Putin Meets Hungary's Orban, Praises Developing Ties

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Vladimir Putin and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban meet for talks at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. **Grigory Sysoyev, RIA Novosti / kremlin.ru**

President Vladimir Putin met Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban in China on Tuesday, praising the EU member state's leader for maintaining ties with Russia despite Moscow's rifts with the West over the invasion of Ukraine.

"It cannot but cause satisfaction that our relations with many European countries are being preserved and developed despite very limited opportunities in today's geopolitical conditions," Putin said on the sidelines of a leaders forum in Beijing.

"One of these countries is Hungary," he said.

Putin said he viewed it as "extremely important" to exchange views on a range of issues where the countries disagreed.

He did not directly reference the invasion of Ukraine, saying instead the disagreements

related to "the situation in Europe."

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Orban directly blamed what Russia calls its "special military operation" in Ukraine and the Western sanctions that followed for deteriorating bilateral ties, according to a Kremlin readout.

"Hungary has never wanted to confront Russia," Orban said. "We're trying to salvage what we can from our bilateral contacts."

Improving relations with Russia was part of Orban's "Eastern Opening" policy adopted soon after he assumed power in 2010.

Prior to Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, Orban protested against sanctions on Russia and vetoed Kyiv's progress toward NATO membership over a dispute about language rights for the large ethnic-Hungarian minority in western Ukraine.

Such moves have fueled accusations that Orban is Putin's "Trojan horse" inside the European Union, an allegation he fiercely denies.

Orban has met Putin annually, signing deals with Russia's state nuclear agency Rosatom to expand a nuclear plant and with Gazprom for a long-term gas import agreement.

Putin and Orban are among 28 heads of state and government attending China's Belt and Road Initiative forum this week.

Rosatom CEO Alexei Likhachev and Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller accompanied senior cabinet members at Putin's talks with Orban, according to the Kremlin.

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