

## Blog

# The Sixth Sanctions Package & the Visegrad Group's Reliance on Putin's Gas

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The sixth package of sanctions against Russia was blocked on May 18 and was rife with controversy until May 30 when it was finally approved. The previous unanimous EU support of sanctions against Russia with five swift sanctions packages has now been undermined with some disagreement over how the sixth sanction package will have uneven economic repercussions on certain European Union Member States. The Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, himself pointed out that the fifth sanctions package was approved on the 44th day of the war; and it took another fifty days or so to approve the sixth package, calling it “unacceptable.”<sup>1</sup>

In its entirety, the sixth sanctions package is meant to de-swift further banks, single out Russian disinformation actors, and slowly eradicate the EU’s reliance on Russian oil. The proposed plan was to end the EU’s reliance on Russian coal by August, which it primarily exports to China. But doing the same for oil would be more difficult for a number of EU members that are more reliant on it, including Slovakia, Hungary, and Czechia. That is why a compromise has been reached where by the end of 2022, 90% of Russia’s previous oil imports will be cancelled.

The reason a sixth package of sanctions was proposed is because of the extent to which Russian gas exports to the EU funded their war effort, despite the many sanctions issued against it. According to the Helsinki-based Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), the EU has daily transferred \$730 million, which is roughly four times as much as Russia’s daily military spendings.<sup>2</sup> As of May 2022, that cumulative estimate the EU has sent to Russia for its exports surpassed \$50 billion (EUR 48.1 billion).

That is not to say that the sixth sanctions package will cause a complete embargo on Russian imports of oil. One area where the EU has shown willing to compromise with EU Members who have a large reliance on Russian oil, is to allow them to continue their contracts past the proposed end in 2023.<sup>3</sup> Bulgaria, for example, has been given an exemption from the embargo until 2024; and Hungary only agreed to it because of the EU’s insistence that their oil security was made certain.<sup>4</sup> Slovakia’s Economy Minister, Richard Sulik, said that they would need at least three years to end their reliance on Russian gas, rather than the EU’s proposed one year. This reliance is made more severe by the fact that Slovakia, like Hungary, is restricted by being land-locked, making it rely on its pipeline infrastructure for oil imports. Czechia similarly rejects the one year proposal, for similar reasons as Slovakia. It is also a land-locked country whose citizens, in the words of the Czech Prime Minister, Petr Fiala, should not be harmed “more than Russia” by the sanctions.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the Visegrad Group, with the exception of Poland, which was cut off from Russian gas on April 27, are all against the sixth sanction package because of the unwanted turmoil to their citizens who are already struggling under high inflation.

The Visegrad Group has historically been in opposition to the EU, with a presence of far-right political parties and an infamously egregious position toward refugees, when in 2015 it refused to open its borders to refugees fleeing Syria and the Middle East. However, with Russia’s large-scale invasion, the four countries decidedly took a different stance toward Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.

Poland, Slovakia, and Czechia took the lead on opening their borders to Ukrainian refugees; Viktor Orban, the Prime Minister of Hungary, changed his previous militant anti-refugee stance and said he would welcome

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/zelenskyy-laments-delay-of-sixth-package-of-sanctions-against-russia-at-brussels-summit-articleshow.html>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.rigzone.com/news/how\\_much\\_eu\\_fossil\\_fuel\\_pay\\_has\\_russia\\_received\\_since\\_invasion-04-may-2022-168870-article/](https://www.rigzone.com/news/how_much_eu_fossil_fuel_pay_has_russia_received_since_invasion-04-may-2022-168870-article/)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/russias-sixth-sanction-package-opens-eus-pandoras-box/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://bnr.bg/en/post/101654805/eu-adopts-6th-package-of-sanctions-against-russia>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/russias-sixth-sanction-package-opens-eus-pandoras-box/>



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“refugees” but that “migrants will be stopped”; and Andrzej Duda, the Polish President, outperforming them all, welcomed millions of refugees at the time of writing.

But within these countries there are significant political movements and parties that have supported Putin and tacitly accepted his imperialist visions, including the above-mentioned leaders. The unwanted economic repercussions the sanctions package may have on the Visegrad Group may boost the popularity of these political movements in Central Eastern Europe.

In Slovakia, the former Prime Minister, Robert Fico, has primarily aligned with Putin and has criticized Czech and Polish colleagues for their pro-Western foreign policy. Fico has previously only agreed to accept Christian refugees from the Middle East, saying in September 2015 that he “can hardly imagine Muslims integrating in Slovakia” since Slovakia was “built for Slovaks, not for minorities.”<sup>6</sup> After the Slovakian government signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States in early February 2022, Fico claimed that it threatened Slovakian sovereignty and that this pro-Western backing was “treason.”<sup>7</sup> He then compared the stationing of NATO troops on Slovakian soil to “welcoming of the Wehrmacht.”<sup>8</sup> However, Fico has had to slow down his public support for Putin with the majority of Slovaks voicing support for the Ukrainian resistance.

