU member state was primarily intended to dispel the perception of her party as isolated on the international stage. However, visiting Orbán – who remains a highly controversial figure in Germany – is unlikely to gain the AfD additional support among moderate voters. For the Hungarian prime minister, the meeting served to strengthen his alliances with radical parties that share his anti-immigration, Eurosceptic, and pro-Russian views.

Commentary

- **By breaking the '*cordon sanitaire*' around the AfD, Orbán seeks to consolidate his image as the leader of Europe's radical right.** Lacking influence in the mainstream EU debate, Orbán continues to support parties that challenge the political status quo. His decision to host Weidel was likely influenced by Elon Musk's public endorsement of the AfD. The Fidesz leader aims to unite right-wing forces under the Patriots for Europe (PfE) group (see '*Patriots for Europe: Orbán's attempt to unite the radical right*'), which so far has not included representatives from Germany. The AfD's entry into the group was blocked by France's National Rally, which in May 2024 pushed for the expulsion of AfD's MEPs from the Identity and Democracy group, the predecessor to Patriots for Europe. However, National Rally members are now increasingly open to cooperating with the PfE. During the Patriots for Europe summit in Madrid, Matteo Salvini, leader of Italy's Lega, wished the AfD success in the upcoming Bundestag election. Even if the AfD does not formally join Fidesz's parliamentary group in the European Parliament, Orbán's support could create new opportunities for collaboration, particularly on migration policy.
- **Orbán's declared support for the AfD represents a definitive break from his previous policy of cooperation with Germany's Christian Democrats, particularly the CSU, as well as his efforts to maintain good relations with the government in Berlin.** During his first

decade in power, the Hungarian leader relied on CDU/CSU backing in institutional disputes within the EU. However, this support ended when Fidesz left the European People's Party in 2021, just before a vote on its expulsion. Meanwhile, Germany remains Hungary's most important investor and trading partner, and maintaining good relations with the federal government – along with its long-standing contacts with Bavaria's leadership, nurtured since the 1990s as part of a partnership with the CSU – is crucial for Hungary's economy, which is heavily dependent on the production and export of vehicles by German automotive manufacturers. Orbán regards the AfD, which has over 20% support, as Germany's rising political force. However, enhancing cooperation with the party could jeopardise Hungary's future relations with a new German government, particularly if the CDU/CSU leads the next coalition. Moreover, implementing the AfD's numerous demands – such as reducing the EU budget, introducing migration restrictions that would effectively undermine the Schengen area, or even leaving the EU altogether – could have profoundly negative consequences for the Hungarian economy.

- **Although Weidel's visit to Hungary is unlikely to translate into an increase in the AfD's support, it was intended to demonstrate that the party has connections with anti-establishment forces in Europe and the US that are growing in strength.** Talks with Orbán and good relations with Elon Musk are intended to signal that the AfD is emerging from political isolation in Europe and positioning itself as a mainstream party also on the international stage. Thus, the AfD aims to demonstrate its coalition-forming potential while arguing that its policies on migration, energy, and relations with Russia and China are viable, as they are shared by other political forces in Europe. This narrative is particularly important for the AfD, given polling data indicating that voters perceive it as lacking expertise in foreign and security policy. In December 2024, only about 9% of respondents considered the AfD competent in these areas, compared to approximately 30% for the CDU/CSU.