Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 28.03.2025 www.osw.waw.pl

Hungary hardens its stance on Ukraine

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In recent weeks, Hungary has intensified its criticism of the European Union's policy on Ukraine. At the European Council summits held on 6 and 20 March, it was the only member state that refused to sign the conclusions concerning further support for Ukraine. Hungary has also become increasingly vocal in opposing Ukraine's EU accession, blocking the opening of the first negotiation cluster and emphasising threats to its own economy and security. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has announced plans to hold so-called national consultations on this matter, which will involve sending questionnaires to citizens.

Although Hungary's position remains isolated, it risks paralysing EU decision-making on matters concerning Ukraine. While alternative solutions are being considered to circumvent Hungary's veto on financial and military support for Ukraine, the requirement for unanimity in accession negotiations means that Orbán will be able to obstruct progress at multiple stages, as the process entails over 100 separate votes.

Commentary

- **Since Donald Trump's return to power, Hungary has stepped up its criticism of Europe's approach to the Russia–Ukraine war.** It appears emboldened by ongoing efforts to normalise US-Russia relations and by rising tensions between Washington and Kyiv. The Orbán government views recent moves by the US administration as consistent with its own position, which advocates peace through concessions to the Kremlin and an end to Western support for Ukraine. It has been pushing these demands within the EU, positioning itself in direct opposition to mainstream European policy.
- **At the same time, Hungary's stance on Ukraine remains isolated.** While leaders such as Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico have employed similar rhetoric regarding the Russia–Ukraine war, Hungary is the only EU member state to have rejected the bloc's common position. It has vetoed the start of accession talks with Ukraine and threatened to obstruct other key decisions. Since January, it has also impeded plans to extend sanctions against Russia and blocked disbursements from the European Peace Facility (EPF) for weapons that have already been delivered to Ukraine.
- **Due to the unanimity requirement, Hungary's veto has effectively stalled Ukraine's accession progress.** Ukraine aims to open all six negotiation clusters by the end of this year. However, since February, Hungary has been blocking the launch of talks on the first cluster, which covers fundamental issues and is a prerequisite for opening the others. It has justified its position by raising concerns over the situation of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine, currently estimated at no more than 100,000 people. It has also issued

excessive demands, notably calling for the reversal of Ukrainian legislation on national minorities to its pre-2015 state. However, changes made by Ukraine in this area, introduced prior to the EU's December 2023 decision to open accession negotiations (see '*Ukraine: another amendment to the law on national minorities*'), were assessed positively by the European Commission in its most recent report on Ukraine's membership preparations (see '*A window with a view of membership: Ukraine's and Moldova's progress on the path to the EU*').

- **Ukraine sees Hungary's focus on the Hungarian minority as a pretext for blocking accession negotiations.** At the same time, it has expressed willingness to engage in dialogue on the 11 conditions presented by Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó during a meeting in Uzhhorod in January 2024. However, the Ukrainian government has stressed that it will continue to require knowledge of the Ukrainian language from members of minority communities, while insisting that, in the context of the ongoing war, derussification efforts must continue. It has also emphasised that it has fulfilled the European Commission's recommendations on national minorities and that current legislation permits education in the languages of EU member states. At the same time, it has been working to consolidate support within the EU and secure backing from its member states to overcome Hungary's veto. Despite opposition from Budapest, the conclusions of the March European Council summits were adopted as the EU's position.
- **The Hungarian government's anti-Ukraine campaign is aimed at mobilising Fidesz voters ahead of the spring 2026 elections.** It seeks to divert public attention from current issues highlighted by the opposition, such as the rising cost of living and the poor state of healthcare and education. The government's narrative depicts Ukraine as a failed state that persecutes ethnic Hungarians, while casting the EU, which supports Kyiv , as the warmongering party, in contrast to the allegedly peace-seeking United States and Russia. Simultaneously, by emphasising the potential costs of Ukraine's future accession to the EU, the Hungarian government appeals to public anxieties about economic uncertainty. The planned so-called national consultations are intended to steer public debate in this direction. Although the government sometimes refers to them as a 'referendum', in practice they serve as a mechanism to create a façade of direct democracy. In the 15 previous instances of such consultations, the questions were phrased in a biased manner to suggest answers aligned with the government's position. This pattern is likely to continue, although the questions for the upcoming consultations have not been announced yet. While the forms are distributed to all citizens living in Hungary, only around 10–20% typically respond – mainly those who comprise Fidesz's core voter base.