
MERKEL VOICES SOLIDARITY WITH JUNCKER, STOPS SHORT OF CALLING FOR ORBAN'S FIDESZ TO BE THROWN OUT OF EPP

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The chancellor has backed the European Commission president in the face of aggressive attacks from Hungary. Still, she declined to call for removing Orban's party from the conservative bloc in the European Parliament.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel waded into the escalating fight between Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban's Fidesz party and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker on Thursday when confronted by reporters in Berlin.

Merkel, who was hosting Burkina Faso's President Roch Marc Kaboré, told reporters, "Jean-Claude Juncker has my full solidarity, and we will also make that clear in discussions with Hungary."

The chancellor, however, refused to answer another question, namely, whether Orban's Fidesz party should be expelled from the majority center-right European Peoples' Party (EPP) ahead of European parliamentary elections in late May.

Orban's Fidesz and Merkel's CDU/CSU alliance are both members of the EPP bloc; Juncker was its candidate for the Commission presidency in 2014's European elections.

Hungarian radicalism on the rise

But Merkel's successor as chair of the CDU, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, did threaten Fidesz on Thursday with halting bilateral cooperation between the two parties unless they could find common ground on the EPP's broader aims.

"It's up to the Hungarians to clearly prove that they still belong in the EPP," Kramp-Karrenbauer told Der Spiegel.

Even the leader of the CSU, which traditionally has had close ties with Hungary, has distanced himself from Orban, calling his latest remarks "unacceptable."

"You have to make it clear what's allowed and what's not," CSU leader and Bavaria state Premier Markus Söder told the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. "Viktor Orban's chosen path is, unfortunately, going in the wrong direction."

'Ludicrous conspiracy theory'

At issue are Orban's continued aggressive attacks on Juncker and Brussels. On Tuesday, Fidesz unveiled a new campaign accusing the European Commission president of being a puppet of liberal, Hungarian-born investor and philanthropist George Soros.

Posters were seen around Hungary with pictures of Juncker and Soros and the words: "You have the right to know what Brussels is preparing. They want to bring in the mandatory settlement quota; weaken member states' rights to border defense; facilitate immigration with a migrant visa."

A spokesman for the European Commission decried the campaign as a "ludicrous conspiracy theory."

Anti-Semitic tropes

Soros, who lives in the US, is Jewish and has been a favorite target of Orban, who has called him a "public enemy." Many of his campaigns have demonized Soros with overtly anti-Semitic tropes.

Orban and his nationalist Fidesz party have also railed against EU immigration policy, erecting a border fence and refusing to accept immigrants and refugees as part of the EU's wider plan to distribute them equitably across the bloc.

No rush to expel Fidesz ahead of EU elections

Orban's latest campaign has created a backlash, putting the EPP's Manfred Weber(CSU), who will lead the party into the May election and hopes to take over for Juncker, under pressure to act.

Thus far, Weber and others in the bloc have criticized the campaign, yet have stopped short of calling for Fidesz to be expelled. The Hungarian party currently holds 12 of the EPP's 217 seats in the European Parliament, more than half the country's allocation.

Juncker, himself a member of the EPP, has been unequivocal about his feelings. Last year he called for Fidesz to be thrown out of the EPP. In order to expel Fidesz at least seven EPP parties would have to submit written requests to do so.

Though some leaders have called for expulsion, none have submitted such requests. Most notably, Germany has been particularly resistant to the idea.

Weber's inaction hurting his chances?

Those resisting the call have argued that expelling Fidesz would only drive the nationalist Orban into the arms of other Euroskeptic nationalists such as Italy's Matteo Salvini and France's Marine Le Pen.

Some observers have suggested that Weber may be undermining his own chances of replacing Juncker. They suggest that his dithering on this current spat may increase the chances of an alternative candidate for the post.

One name that has been appearing with greater frequency is Michel Barnier, France's former foreign minister and currently the EU's Brexit negotiator.

js/sms (AP, AFP, dpa)

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