

Orbán showcased himself as a mediator between the East and the West in his meeting with Putin in Moscow

Flash Report



On 18 September 2018, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán met with Vladimir Putin the seventh time since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The number of Orbán-Putin meetings (in comparison, Chancellor Merkel met Putin nine times in this period¹) clearly shows that Hungary is punching way above its political and economic weight in terms of its perceived importance for the Kremlin. There are signs that behind closed doors there are problems with the Paks II nuclear power plant project, but PM Orbán presented Paks II as a “flagship” of cooperation between a NATO/EU member and the East. Hungary remains an important partner for Russia as a supporter, but also as a troublemaker for Europe, and Orbán can counterbalance his increasing diplomatic isolation in the West with a “good and predictable” relationship.

Vladimir Putin’s meetings with European prime ministers and presidents, 2014-2018 (ranked by the number of meetings)

Politician	Number of meetings
Angela Merkel <i>German Chancellor</i>	9
Sauli Niinistö <i>President of Finland</i>	8
Francois Hollande <i>President of France</i>	8
Viktor Orbán <i>Prime Minister of Hungary</i>	7
Matteo Renzi <i>Prime Minister of Italy</i>	5
Emmanuel Macron <i>President of France</i>	4
Alexis Tsipras <i>Prime Minister of Greece</i>	4

(Source of data: kremlin.ru, foreign ministries of European countries)

¹ Including the Normandy talks on Ukraine.

Five statements about the meeting

- 1. Timing is important.** It is symbolic that US President Donald Trump met Polish President Andrzej Duda the same day PM Orbán expressed pleasure in finding a “needed and reliable partner” in Russia, showing the vast differences between the Polish and Hungarian approach to foreign policy. The Russian and Hungarian leaders stressed that they have managed to overcome the hostile international environment and sanctions to “open up new venues for development in trade, energy, agricultural and cultural relations.” Putin could show he still has support from an EU and NATO member state after more and more unofficial and official details are emerging about the alleged Russian perpetrators of the Salisbury nerve gas attack, leaving no doubt over who was behind it. At the same time, Orbán could show he has diplomatic support from the East in the face of deteriorating Western relations after the approval of the Sargentini-report with a supermajority in the European Parliament. According to news sources, the meeting was initiated by PM Orbán, and it was unquestionably more important for him than it was for Putin in a highly asymmetric relationship.
- 2. Orbán is part of a Eurosceptic, pro-Russian bloc within the European Union, which is useful for the Kremlin.** On the meeting PM Orbán showcased himself as a mediator of peace between the East and the West, while in reality the Hungarian government is part of an already existing pro-Russian, Eurosceptic political bloc made up mostly of far-right parties who voted against the Sargentini-report in the European Parliament (EP), like the Lega (formerly Lega Nord) in Italy and the Freedom Party of Austria. PM Orbán could be set for a leading role in this group – as he is the only head of government in it – and the Kremlin hopes that a critical mass against the sanctions can finally be built. A pro-Russian, Eurosceptic, anti-sanctions bloc in the EU can help the Kremlin justify its steps against Ukraine as well, and Hungary is the only member state that is blocking Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration on a multilateral level. This Eurosceptic group within the EU can also help Russia to advance Russian energy policy interests – well illustrated by Hungary, a supporter of practically all Russian energy projects, ranging from the nuclear plant expansion to gas pipeline projects.
- 3. Pro-Russian policies pose national security threats as well, which are ignored by the Hungarian government.** The Hungarian government does not officially identify Russia as a threat to national security. On the contrary, **Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó said before the meeting that “cooperation with Russia is both a national economy and national security interest”.** Earlier, PM Orbán had said after the July 2018 NATO summit that the “Eastern [threat] is called Russia,” but he almost immediately refuted himself by criticizing once again the “harmful sanctions” against Russia and saying that he wanted to soften NATO’s approach to Russia on his July 2018 meeting with President Putin. The now-defunct Hungarian Residency Bond Programme (HRBP) provided Atiya Houry, the Assad regime’s “moneymen” – who is on the US’s sanctions list –, and family members of SVR-head Sergey Naryshkin with Hungarian residency permits due to the lack or failure of Hungarian national security screenings, or that political considerations were placed above national security interests. According to media information, the Russian Central Bank-owned Sberbank was involved in the HRBP. Hungary is the only member state in the Visegrad Group that practically implemented no measures countering Russian hybrid warfare.

- 4. Despite some tensions surrounding the Paks project behind closed doors, PM Orbán claimed that Hungary – as a NATO and EU member state – is a “flagship” for Russian energy in Europe.** On the meeting, both leaders strengthened their commitment to the Paks II project. President Putin emphasised that the construction is to start soon, while Viktor Orbán positioned the new nuclear plant as a “flagship” project for cooperation between the East and the West. Orbán also said he personally asked President Putin that Russia considers leading the Turkish Stream through Hungary. Recently, the Hungarian opposition to the Nord Stream 2 disappeared as well. However, troubles seem to be looming in the background for the Paks 2 project. According to sources from the media, the costs of Paks II are overrunning, the Hungarian industry lacks the necessary knowledge to execute the project and it is lagging behind schedule – the project is in a two-year delay. “Paks Minister” János Süli said in July 2018 that around six thousand permits still need to be obtained before the new plant starts operating. On the meeting, Orbán blamed the EU for the slowness of obtaining the permits. These issues show the lack of political will on the Hungarian side despite the ruling party’s two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, but the Russian president personally pushes for accelerating project implementation. The Hungarian side also thought about replacing the Russian credit line with a loan from the free market, but the Russians rejected it.
- 5. The Russian-Hungarian relationship is not only about pragmatic matters.** Despite the negative historical experiences with Russia throughout Hungarian history, the ruling party’s pro-Russian policies and rhetoric has turned the generally anti-Russian Fidesz electorate into a group favouring “closer relations” with Moscow rather than Washington in the past eight years. **On the meeting Orbán even emphasized that Russia’s prestige is “huge” in Hungary and that both countries are founded on Christianity.** Hence, ideology became the second most important bond between the two countries for both the electorate and the political elite. Ideological Eurasianism and Turanism², theories emphasizing the Eastern genetic/language roots of Hungarians are messages that aim to further strengthen the increasingly pro-East, pro-Russian voter base of Orbán. Additionally, Russia continues to be a systemic role model for Orbán in terms of ideology and institution-building. Putin is depicting himself as a global symbol of “conservatism” built on values of religion, family and traditions, while Orbán plays a similar role for the European and the American far right.

² Turanism is a chauvinist ideology based on the false presumption of an old kinship between Turkic and Hungarian nations.