Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Orbán will not give up the policy of blackmailing the EU – is there an efficient answer?

Ukraine will receive a significant financial package of European support despite the opposition of Hungary and its PM, Viktor Orbán.

The decision of 26 out of 27 EU members to send €50 billion over the next 4 years prevailed over Orbán's resistance, but the relief from the meeting of EU member leaders cannot last long.

Blocking strategic decisions regarding European support for Ukraine has become a well-established modus operandi for Hungary and its Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán.

His refusal to agree with the remaining 26 partners in the bloc was blackmail, even though the government in Budapest accused all the remaining Europeans of blackmail.

The Hungarian PM did not invent blackmail as a way to get the bloc's desired decision. There is no EU member that has not at least once resorted to the veto permitted by the EU Statute, most often to enforce some of its bilateral interests regarding another member of the Union.

However, Orbán is the first European leader who made a policy, even a kind of ideology, out of a tool intended to be an exception (Budapest claims that "Brussels has been waging an ideological war against Hungary").

The exception that has become the rule

The previous veto threat occurred just a month ago when Hungary opposed the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine.

"Firstly, because they're [Ukraine] not ready to negotiate. Secondly, because we Europeans aren't ready to accept them as full members", said Orbán last December.

The EU then avoided the Hungarian blockade and made the decision to open negotiations with Ukraine only because PM Orbán left the hall for coffee or a toilet break before the vote (this puzzle has not yet been clarified among Europeans).

> The relief will last only until the next opportunity and until Orbán's next veto threat

Regardless of the fact that there was relief at the time because the decision on Ukraine had been made, Viktor Orbán fulfilled his goal.

For months, he kept his partners wondering whether they could reach a decision they believed was one of the most significant for proving European commitment to Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression.

But the relief will last only until the next opportunity and until Orbán's next veto threat. This time, only a month, and just before deciding on the 4-year massive financial support of the Union to Ukraine.

Orbán fatigue

On the eve of the EU summit, which started today in Brussels, Polish PM Donald Tusk launched an expression that will remain in the political vocabulary of Europeans for a long time - "Orbán fatigue".

"I can't understand, I can't accept this very strange and very egoistic game of Viktor Orban", said Tusk, a veteran of European politics ahead of another confrontation with Orbán's veto policy.

The policy of the Hungarian PM regarding the EU is not difficult to understand, regardless of how unacceptable it is for Donald Tusk and the other 25 opponents of such a policy in the Union.

Orbán has demonstrated this policy too many times for it to remain unclear to anyone. He exhibited constraint regarding the sanctions against Russia, the shared policy towards

migrants, standards regarding media and the rule of law, and support for Ukraine.

> "A coffee-break diplomacy" is not the solution for every future situation with the Hungarian PM

These oppositions were always presented as out of principle, even though they were always about arm wrestling with the Europeans regarding the unfreezing of financial funds for Hungary.

Orbán's European policy is not less frustrating for the remaining 26 EU members, even though it is clear. And what's even more disturbing, this has grown into a practice, a manner for which the bloc has no long-term answer.

At the last December summit, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz found a one-time answer to Orbán's opposition to the opening of accession negotiations with Ukraine by suggesting that he go out for a coffee break at the meeting, which the Hungarian did.

But "a coffee-break diplomacy", as Scholz's manoeuvre is called in the Brussels political vocabulary, is not the solution for every future situation with the Hungarian PM, and there will be more.

The nuclear threat is unmanageable

The EU even threatened Hungary with a heavy economic hammer if it persisted in blocking the financial package to Ukraine.

The threat was, admittedly, unofficial, but Budapest recognised the official position of the remaining 26 members in the report by the Financial Times about the possible economic retaliation of the Europeans and, of course - blackmail.

Until he is made aware of the concrete and severe consequences of such decisions for his country, Viktor Orbán will continue to abuse the right of veto in the European Council.

The EU still has no efficient response, burdened by institutional frameworks and rules of consensual decision-making

Europeans are again talking about activating the "nuclear" statutory option against Orbán, that is, the suspension of Hungarian voting in EU fora. However, implementing this measure would cause a dangerous precedent, introducing the EU institutions into a high-risk zone for internal cohesion, and will remain only a threat.

Orbán's opposition to the European Union is strategic. However, this year, he also has a clear tactical goal - to mobilise his sovereigntist-oriented voters in Hungary ahead of the significant elections for the European Parliament and local governments, which will be held on the same day next June.

His policy of soloing will encourage all other like-minded Eurosceptic forces in Europe to participate in the June European elections with optimism. He has been telling them that the tension towards Brussels is an effective policy and provides results to national, sovereignty-orientated programmes.

The EU still has no efficient response, burdened by institutional frameworks and rules of consensual decision-making.

Last November, the European Parliament made a significant decision regarding changing the way of decision-making and the so-called federalisation of the EU. However, it may take years (if it comes to life at all). Until then,

Orbán and the European followers of his policy will still have an "unacceptable" but effective mechanism of political blackmail in their hands.