



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

# Is Orbán running Hungary for the 51st US state?



At the last moment, Hungary has given up on blocking the new six-month package of EU **sanctions** against Russia, but this is by no means a sign of a change in Hungary's tougher policy on sanctions against Russia.

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán will maintain this strategy; he will probably implement it even more persistently, fuelled by the fact that the EU has not found an effective mechanism to circumvent it for three years.

With the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House, Orbán's policy of blocking European pro-Ukrainian decisions, in particular the resistance to the tightening of sanctions against Russia, is receiving considerable support.

The Hungarian prime minister sees the new American president not only as a close friend but also as a kind of ideological leader, and he regards himself as Trump's first-class partner in loosening relations within the EU.

"The Americans don't want sanctions, they want peace, and the Europeans want sanctions instead of peace. The Americans want peace, and one of the ways to get peace is through sanctions," **said** the Hungarian Prime Minister this week.

## Good and bad sanctions

This construction, which Orbán explains by saying that there are "two completely different schools of thought" with regard to the relationship with Russia and Ukraine, is only seemingly paradoxical.

Finding a logical explanation for the Hungarian PM's position that American and European sanctions against Russia differ in their essential aim is a difficult task. Since the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine almost three years ago, the EU and the US have closely coordinated their sanctions against Moscow and have previously set themselves a common goal: to weaken Russia's power to wage an aggressive war with sanctions and force it to retreat.

Last Monday, the EU partners were relieved when Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó agreed to a six-month extension of EU sanctions against Russia during a ministerial meeting.

The deadline for the extension expired on 31 January, and Hungary once again, as it has done several times before, eliminated the risk of a veto at the last moment and enabled the necessary consensus in the 27-member bloc.

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Viktor Orbán made no secret of the fact that his latest tightening was directly linked to the demand to put pressure on Ukraine to unblock gas supplies from Russia via its territory, which were stopped on 1 January.

Minister Szijjártó **confirmed** this last Monday in Brussels, as he explained that the waiver of the veto was due to the EU Commission's willingness to talk to Kyiv about the possible continuation of the gas flow, which, in addition to Hungary, is needed above all by neighbouring Slovakia.

"Hungary has received the guarantees it has requested concerning the energy security of our country," said Szijjártó.

## Short-term peace

European unity on sanctions against Russia has successfully passed another test in Hungary, meaning that the partners can take a break on this issue until the summer. However, they will have to make a new decision on the six-month extension of the sanctions before 31 July.

Budapest warns that Europe must not be lulled into believing that future decisions will be

taken under easier circumstances. "So far, everyone has seen the extension of sanctions as automatic, but we do not think it is automatic now," **said** Gergely Gulyás, head of the Prime Minister's Office.

This means that the Orbán government will only continue its strategy of putting pressure on its partners in the EU over the next six months and will see this week's decision not to veto the extension of sanctions against Russia as a major concession to the EU that it intends to use to its advantage.

### The Hungarian prime minister is looking forward to Trump's first steps towards European partners

Given his close alliance with Donald Trump, Orbán holds high expectations for the success of his strategy. Moreover, the Hungarian prime minister is looking forward to Trump's first steps towards European partners, especially in the area of trade, where he will undoubtedly show solidarity with the US president rather than his European partners.

Budapest is enthusiastic about the first package of Trump's presidential decisions, particularly with regard to border protection, immigration, and gender policy. "What Trump is doing in the United States is what we've been doing over here for years," **said** Orbán's close associate Gergely Gulyás.

## Trump—Orbán's only hope

The Hungarian PM is optimistic that the US president will gradually ease tensions with Russia, thereby reshaping the entire Western strategy towards the Ukraine crisis.

For Orbán, Trump is the most important, if not the only, hope for a rapid return to a state that is as close as possible to that before the Russian aggression against Ukraine. And for the populist Hungarian prime minister, this means, above all, importing cheap oil and gas from Russia but also reactivating numerous

lucrative business deals with Russian companies.



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However, the unpredictability of Trump's policies, and in particular the divergence between some of his pre-election promises and the reality after he took office, remains a cause of immense concern for Orbán.

An important test of whether Trump will be able to appreciate Orbán's loyalty will be the new administration's attitude towards the US **sanctions** against Orbán's closest associate, Antal Rogán, which the Joe Biden administration imposed in its final days in office.