

A dispute with Ukraine fuels Orbán's election campaign

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Tensions in Hungarian–Ukrainian relations have been escalating for several weeks. The immediate cause of the current escalation was the destruction, at the end of January, of a pumping station of the Druzhba pipeline near Brody as a result of Russian shelling. The pipeline transports Russian oil to Hungary and Slovakia. The government in Budapest (and in Bratislava) has accused Kyiv of deliberately halting supplies, while the Ukrainian side has declared its willingness to carry out repairs but points to the extensive scale of the damage. In response, Hungary blocked a €90 billion EU loan for Ukraine, as well as the EU's twentieth sanctions package against Russia. Mutual accusations intensified further on 5 March, when Prime Minister Viktor Orbán announced that Hungary would break the Ukrainian "blockade" of Druzhba by force – using political and financial means – while President Volodymyr Zelensky threatened that continued obstruction of the EU loan would result in Orbán's "phone number being passed to the Ukrainian armed forces" whose representatives would call him and speak with him "in their own language".

On the same day, seven Ukrainian cash couriers from the state-owned Oschadbank were detained in Hungary while transporting nearly \$100 million in currency and gold to Ukraine under an agreement with Austria's Raiffeisen Bank. Hungary's National Tax and Customs Administration (NAV) announced that criminal proceedings had been initiated against them on suspicion of money laundering. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, in turn, accused Budapest of "hostage-taking, racketeering and state terrorism". The couriers were deported to Ukraine the next day, but the Hungarian authorities have still not returned the seized assets.

Zelensky's unfortunate remarks and the escalation of the dispute are likely to provide further fuel for Fidesz's campaign, as the party senses an opportunity to reverse the negative trend in the polls ahead of the April 12 election. Orbán's party had already been building its message around anti-Ukrainian themes, presenting itself as the sole guarantor that Hungary will not provide financial or military support to Ukraine, and portraying the opposition leader Péter Magyar as a puppet of Kyiv and Brussels.

Commentary

- **Fidesz is using the rise in Hungarian–Ukrainian tensions to create a sense of threat to the country's interests.** The party's electoral campaign is based primarily on warnings that, if it were to lose power, a candidate backed by Kyiv and Brussels would come to office – one who would agree to financial transfers and military support for Ukraine, its accelerated EU accession, and even the deployment of Hungarian soldiers to the front

(although Magyar has not advocated any of these measures).

- **The principal anti-hero of Fidesz's campaign is Zelensky himself**, whose image appears on thousands of posters and hoardings across the country. In addition, Fidesz argues that the guarantee of low energy prices (and prosperity in Hungary) lies in the continued import of Russian energy resources, which Ukraine is allegedly seeking to obstruct. This strategy allows the governing party to focus on purported external threats to the state and to divert attention from the opposition TISZA campaign, which is focused on issues uncomfortable for the government – including corruption, oligarchisation, economic difficulties and the deterioration of public services. Thus far, though, this strategy has failed to bring about the desired effect for Fidesz, and Magyar's party has continued to maintain a lead of around ten points in polls conducted by agencies independent of the government.
- **The deliberate escalation of the dispute with Ukraine offers Orbán an opportunity to steer the campaign in a direction favourable to him.** Magyar, seeking to avoid being labelled a pro-Ukrainian politician, condemned Zelensky's threats towards Orbán. He also stressed that, as prime minister, he would not yield to threats either from the Ukrainian president or from Vladimir Putin. The latter, during talks with Hungary's foreign minister in Moscow on 4 March, emphasised that energy supplies would continue to flow to Hungary provided that it maintains its current policy. Russia has been fuelling the Hungarian–Ukrainian dispute and making pre-election gestures towards Orbán – including the transfer to Budapest of two prisoners of war, Ukrainian citizens of Hungarian origin.
- **Kyiv favours a victory by the opposition TISZA, but by attacking Orbán it is inadvertently providing fuel for Fidesz's campaign.** Ukraine views the potential formation of a Magyar government as an opportunity for a change in Budapest's position on at least several key issues, including the launch of the EU loan for Ukraine (see '[A bitter compromise over the EU's financial assistance to Ukraine](#)') as well as the withdrawal of the veto on opening negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU and on the EU adopting the twentieth sanctions package against Russia. Zelensky has been yielding to provocations from Budapest, while both his personal antipathy (he had previously criticised Orbán in personal and undiplomatic terms during appearances in Davos and Munich) and broader anti-Hungarian domestic sentiments are pushing him towards personal attacks on the Hungarian prime minister and an unconstructive communication strategy regarding the operation of the Druzhba pipeline. In December 2025, more than 80% of Ukrainians expressed distrust towards Orbán, a sentiment rooted in Budapest's pro-Russian policy and its obstruction within NATO and the EU of measures aimed at supporting Kyiv. Bilateral relations have been in a systemic crisis, marked by persistent disputes – particularly concerning the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine – that have been ongoing since at least 2017 (see '[Ukraine–Hungary: the intensifying dispute over the Hungarian minority's rights](#)'), since the adoption of a law restricting the use of Hungarian (and other languages) in education. In light of the recent amendments easing these provisions (see '[Hungary hardens its stance on Ukraine](#)'), agreed with the European Commission, the alleged violation of the rights of the Hungarian minority serves Budapest as a pretext for targeting Ukraine.