The former Slovakian Prime Minister, Igor Matovic, who followed Fico, was meant to crack down on the widespread corruption in Slovakia. But his short time as PM further divided the country. Matovic’s position toward Putin during his tenure was not entirely clear, as he steered clear from detailed comments. His purchase of millions of Russian-made Sputnik COVID-19 vaccines, without the approval of the European Medicines Agency (EMA), in 2021, was the tipping point for his stepping down as PM. And the present Prime Minister of Slovakia, Eduard Heger, has been openly pro-Western and vocally against Putin’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In Hungary, Orbán’s own position toward Russia’s full-scale invasion is clear, as he has remained relatively neutral to the large-scale invasion. On March 15, in remembrance of Hungary’s revolution against the Habsburgs in 1848, Orbán stressed that Hungary will try to not get in “between the Ukrainian anvil and the Russian sledgehammer.”<sup>10</sup> Orbán’s position isolates him among neighboring nations that otherwise agree on some key issues like immigration, discrimination against minorities, and EU involvement in domestic affairs. That is to say nothing of the neo-fascist Hungarian party, Jobbik, which continuously praised Putin and is rumored to even be funded by Russia.<sup>11</sup>

The previous alignments some members of the Visegrad Group have toward Putin is relevant to present-day concerns over energy sources in these countries. If the sixth sanctions package weakens the economies of the EU, domestic voters might be incentivized to elect candidates who are more aligned with the Kremlin rather than Washington; convictions rarely pay the bills. Human rights may not prevail over the economic anxiety voters feel. In fact, from previous antipathy toward refugees fleeing war-torn countries, we know that self-interest and xenophobia are dominant features of our politics and society. And these prejudices are not guaranteed to be exclusive to refugees from the Middle East, particularly not amidst the current housing crises plaguing the V4 countries due to egregiously unregulated real estate markets.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/robert-fico-anti-refugee-pro-russian-headache-for-the-socialists/>

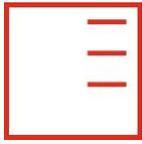
<sup>7</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/03/29/vladimir-putin-used-to-be-popular-in-slovakia-then-he-invaded-ukraine>

<sup>8</sup> The military units of Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1945

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/03/29/vladimir-putin-used-to-be-popular-in-slovakia-then-he-invaded-ukraine>

<sup>10</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/20/viktor-orban-is-the-wests-pro-putin-outlier/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2016/01/20/is-the-hungarian-far-right-jobbik-party-financed-by-russia/>



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## Putin's Fascist Allies in the EU

Putin's far-Right allies are also found elsewhere in the EU. Bulgarian, Italian, Greek, Swedish, and other far-Right political parties praised Putin for his efforts to unite Ukraine and Russia. In Bulgaria, the fascist party can trace its genesis to its political campaign in Moscow. In Greece, Golden Dawn released statements against sanctioning Russia over its invasion of Ukraine in 2015. In Italy, The National Front's Matteo Salvini, the former Deputy Prime Minister of Italy, claimed in 2019 that Putin is "the best statesman currently on earth."

Other similarly embarrassing moments have been revealed from glancing at Marine Le Pen's previous alignment with Putin. In early February 2022, Le Pen commented that she does not believe "AT ALL that Russia wishes to invade Ukraine."<sup>12</sup> In March 2017, she claimed to "support Putin's policies" and even falsely stated that Russia has not "led any campaigns against European countries, or against the US."<sup>13</sup> After Russia's extensive mis/disinformation campaign against the West, both influencing Brexit and Donald Trump's presidency, reality paints a different picture.<sup>14</sup> In fact, troll accounts have been widely sourced to Russian users and troll farms. When it came to questions concerning Putin's backing of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and the bombing of Syria's capital, Aleppo, Le Pen said Putin's intervention was "positive for the security of the world."<sup>15</sup> Concerning Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, Le Pen stated that "Crimea has always been Russian... It was given by the Soviet Union... The population feels Russian. The population is Russian. The population decided by a crushing majority to return to Russia's bosom."<sup>16</sup> Le Pen's support for the annexation came despite the majority of foreign observers resolving that the referendum was a sham.

Despite all these previous alignments, many supporters of Putin have been mystifyingly silent toward his recent escalated aggression. Some, like Le Pen, have made sure to restrict their criticism, primarily by acknowledging the presence of war crimes in Bucha and elsewhere in Ukraine and abstaining from any serious criticism toward Putin. This all begs the question, if Putin cared about the presence of neo-Nazis in Ukraine, he would condemn the support he has received from the many far-Right groups mentioned in this article.

## What Now?

We have reasons to be hopeful about the sixth sanctions package, however. When the sixth sanctions package was blocked, the European Commissioner for Economic Affairs, Paolo Gentiloni, in a statement on the blocking said that he remains "optimistic about the prospects for finding a compromise."<sup>17</sup> A few weeks later, the EU was indeed able to find a compromise. Despite disagreements among EU Member States, the EU is clearly headed toward a direction away from Russian oil. In the words of the EU Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen, "The era of Russian fossil fuels in Europe will come to an end. Europe is moving forward on energy issues."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/18/french-election-what-exactly-is-marine-le-pen-s-stance-on-russia-and-vladimir-putin>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/18/french-election-what-exactly-is-marine-le-pen-s-stance-on-russia-and-vladimir-putin>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.politifact.com/article/2017/apr/04/four-things-know-about-russias-2016-misinformation/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/18/french-election-what-exactly-is-marine-le-pen-s-stance-on-russia-and-vladimir-putin>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/04/18/french-election-what-exactly-is-marine-le-pen-s-stance-on-russia-and-vladimir-putin>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/eu-blocks-sixth-package-of-sanctions-against-russia-that-included-oil-embargo-articleshow.html>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.rigzone.com/news/how\\_much\\_eu\\_fossil\\_fuel\\_pay\\_has\\_russia\\_received\\_since\\_invasion-04-may-2022-168870-article/](https://www.rigzone.com/news/how_much_eu_fossil_fuel_pay_has_russia_received_since_invasion-04-may-2022-168870-article/)



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As of writing, an almost complete embargo has been passed. A stark blow has been dealt to Putin and his enablers, who will have to grapple with a changed EU. Let's hope that this distaste for authoritarianism prevails among the Visegrad Group who have had a tendency to violate Rule of Law principles. Most importantly, let's hope that the far-Right's presence disintegrates as more become aware of Putin's disinformation and misinformation campaigns in the EU and elsewhere.



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