Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: The Editorial Board

Orbán's trip to Moscow – an investment in a joint project with Putin and Trump

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will have a difficult couple of days in Washington next week, where he will have to explain to his partners at the NATO summit his reasons for travelling to Moscow for talks with Vladimir Putin.

But as a veteran of high politics who has been through many tough times, Mr Orbán is prepared for the difficult talks ahead.

He faces them with the belief that next year, at the NATO summit in The Hague, Netherlands, he will have his friend Donald Trump as a dialogue partner from the US, the most powerful member of the alliance.

The EU heads of state and government, who also constitute the majority in NATO, received Orbán's talks with Putin on Friday with utter astonishment and even anger.

Their shock at Orbán's unannounced visit to Moscow matched their previous satisfaction that only a few days earlier, on Tuesday, the Hungarian prime minister had travelled to Kyiv for the first time since the start of Russian aggression and had spoken with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

The Europeans saw the meeting in Kyiv as a turning point for Orbán, probably the end of his policy of resistance to strong support for Ukraine, in which he is the only holdout in the 27-member bloc.

Who is the boss?

Orbán's partners' equally emotional reactions to his two visits to Kyiv and Moscow largely overlook the fact that his strategy extends beyond discussions in these two cities.

Orban's understanding of peace diplomacy and opening communication channels must incorporate the significance of his third meeting. The one from last March, when he visited Donald Trump in Florida, on his property.

“He’s a non-controversial figure because he says, ‘This is the way it’s going to be,’ and that’s the end of it. Right? He's the boss," Trump flattered his ideological Hungarian friend as they toured Mar-a-Lago.

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Orbán is aware that he took a significant political risk for both the EU and NATO when he travelled unannounced to Vladimir Putin, apparently without consulting any of the partners in either alliance.

First, he travelled to Putin just four days after Hungary had taken over the six-month presidency of the European Union. In this capacity, it was easy to present to the uninformed public that Orbán came on behalf of the entire Union, not just as the leader of one of its members.

Putin exploited this opportunity for manipulation at the beginning of their documented encounter.

“I understand that you have come here now not only as our partner, but also as the president of the Council of the European Union... I am at your disposal,” said Putin to Orbán.

Orbán will continue to make concessions to Putin

The Russian president was well aware of what caused panic among European governments and their leaders in the hours before Orbán landed in Moscow—that he was not representing the EU but travelling to the meeting in his country's capacity.

But it was too late. In the first few minutes of the meeting, Orbán's arrival fulfilled Putin's goal of demonstrating to the Russian public that he is not alone and that he is now in

communication with the EU's "top" about his peace initiative.

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And it will probably not be his last concession, either. Orbán's office has made an effort to react sharply to criticism from European leaders of their visit to Moscow, and at the centre of these reactions were the Hungarian prime minister's alleged "peace-making" efforts.

“It is in our collective interest to end this bloodshed as soon as possible. That’s the idea we must be united behind, that’s the position strongly advocated by the Hungarian government, and that’s a European position, too,” Balázs Orbán, political advisor to the Hungarian Prime Minister, wrote on X in response to the criticism of Kaja Kallas, the future head of EU diplomacy.

Investing in the new Trump era

With the latest fake peace initiative for Ukraine, which is nothing more than a list of Russian invasion goals, Viktor Orbán has fallen into the trap that Vladimir Putin has set for the West.

Orbán's actions were not accidental or uninformed, but rather a deliberate political calculation. The fact that in just one day he has succeeded in discrediting the hard-won and even more difficult-to-maintain unity of the Western blocs in exerting pressure on Moscow and, on the other hand, supporting Ukraine, represents an investment in the near future for the Hungarian prime minister.

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By travelling to Moscow for talks with Putin, Viktor Orbán has openly applied for the post of leader of the Eurosceptic group within the EU and NATO, where he expects the gathering of those governments in which the extreme right has recently gained the upper hand.

The crowning glory of his calculation is his expectation of Donald Trump’s victory in the November presidential elections. With such an outcome, Orbán would position himself as the leader of a group of Europeans who see Trump's isolationism, his anti-NATO commitment, and his particularly favourable stance towards Moscow as how future relations between Europe and the US should look.

Orbán has already taken an important step towards this status of "closest European" with a trip to Florida last March and an entertaining meeting with Donald Trump. And with his trip to Moscow to breathe life into Putin's idea of ending the war as a 100% winner, the Hungarian head of state has made a major investment from which he expects a big return as early as next year.

He accepts the risk he is now taking and is willing to pay for it because, for at least a few more months, no EU decision-making mechanisms that could penalise him will be in

place.

Orbán's construction only collapses in the event that Trump loses the presidential election. Such an outcome would simultaneously destroy Putin's construction of a way out of the Ukraine crisis and a return to the old ways of "communicating" with the West.