



Europe Is Waking Up to Threat of an Eastern Version of Brexit

Description

Placards at Budapest tram stops show a portion of pizza next to the slogan “Why would we be satisfied with less?” Hungarians are urged to think with their wallets and choose “More Europe.”

The message might appear unnecessary in a former communist country that’s been absorbing more than €100 billion (\$110 billion) since joining the European Union in 2004, among the highest levels of per-capita aid. But the campaign reflects some alarming developments in a nation that’s become the most critical test of the EU’s integrity.

After years of Prime Minister Viktor Orban dominating public life with his railing against the EU, the counter offensive to reach ordinary citizens comes as polls show Hungarians increasingly turn eastward. The risk is that a decline in popular support for the EU might loosen the most important guardrail against Orban’s self-styled illiberal leadership.



A pro-EU advertisement reading “Why would we be satisfied with less?” at a tram stop in Budapest on April 19.

Photographer: Akos Stiller/Bloomberg

The most recent semi-annual Eurobarometer poll conducted by the EU registered a 12 percentage-point decrease in backing for the bloc, the sharpest drop among any of its 27 members.

A survey on relations with other countries for center-left newspaper Nepszava found that a majority of Orbán’s supporters — by far the biggest political grouping — considered themselves “more sympathetic” to Russians and Chinese and “less sympathetic” toward Americans and Ukrainians. By contrast, Russians were the least popular among the wider population, according to the results published on April 17.

“This is extremely significant and scary, given how fast attitudes are changing,” said Daniel Hegedus, a fellow at the German Marshall Fund in Berlin. “It’s astonishing how effective Orbán has been at destroying Hungary’s pro-European attitude.”

The UK’s departure from the EU in January 2020 sheared the bloc of its second-largest economy after a divisive referendum the British government thought it could win. Yet a similar political accident in Hungary — while less costly — would be arguably more symbolic given how it was once a poster child of the EU’s successful post-Cold War expansion.

Along with Poland, Orbán has been sparring with Brussels over government control of democratic institutions such as the judiciary and media. EU officials have also focused on corruption in Hungary, which now places bottom among member states in Transparency International’s rankings.

The EU is still blocking more than €28 billion in funding to Hungary because of its concerns, though Johannes Hahn, the budget commissioner, said in an interview on Thursday that about €13 billion could be unlocked in coming weeks after a deal aimed at de-politicizing the courts.



Viktor Orban, left, with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during the EU leaders summit in Brussels on March 23.
Photographer: Valeria Mongelli/Bloomberg

Orban has repeatedly dismissed the idea that he intends to drive Hungary out of the EU. Leaving would make no sense, he's said, given how intertwined the country is with the trading bloc. Almost four-fifths of its exports land in the EU's borderless market and its economy is underpinned by investment from German companies such as Mercedes-Benz Group AG and BMW AG.

Yet questions about the Hungarian prime minister's European commitment — and more broadly his western allegiance — have sown doubts about Orban's endgame, especially given his actions and rhetoric since Russia invaded Ukraine.

The government brought up the idea of “Huxit” during the pandemic when Finance Minister Mihaly Varga said that EU membership may be “cast in a new perspective” once Hungary becomes a net contributor to the bloc's budget, which he said may happen by 2030. Hegedus called that a “test balloon” to gauge public opinion on membership.

Since then, Orban has attacked the EU for trying to corner him financially as the economy and currency cratered. Scores of broadcasters, newspapers and websites controlled by Orban's political machine disseminate the narrative that the EU's backing of Ukraine is damaging Hungary.

Government-sponsored billboards show a bomb with “sanctions” written on it and blaming the EU for “ruining us.” Orban has refused weapons aid to Ukraine, dragged his feet on NATO expansion while sealing energy deals with Russia.

In his regular radio broadcast, Orban said on March 31 that people may start to question the “entire existence” of the EU for its support of Ukraine. Two weeks later, he said pulling the aid would end the war.

“Hungary never managed to really internalize EU values, it was really about the money,” said [Agnes Urban](#), director of Mertek Media Monitor, a media watchdog in Budapest. “Now that the money is not flowing, add to that the propaganda, and the two together have a powerful effect.”

Hungarians Sour on the European Union

Share of positive opinions about the EU

Source: Eurobarometer

Hungarians had remained broadly pro-EU while Orban courted Russia and China during his uninterrupted rule since 2010. But With Hungary facing a deepening recession and inflation exceeding 25%, that support is now crumbling — and most dramatically among young people who also have been flocking to an anti-NATO opposition party.

Overall EU backing now stands at 39%, putting Hungary in the bottom fifth among the 27 EU member states along with the Czechs and Slovaks in the Eurobarometer poll. As recently as last year, 51% of Hungarians had a favorable view of the EU. Positivity toward the EU also dropped sharply in Poland, by eight percentage points, though was still 55%.

European Commissioner Hahn, who will meet Orban next week in Budapest, said he was concerned that it will get harder to recover support. He doesn’t, though, think Hungary’s EU membership is at stake. “People know how much they benefit from the EU,” he said in the interview. “Trust in the European institutions is higher than in the national parties.”

In Brussels, the decline is widely attributed to Orban’s grip on the media. Indeed, commuters in Budapest are used to seeing political billboards as part of Orban’s attacks on what he sees as enemies of the state.

Hungarian-born investor and philanthropist George Soros, asylum seekers, the LGBTQ community and former European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker have been targets of media campaigns. But the mood music has changed, said Urban.

“Whereas before government propaganda was about fighting scapegoats, in the past year it’s taken on a new dimension and is now squarely targeting Hungary’s western alliances,” she said. “It’s a real geo-political turn.”



Daniel Berg is helping coordinate the pro-EU campaign in Budapest.
Photographer: Akos Stiller/Bloomberg

While the pro-EU campaign is being orchestrated by ALDE, the umbrella group for liberal parties in the EU, the US is also involved in the counter-offensive. Recent ads funded by the American embassy carry the slogan “Russians go home,” a rallying cry against Hungary’s 1956 Soviet invasion superimposed on Russia’s current attack on Ukraine.

As the government controls much of the media in Hungary, the US will continue to connect directly with Hungarians, an embassy spokesperson in Budapest said. Cabinet Minister Gergely Gulyas said on April 12 the billboards showed the US was now directly campaigning in Hungary.

“Hungary is perhaps the only member state that’s pursuing an anti-European campaign, at least at this scale,” said Daniel Berg, a member of the opposition Momentum party who is helping coordinate the campaign for ALDE. “That’s one of the reasons we wanted to launch this campaign — to say that this promised land outside the EU doesn’t exist.”

— *With assistance by Marton Kasnyik and Jorge Valero*

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