



## The EPP's Orbán Compromise Is Not a Solution—but it Can Be a First Step

*By Daniel Hegedüs*

The growing conflict within the European People's Party (EPP) over what to do with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which governs Hungary and has become the conservative party group's *enfant terrible*, has been temporarily solved by a surprising compromise. Threatened with expulsion or suspension, as proposed by 13 EPP member parties, Orbán submitted himself to the latter under the condition that it was framed as a voluntary move by Fidesz. This suits both sides. It helps Hungary's prime minister save face at home and in Europe. It also brings to the EPP political relief in its European Parliament elections campaign, which was suffering from association with Orbán's actions.

However, this development is not the win for him that he would like to spin. For the first time, he has been stood up to and he had to back down from his threat to leave the EPP if sanctioned. At the same time, it shows to the European party groups, the EU, and member-states that autocratizing governments respond to pressure, not to coddling.

After tolerating the EU's first competitive authoritarian regime for nine years, the EPP finally took the first step against it. The suspension is only a compromise; nevertheless, future scrutiny and treatment of Fidesz will provide the EPP with an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to defending European democratic values.

### Direct Implications

The suspension deprives Fidesz of its voting rights in the EPP organs and of its right to propose candidates for party positions, as well as stopping its representatives from attending party meetings. Furthermore, Fidesz will be subjected to the scrutiny of a wise-persons group consisting of the former Belgian and Austrian prime ministers, Herman van Rompuy and Wolfgang Schäussel, and the former president of the European Parliament, Hans-Gert Pöttering, from Germany's Christian Democratic Union. They will investigate whether Fidesz complies

with the conditions set by the EPP leadership, which include the Hungarian government obeying of rule of law and keeping Central European University in Budapest.

The question of Fidesz's status in the EPP is not settled for good, only postponed till after the European Parliament elections, when all those involved will have a clearer picture of the European political landscape. However, the negative impact of even this temporary measure on the influence of Hungary's governing party is significant. Orbán will



not able to take part in important decision-making occasions, like the meetings of EPP prime ministers ahead of EU summits or those about the EU's next Multiannual Financial Framework. However, the Hungarian Christian-Democratic People's Party, officially Fidesz's smaller coalition partner but in practice subordinated to it, is also part of the EPP, which will allow Orbán to keep its fingers on the pulse of the group.

## Orbán Blinks

Despite the positive spin and face-saving on the surface, the deal is something of a humiliation for Hungary's prime minister. For the first time since he took office in 2010, he was confronted with real political pressure and he blinked. Fidesz's vice-president, Gergely Gulyás, had announced that the party would leave the EPP if suspended, but in the end, it agreed to a solution in which suspension was officially a voluntarily accepted status instead of an externally imposed sanction.

Orbán appeared to have a Plan B in case he had to leave the EPP. Both at the level of party diplomacy across Europe and of the Hungarian public, he invested considerable resources in the preparation of a new European party group centered around Fidesz, Italy's Lega, and Poland's Law and Justice (PiS). The fact that he did not choose further confrontation with the EPP and putting his plan in action points at two important conclusions.

First, Orbán shied away from gambling on his party's future political affiliation without exactly knowing the political power relations after the European Parliament elections. This shows he might not be as convinced about the chances of Euroskeptic radical-right forces as he claimed in the government-friendly Hungarian media.

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Second, there might be significant tensions among these forces, which also include France's Rassemblement National and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), that might hinder the birth of the widely feared new Euroskeptic grouping. The personal antipathy between PiS's Jarosław Kaczyński and Lega's Matteo Salvini, and between the FPÖ's Heinz-Christian Strache and Orbán are already publicly known, but the recent developments hint at even wider political divides that cannot be easily bridged.

## Dealing with Autocratizers

The events of recent weeks have given the EPP an important lesson into how it should have dealt with its *enfant terrible* during the previous nine years. It is high time that its leadership realizes that those autocratizing governments in East-Central Europe speak the political language of power. Instead of offering them concessions, EU institutions, European parties, and member states have to look for ways to exploit their political leverage.

The Orbán compromise fulfills three goals for the EPP leadership. It temporarily pacifies Fidesz critics and preserves the party family's formal unity. It sidelines Fidesz, neutralizing its effect on the EPP's election campaign and structures. And it allows all those involved to save face, which appeared to be the decisive factor for Fidesz. It also demonstrates Manfred Weber's political skill in forging unexpected deals; with this success, he has made a big leap toward the presidency of the European Commission, for which he is the EPP's choice. The leadership also strengthened its grip on the centrifugal tendencies of the party, avoiding a split that could have seriously threatened Weber's chances.

Ultimately, this compromise will not necessarily have any positive impact on democracy and the rule of law in Hungary. Therefore, how serious the EPP is about defending European values will be demonstrated by what it does in the coming months. It must exploit the leverage it has gained over Orbán. The three wise persons should scrutinize

the developments in Hungary and the government's compliance with fundamental European values in a critical and systemic way. The EPP either will have to push Orbán to real political concessions, including easing his grip on civil society and the media or eventually expel him, opening the way for possible EU sanctions on the Fidesz government.

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### **About the Author**

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