

Orbán repeats threat to block EU accession negotiations with Ukraine



Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in October.

On Nov. 8, in anticipation of the meeting of the European Council on Dec. 14-15, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, accompanied by Olivér Várhelyi, the Commission member responsible for neighborhood policy and enlargement, announced the Commission had adopted the EU's 2023 Enlargement Package, which provides a detailed assessment of the progress (or lack thereof) of ten neighboring states on their respective paths toward eventual membership in the EU. Undoubtedly the most notable feature of the package was the Commission's recommendation that, in light of the results achieved thus far and the ongoing reform efforts, the Council open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova and, once they have adopted certain key measures, adopt the negotiating frameworks for both.

Not surprisingly, it didn't take Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán long to speak out against the Commission recommendation that the EU open accession negotiations with Ukraine. Speaking a couple of days later on public radio, he said, "Ukraine is in no way in a condition to negotiate over its desires to join." Ukraine, he said, is "light years" away from EU membership: "Ukraine is as far from EU membership as Makó [a small town on the border with Romania] is from Jerusalem." He of course denied that his position was contingent on whether the EU decides to provide Hungary with the €3.9 billion in loans and €700 million in grants it requested under the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, saying "Hungary's position of rejecting the start of accession talks with Ukraine cannot become part of any deal" and can't be connected to any "financial questions."

A decision to start accession negotiations with a candidate country requires the unanimous support of the 27 member states. With the threat of a possible Hungarian veto in mind, European Council President Charles Michel travelled to Budapest this week and met with Orbán and discussed the issue with him for two hours. As expected, there was no resolution of the issue and Orbán remains strongly opposed to starting the accession negotiations with Ukraine. Today, in a radio interview, he said, “The start of negotiations concerning Ukraine’s EU membership does not coincide with Hungary’s national interests. It is not worth starting membership negotiations because we cannot answer the question of what the consequences of Ukraine’s membership would be.” Continuing, he said, “I would be in favor of the EU concluding a strategic partnership agreement with Ukraine first. This could last for up to five to 10 years. Let’s bring them closer, as the gap is too wide now. Let’s give time for us to work together, and when we see that we can work together, then let’s bring up the issue of membership.”

Also not surprisingly, given that he is widely regarded as being Putin’s voice inside the EU, Orbán made it clear that he opposes creation of a new €20 billion fund proposed in July by Josep Borrell, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, that would provide Ukraine up to €5 billion a year for four years for weapons, ammunition, and military assistance. He also made it clear that he is opposed to a possible revision in the EU budget that would provide €50 billion in new assistance for Ukraine from 2024 through 2027. Saying the EU budget is already overstretched from providing support for Ukraine, he said if the EU wants to provide more financial support for Ukraine it should set up a separate fund outside the EU budget and based on an intergovernmental agreement among the member states wishing to contribute: “Everybody should put in the money that they want to, and we should send the money to Ukraine from the fund.” Interestingly, because he is widely regarded as Putin’s voice in the EU, Orbán also urged that there be a ceasefire in Ukraine.

The EU has some leverage in its dispute with Hungary over the start of accession negotiations with Ukraine – most notably, the nearly €5 billion in loans and grants Hungary has requested from the EU’s Recovery and Resilience Facility. But it’s not at all clear the EU will approve the request, nor is it clear that, even if the request were approved, Hungary would agree with the other EU member states to open accession negotiations with Ukraine. Ukraine is the first item on the agenda for the European Council’s two-day meeting on Dec. 14-15, so we probably won’t find out whether the accession negotiations will begin until sometime in the late evening of Dec. 14.

David R. Cameron
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