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Thousands Gather in Budapest to Protest Hungary's Shift Toward Russia

By The Moscow Times

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People take part in a protest against the government of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban outside parliament in central Budapest Feb. 1, 2015

BUDAPEST — A day before German Chancellor Angela Merkel was due to travel to Budapest, several thousand people gathered outside Hungary's parliament to tell the government of Prime Minister Viktor Orban to respect its Western ties rather than look east toward Moscow.

The West has watched with growing alarm as Orban's centre-right Fidesz party has edged closer to Russia at a time of an escalating conflict in Ukraine. Two weeks after Merkel, Russian President Vladimir Putin is also expected in Budapest.

Protesters held up signs and chanted slogans on Sunday to demand that Hungary stay within the EU's fold and away from the Kremlin's orbit, demanding Orban's ouster for eroding democratic freedoms, perceived corruption and diplomatic conflicts with the West.

"We dislike the directed democracy, the kind of dictatorship Putin has built in Russia. And this is the direction in which the Orban government is going," protester Jozsef Bruck said.

"European politicians look away, and they can do that because their voters don't care. We are trying to change that."

Fidesz has seen a steep fall in popularity in recent months, highlighting cracks within the party whose core members have begun to grow restive.

Helped by a weak opposition, Orban remains firmly in control of Hungary and of the party he has led for most of its 27-year history and he does not face another parliamentary election until 2018.

Protesters held up several signs written in German, meant as direct messages to Merkel. One read: "Our Angela! Please deliver us from evil! We want to stay EU citizens."

Vilmos Torok, the protester who held up that sign, said: "We are brothers here in Europe with Germans. I expect her to tell Orban to back off, behave in a more European way ... His disrespect for liberal freedoms has earned him the Little Putin moniker in Europe — but also in Hungary."

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