

Donald Trump Gives Hungarian Autocrat's Bromance With Putin a Boost

In Trump era, Budapest hopes for an end of isolation over its ties to Moscow

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban **Maxim Shipenkov / AP**

It's not every day Vladimir Putin finds himself on EU soil. On Thursday, however, the Russian leader will travel to Hungary to meet Europe's own veteran authoritarian, Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

It will be the third time the pair meet since the 2014 Crimean annexation. The Kremlin is keen to showcase its growing collection of Western friends from the heart of the EU. And now that Donald Trump is in the White House, Budapest is eager to finally rid itself of US criticism.

"What a wonderful world," Orban said after Trump won the US election.

Black Sheep No More

Viktor Orban was an anti-democratic populist long before it became fashionable. Soon after returning to power in 2010, he cracked down on the media, the courts and Hungary's once burgeoning civic society. Earlier this month, he intensified his campaign to "sweep out" NGOs financed by another Hungarian, George Soros.

In the process, Orban, formerly anti-Soviet crusader, developed strong relations with the Kremlin. These ties have only continued to grow since the European Union imposed sanctions on Russia for its annexation of Crimea from Hungary's neighbor, Ukraine.

For years, Washington and Brussels have shunned Orban for his ties to Putin. But with the arrival of Donald Trump, Hungarian officials are celebrating the possible end of their isolation.

The Hungarian Prime Minister was one of the first leaders Trump called and, apparently, invited to the White House as president-elect.

"I told him I had not been [to the White House] for a long time because I had been treated as a 'black sheep,'" Orban said. "Me too," Trump reportedly replied, with a laugh.

Now Budapest hopes to serve as a bridge for renewed relations between Washington and Moscow. During a recent visit to Moscow, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said the "timing is perfect" for Putin's visit. The last time Putin was in Budapest, in 2015, the U.S and the EU warned the Hungarians that courting Moscow would come at a cost. The Obama administration also sanctioned six Hungarian officials on corruption charges.

"Now," said Szijjarto, "there will be no more American pressure." He added that 2017 will be "one of the most exciting years of foreign policy since the end of the Cold War."

"Orban's Fidesz Party is hailing Trump's victory as the end of the era of multilateral deals and the beginning of the age of bilateral ones," says Hungarian analyst Peter Kreko. As part of this new arrangement, Hungarian authorities hope there will be no more obstacles to the pro-Russia line. At the same time, says Polish-Hungarian analyst Dominik Hejj, Orban's government is hoping Putin will remember who supported him during the "difficult times."

Putin, meanwhile, can demonstrate he has a loyal EU and NATO member state that he can still visit despite Crimea and Western sanctions. The last time he was in Hungary, the Russian leader announced Crimea as a done deal while standing on EU soil. This time, he will want to tell the world from the heart of Europe that he has good relations with Washington.

Economic on Paper

Hungarian and Russian authorities are portraying the visit as primarily focused on furthering economic, rather than political, ties.

Budapest has renewed its call to lift the Russian sanctions, saying they harm the country's economy. But economists say the figures repeatedly published by the government are purposely exaggerated. "They are simply false," says Peter Kreko.

Budapest hopes to finalize the controversial Paks nuclear station deal, financed by the Kremlin and currently under investigation by the EU Commission. The project has been shrouded in corruption scandals involving government officials, and critics say a \$10 billion Kremlin loan allocated for it buys Moscow long-term influence in Hungary.

The other key issue to be discussed is the extension of a Russian gas delivery contract signed during Putin's last visit. "Cheap energy is one of the pillars of this government," says Dominik Hejj.

Illiberal Central Europe

The Hungarian authorities clearly are preparing for a political show.

In preparation for Putin's visit, authorities have erected a statue, made by a Russian artist, commemorating Soviet soldiers who fought in Hungary during World War II. No other former Eastern Bloc country is erecting Soviet-style monuments. But a few months ago, anti-government protesters disrupted a state event marking the 60th anniversary of the 1956 Hungarian Uprising, which was crushed by Soviet troops.

Although Fidesz enjoys widespread support in the country, Hungarian society remains divided over relations with Russia. In these conditions, Putin's visit may cause some friction.

It may also cause regional friction. For a long time, Orbán's friendship with Putin has been viewed with suspicion in Central Europe. When he was in the opposition, Jarosław Kaczyński, Poland's current de facto leader, once refused a meeting with the Hungarian to protest the previous Putin visit. But with all four so-called Visegrad states now ruled by eurosceptic populists, the mood in the region is changing.

"Central Europe is united by its opposition to taking in migrants, which puts Russia in the background," says Kreko. Now in power, Kaczyński needs Orbán's support as Warsaw faces growing EU pressure while building its own "Budapest on the Vistula," as the Polish populist once described his vision for Poland. Last week, Kaczyński told Hungarian media that the Putin visit will cause no problems.

This time, he said, "we can count on Hungary."

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