

Putin Visits EU Ally Hungary to Talk Energy

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Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban

President Vladimir Putin arrives in Hungary on Tuesday for a rare working visit to an EU member state since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, a trip that political analysts said reflects the need of individual countries to protect their economic interests despite Europe's supposedly united front on Russia.

Putin is set to meet with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban mainly to discuss their countries' energy relations, in spite of last March's agreement among European Council members not to hold regular bilateral meetings with Russia in response to its annexation of Crimea.

Russian presidential aide Yury Ushakov told reporters Monday that five agreements are expected to be signed during Putin's visit, including cooperation agreements in the fields of nuclear energy, education and health care, according to the TASS news agency. Foreign

Minister Sergei Lavrov, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, Energy Minister Alexander Novak and Sergei Kiriyenko, the head of state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom, will also be part of the Russian delegation.

Venturing onto EU and NATO territory to hold bilateral talks will score Putin a political victory while exemplifying the Hungarian government's quest to balance its political interests between Europe and Russia, analysts said.

"Some people are speculating that Putin is coming to Hungary to split up the EU," said Gabor Stier, a foreign policy analyst and head of the foreign affairs desk of Magyar Nemzet, a conservative Hungarian newspaper generally perceived as supporting Fidesz, Orban's right-wing party.

"This will not happen. Putin simply wants to show that he still has some allies in Europe, that some leaders still wish to speak with him."

Putin has embraced ties with the Eurosceptic political forces, which have grown disgruntled with the economic repercussions of European attempts to influence Russian policy. An array of European right-wing and left-wing parties, including Fidesz and the radical leftist Syriza, the party of the newly elected Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, have openly expressed support for Russia and their dislike of the EU's approach to the Ukrainian crisis.

"We share the attitude of the Hungarian leadership aimed at growing constructive dialogue and jointly carrying out very large planned investment projects," Putin said in November at a Kremlin ceremony at which Hungary's new ambassador presented his credentials.

Putin supporters have also made their way into the European legislature. Fidesz, which controls two-thirds of the Hungarian parliament, won 12 seats in the European parliament after receiving more than 50 percent of the vote in last May's elections to the European Parliament. France's far-right National Front — whose leader Marine Le Pen has said she admires Putin — secured 23 seats in the European legislature.

Although political analysts concede that Putin has secured some allies in Europe, they dismiss the notion that Orban's affinities toward Putin could sway EU policy on Russia.

"Hungary is simply too weak in the EU to have any effect on sanctions against Russia," Alexander Stykalin, a scholar of Hungary at the Russian Academy of Sciences, told The Moscow Times on Monday. "Orban has tried to show he is politically independent. He's pragmatic. I think that if Hungary's economic and energy interests were not tied to Russia as they currently are, Orban would be looking elsewhere."

Balancing Interests

Walking a political tightrope, Orban hosted German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Budapest earlier this month, flew to Kiev to meet Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and is now laying out the red carpet for Putin. He has been compared to a softer version of Putin for cracking down on the opposition and channeling the Kremlin's rhetoric about the demise of liberal states.

Hungary has supported and voted for all the joint EU sanctions motions against Russia, but its reliance on Russian gas has obliged it to balance its interests between Moscow and Brussels.

Former Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany, who called Putin's visit a "failure" of Hungarian diplomacy, accused his successor of taking part in a "peacock dance between Moscow, Brussels and Berlin," Hungarian media reported Monday.

Russia is Hungary's biggest trading partner outside the EU. It is also the source of some 85 percent of the country's gas needs, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said last week. The recent cancellations of the South Stream and Nabucco gas pipelines have given it an additional impetus to come up with a long-term solution to safeguard its energy supplies, given that its 1996 agreement on gas supplies with Russia expires this year.

Szijjarto told The Associated Press last week that Hungary could not "afford not to talk to Russia" for the sake of its energy security.

Last January, the Hungarian government signed a 12.5 billion euro (\$14 billion) deal with Russia's Rosatom to expand the country's nuclear plant. To the dismay of the EU, Hungary froze its gas deliveries to Ukraine in September, after Moscow ended all gas sales to Ukraine. Orban told Hungarian media that the country could not afford to risk losing its gas supplies from Russia.

"Pragmatism is one of the cornerstones of Hungary's ties to Russia," Stier said. "Hungarian goods are not competitive on European markets, and this forced the country to find other partners. The country's approach is to safeguard its interests by balancing its different partnerships."

Although his government has endorsed EU sanctions against Russia, Orban has publicly lambasted them, claiming they would cause more harm to Europe than to Moscow. In May — as pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine launched a bloody fight for independence — Orban said that Ukraine's ethnic Hungarian population, concentrated in the country's western tip, should also be granted autonomy.

Domestic Resistance

Orban's ruling party Fidesz, which does not face parliamentary elections until 2018, has the support of 23 percent of Hungarian voters, although popular support for the party has declined in recent months, according to a recent survey by the Ipsos research firm.

Thousands took to the streets of Budapest earlier this month to protest against Orban's pro-Russian policies, urging the country's leader to fulfill its European obligations and steer clear of Kremlin influence. Some protesters appealed to Merkel — who was scheduled to arrive in Budapest the next day — to help the country stay out of Russia's orbit.

Human Platform, an umbrella organization of Hungarian nongovernmental organizations, scheduled a series of three conferences to discuss the dire state of civil rights in Russia, as well as the country's role in the crisis in Ukraine, ahead of Putin's visit. The organization was set to stage a 4,000-person demonstration Monday night in central Budapest to protest against the government's approach toward Putin and Russia.

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