

## Cosying up to Russia

Written by István Ujhelyi on 8 April 2019 in Opinion  
Opinion

Viktor Orbán is Russia's number one mouthpiece in Europe, but Hungary is not the only EU player with vested interests in Russia, writes István Ujhelyi.



*István Ujhelyi | Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

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Hungary's relationship with Russia has never been easy. Two suppressed revolutions and 40 years of communism have taught Hungarians to view Moscow's foreign policy with scepticism.

This makes it more baffling why Viktor Orbán's government, led by Fidesz, often acts like Putin's Trojan Horse within the EU.

Once a fierce anti-communist and liberal 'liebling', today's Orbán is Russia's leading mouthpiece in Europe; there is little doubt whose interests he is advancing.

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Although the two countries' trade relations should not warrant such deep ties, Orbán holds annual bilateral meetings with Putin. No other EU leader has had more - or more frequent - meetings with the Russian President.

All too often, the subject of these encounters has remained opaque, but their outcome gives a firm indication of what these self-proclaimed illiberal leaders seek.

Following years of discussions, Hungary awarded the Paks II Nuclear Power Plant development project to Russian nuclear giant Rosatom. It was accompanied by a €10bn loan, indebting Hungary for generations to come.

In another example of the Hungarian government's eagerness to satisfy Putin, Russia's International Investment Bank (IIB) is moving its headquarters to Budapest.

“In times of diplomatic isolation you cannot be picky with your allies. As a result, mainstream European parties are now wedged between radical forces more loyal to Moscow than to their own electorate”

The bank, widely considered a front for the Russian intelligence activities, will receive all conceivable privileges.

According to Fidesz's proposal, the IIB will be exempt from any financial probes or international reporting norms, its staff enjoying diplomatic immunity.

Hungarian authorities will have no right to enter the premises or to examine the background of anyone invited by the IIB to Hungary. Essentially, it will operate in a legal environment similar to diplomatic missions, while its machinations will be invisible.

With this agreement, Hungary - a NATO and EU member - has opened the EU's door to Russian covert operations.

Orbán has signalled unprecedented loyalty to Putin. However, he is not alone in Europe in cosyng up to Russia; others are also doing so.

Those that enjoy Russia's obvious ideological, and sometimes financial, support, these parties do not subscribe to the united Europe concept; rather it is sabotaging any initiative to sanction Russia, while trying to implement the Moscow playbook.

Interestingly, a party's position on the right-left political spectrum does not seem to influence its fondness for Moscow. Far-right parties have long sympathised with Russia.

Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France received loans from a state-funded Russian bank while employing Putin's spokesperson's daughter in the European Parliament.

Meanwhile, Europe's radical left are equally valuable to Moscow. The 2008 economic crisis helped left-wing forces reorganise and build support; Russia was quick to harness the inherent political potential.

After all, in times of diplomatic isolation, you cannot be picky with your allies. Mainstream European parties are now wedged between radical forces more loyal to Moscow than to their own electorate.

While radical parties seldom win elections, their existence and considerable political support is already a huge victory for Russia.

Russia seeks to foment political instability in Europe - a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns - ensuring that they maintain their geopolitical goals.

Europe failed to recognise the danger in time and did little when the challenge escalated further.

Debunking Russian propaganda and stepping up efforts to counter Russia's influence is imperative if we are to defend European values and principles against those who wish us harm - often helped from within the community.

## About the author

István Ujhelyi (HU, S&D) is vice -chair of Parliament's transport and tourism committee

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