Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Orbán's blackmailing potential has been increasing as he engages in bargaining with EU leaders over Ukraine

The EU leaders bargaining with Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the summit starting today in Brussels will not face the first time this has happened. He has already threatened to veto the plan for significant European financial support to Ukraine.

Most are angry about the situation Orbán has put them in, but they do not have many options to avoid the trade with the Hungarian leader.

Orbán's resistance to European support for Ukraine has been his most painful blow to the EU unity regarding aid to Ukraine so far when €50 billion of long-term support is on the table.

In addition to the fact that a large sum of money is at risk, which would provide Kyiv with long-term stability and the assurance that the EU has not abandoned it, there is also a political decision regarding the start of negotiations on Ukraine's EU membership.

Originally planned as a 2-day event, the EU summit might extend over the weekend, as some participants have made plans to stay in Brussels for the following days.

This speaks to the considerable confusion at the top of the EU, given that they do not have many shared strategies and pre-prepared alternatives for the confrontation with the Hungarian prime minister.

EU without a plan and strategy

"Let's see how far we can get", said Mark Rutte, outgoing Dutch Prime Minister, before the meeting, leaving no room for the conclusion that there was a plan of the European 26 for negotiations with the Hungarians.

The bargaining started last Wednesday, the day before the summit, when as much as €10.2 billion from European funds was unfrozen and sent to Budapest. Because of this, EU leaders have been the target of outraged members of the European Parliament, and some of them accused Commission President Ursula von der Leyen of having paid "the biggest bribe in EU history".

"The signal is disastrous: Viktor Orbán's blackmail pays off", said Daniel Freund, German Green Party MEP.

Orban would demand maximum concessions from Brussels regarding the prior fines imposed because of Hungary's inadequate application of the rule of law

The Hungarian Eurosceptic leader will continue the same strategy against his EU partners. He would demand maximum concessions from Brussels regarding the prior fines imposed because of Hungary's inadequate application of the rule of law.

It appears that the remaining 26 are responding well to this kind of pressure because they do not have many alternatives to avoid Budapest's veto when making significant decisions.

One of the alternatives would be to support Ukraine within the circle of 26 member states without Hungary. However, that plan is also much closer to Orbán's request that European money could go to Kyiv, but as part of the national donations of the member states and not from the shared EU budget.

Orbán's blackmailing capacity is much greater after the halt in US aid to Ukraine and because of the opposition of Republicans in Congress to continue it at the current pace.

While further funding and arms supplies from the US remain in question, the eyes of Kyiv and its partners are on European funds as decisive support for Ukraine against Russian

aggression.

Blackmail provides results

Orbán apparently wants Brussels to continue unfreezing billions of euros from shared funds. After the release of €10.2 billion last Wednesday, €11.7 billion intended for Hungary is still on hold, awaiting Budapest's progress in public procurement procedures, the protection of the rights of the LGBTQ community, asylum policy and university freedoms.

Europeans will probably have to postpone some of those demands to persuade the Hungarian leader to agree to financial packages for Ukraine, which are undoubtedly a much higher priority for the EU.

As much as it seems that bargaining over financial disputes will be complicated, it is much simpler than the political "blackmail" of Budapest regarding slowing down the process of Ukraine's candidacy for full membership.

This EU intention is in the same "package" with financial support to Kyiv of €50 billion and implies the opening of negotiations that would lead to full membership.

A long way to effective decision-making

While in the financial part of the package, Orbán plays alone and has no allies (nor does he need them because he can always veto), there are reservations about opening negotiations with Ukraine, not only in Budapest.

He believes prematurely opening accession negotiations with Kyiv would be a "tragic mistake" and that they should offer Ukraine a strategic partnership instead as a somewhat lower and more cautious form of cooperation than the well-trodden path to future membership.

A small circle of Europeans called "Friends of the Western Balkans" (Hungary, Austria, and the Czech Republic) somewhat agree with Orbán's reservations regarding Ukraine's fast path to EU membership.

They warn that the European push for Ukrainian accession, as a significant political support for Kyiv, should not come at the expense of other candidates who have been part of the accession process for a long time, primarily Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The majority of the EU, and particularly the wealthier EU members in the West, are very sceptical about the results of Bosnia and Herzegovina and some other candidates from the Balkans, so they will continue to push for the opening of negotiations with Ukraine as a European political priority.

> Victor Orbán's tightening continues to favour Russia's goals of having a disunited European bloc against it

Viktor Orbán's tightening continues to favour Russia's goals of having a disunited European bloc against it, having a hard time making decisions about supporting Ukraine. However, building consensus in the 27-member bloc is a strategic headache, whether misused by Orbán or someone else.

The recent initiation of the procedure in the European Parliament to amend the essential EU documents and move towards "federalisation" of the Union where there will be no veto threat is at the very start. This will take years and a lot of political will to take root.

But that seems like the only sustainable way for the EU to permanently resolve frustrations with obstructions and decision-making processes, which it is facing with Orbán currently, and possibly some other national leader of an EU member state in the future.