



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Hungary is synchronising its dance with Turkey over rejecting Sweden's admission to NATO membership



As prime minister, Viktor Orbán introduced Hungary to NATO in 1999, without any opposition or terms of condition from members of the Alliance. It was a moment of celebration for both NATO and Hungary.

After only one year in office, the then young, 36-year-old Prime Minister Orbán, brought his country security and an economic boost by joining NATO, together with the Czech Republic and Poland.

This was a decisive step for Hungary's transition from a complicated post-Soviet legacy to a bloc of developed European and Atlantic partners.

This transformation was completed five years later, with Hungary's entry into the EU. But is this over, now?

At the ceremony of the admission of Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland to NATO in Brussels in 1999, Orbán said: "We have been members of this civilisation for a thousand years. We belong here. Now Hungary is returning as an Ally."

The initial enthusiasm has gone

Hungary today, with Orbán as prime minister again, does not have its former enthusiasm for unity. A thick dust has fallen on his words of gratitude and promises of partnership from 1999.

Although around 80% of its citizens are still satisfied that their country is part of NATO, today, Orbán's Hungary represents a brake on the expansion of the Alliance.

Hungary delayed the admission of Finland until a few days ago but remained firm in its refusal to let Sweden become a new member.

Twenty four years later, the former Soviet colony, with a legacy of dictatorship and occupation, and no experience regarding democratic institutions, has become an obstacle to the entry into NATO of one of the most developed European economies and

democracies.

The head of the Swedish diplomacy Tobias Billström said last week that "it goes without saying that Sweden would become a member by the time of a NATO summit in Lithuania in July".

However, he was no longer so sure on Thursday. "I have noted the things that have been said in recent days, particularly from Hungary's side, and that means you always have reason to alter your words."

Hungarian roller coaster

Sweden's expectations have been changing under the influence of the rollercoaster of Hungarian attitudes regarding Sweden's and Finland's admissions to NATO.

Budapest is allegedly angry with Stockholm and Helsinki because they have been the loudest among European partners in criticising the state of democracy in Hungary, particularly of the decisions of Prime Minister Orbán.

However, on March 27, Finland passed the "test" in the Hungarian parliament, where its application for NATO membership was accepted by a huge majority, but Sweden was still left waiting in front of the Hungarian ramp.

This shift towards Finland occurred at the beginning of March, just a few hours after officials in Ankara announced that they had nothing against Finland's membership in the Alliance, even though they had opposed it for a long time.

Hungary is following in the footsteps of Turkey when it comes to the admission of two Scandinavian countries to NATO, almost in real-time.

This kind of absurd political behaviour completely disavows Hungary's formal arguments for rejecting the Swedish candidacy.

Turkey has a completely different package of objections to Stockholm which includes the protection that Kurdish emigrants, whom Erdogan's government considers terrorists, have in Sweden.

Ankara and Budapest are demanding concessions

Regardless of these differences, Hungary and Turkey are essentially in the same position, which is built on the “you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours” policy with regard to the Euro-Atlantic partners.

Viktor Orbán has been implementing the same policy towards the European Union for a long time. Last November, he blocked the European aid package to Ukraine worth 18 billion euros, at a time when 40% of Ukraine's electric power system had been destroyed in Russian attacks.

It was Orbán's revenge for the previous blocking of 13 billion euro of EU support, due to the broken democracy in Hungary, and at the same time, blackmail to release that fund.

Brussels and Budapest settled the next month. Part of the package of EU money was sent to Hungary, which, in turn, removed its veto on the money intended for Ukraine.

By giving in to Finland and continuing to block Sweden's admission to NATO, Hungary is fully in sync with the policy of pressure that Ankara has been administering toward its allies.

Will things change after the Turkish elections?

There are expectations that Turkey will change its attitude towards Sweden after the May 14 presidential and parliamentary elections, which are important for Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AK Party.

If that happens, it is quite realistic to expect a

shift in Budapest's attitude. After all, the same thing happened at the beginning of March in the case of Finland's application to NATO.

But, in order to get there, the “illiberal” leaders in Ankara and Budapest expect concessions from their partners in the Alliance. Erdogan will certainly support his policy until the crucial May elections, and Orbán will continue his tolerant policy without pressure towards Russia.

In the meantime, NATO's structure in northern Europe has been suffering, particularly with regard to the three Baltic members, whose protection against possible Russian activities would not be the same with Finland and Sweden outside the Alliance membership.

“The accession of both Finland and Sweden is of major strategic interest for the alliance”, said Mats Engstrom from the European Council on Foreign Relations.

He recalled that NATO started preparing defence strategies for the Baltic countries more than ten years ago, and that the use of Sweden's territory was always necessary in case of Russian aggression against the three Baltic NATO members.

“Were Finland to join, but not Sweden, there would still be a strategic interest for NATO to be able to use Swedish territory to defend the new member, which shares a 1,300 km border with Russia”, assessed Engstrom.

This is the price of uncertainty that NATO is paying due to internal pressure from two of its members and their leaders.