Hungary's Orban visits Ukraine with aid tensions running high

AFP- Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orban arrived in Ukraine on Tuesday for a surprise visit to the war-torn country by the EU and NATO's most vocal critic of Western support for Kyiv. Orban has not visited Kyiv since Russia invaded in February 2022 and has publicly hit out at Europe's financial and military aid, temporarily blocking a 50-billion euro aid package for weeks.

The nationalist leader, in power since 2010, has also blasted Brussels' move to open formal membership talks with Kyiv – though he abstained rather than vetoing it – and has been accused of maintaining warm relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Orban met Putin in October 2023 in a regional summit in Beijing, becoming the first EU leader to do so since the start of the war.

Hungary openly opposes sanctions on Russia, though has so far only sought to hold up the EU's measures, not outright block them.

"The most important topic of discussion is the possibility of building peace," Orban's press secretary Bertalan Havasi told national news agency MTI, announcing the visit on Tuesday.

He also said Orban and Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky would discuss bilateral relations.

The visit to Ukraine comes the day after Hungary took over the EU's rotating presidency for the next six months, a position

which gives the central European state sway over the bloc’s agenda and priorities for the rest of the year.

On Monday, Zelensky said he wished Hungary “effectiveness in promoting our shared European values, goals and interests.”

“While advancing on its path to the EU, Ukraine is ready to contribute to these efforts and strengthen our Europe,” Zelensky said.

Despite sharing a border with Ukraine, Hungary has also taken in significantly fewer refugees than most EU members.

– ‘Opponent’ –

Relations have been frosty between Orban and Zelensky since the start of the war.

After winning re-election in April 2022 Orban said the Ukraine leader was an “opponent” that he had managed to defeat in the campaign.

Zelensky had personally called out Orban for his lack of support to Kyiv in the days after Russia invaded – a position that has only appeared to harden with the war now in its third year.

In December, Zelensky sought out the Hungarian leader at the inauguration of Argentine President Javier Milei for what he called a “frank” conversation.

Videos circulated online showing the pair locked in a tense exchange, with Orban standing with his back to the wall and Zelensky in front of him.

The pair were again filmed in a short, animated exchange, last week on the sidelines of an EU Council meeting in Brussels.

Hungary wields outsize influence over the West’s support for Ukraine given its membership of both the EU and Nato.

That gives it the ability to thwart, delay, water-down or outright block initiatives and funding to support Kyiv.

After a phone call in May, Zelensky said: “Hungary’s position is important to us when it comes to bringing peace and common regional security closer.”

Negotiations over a substantive face-to-face meeting between the pair have been in the works for months, according to statements by Ukrainian officials.

Western leaders have paid regular high-profile trips to Ukraine throughout the war in a bid to show support for their fight against Russia.

Tensions between Kyiv and Budapest pre-date the Russian invasion, with Hungary angry at Ukraine’s language policies.

More than 100,000 ethnic Hungarians live in Ukraine, most in the western Zakarpattia region, part of Hungary until the end of World War I.

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