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## **ORBAN EDGES CLOSER TO SALVINI'S ANTI-MIGRANT ALLIANCE**

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Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orban called on the centre-right European political bloc, the European People's Party (EPP) to be open to forging a coalition with far-right, populist parties championed by Italian interior minister Matteo Savini after the European elections in May.

Orban told reporters on Thursday (2 May) at a press conference with Salvini in Budapest that he will find it difficult to continue to work with EPP, where his Fidesz party is a member, if the centre-right faction forms an alliance with "pro-migration" left wing parties after the EU elections.

The Hungarian leader hinted that he could leave the EPP after the elections, but said he would only make that decision after the vote.

"Whether we will remain a member of the EPP or not depends on which way EPP turns. If it ties itself to a European left that has been continuously losing the people's support, then it will be difficult to find our place in that alliance," Orban said, adding that he will openly and visibly seek cooperation with Salvini's party.

The EPP's leadership and Orban agreed last month to suspend Fidesz's membership after Orban's government attacked European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker in an ad campaign, and after he had backtracked on democratic values and rule of law for years.

"The EPP has to be open to the right, to cooperate with Salvini's party. We need an anti-migration alliance and that can be found on the right," Orban said.

According to polls, the EPP is set to remain the largest political group in the European Parliament after this month's election, but will need a coalition to form a majority. Populist and nationalist parties are projected to win around a quarter of the seats.

Salvini's League is set to become the second largest political party in the next parliament, after German chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU).

### **Tired Brussels**

The CDU's leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, a potential successor to Merkel, had warned Orban ahead of Thursday's meeting.

"If Orban chooses to move further away from the EPP, there is no way back to the EPP for him and

Fidesz," she said, according to the Reuters news agency. "Since the suspension in March, Orban and Fidesz no longer have any influence on EPP policy," she said.

When asked about Kramp-Karrenbauer's comment, Orban said Hungarians will decide the fate of their own country. "We expect more respect," he added.

Orban admitted that, for now, his position is in a minority within the EPP, but he hoped it will gain the majority. "There is a big need for Salvini's party," he said, praising the Italian deputy prime minister for being ambitious, while saying that the "Brussels bubble" was tired and had lost touch with people.

Salvini's first visit to Budapest was part of his Europe-wide effort to build a strong anti-migration alliance in the next European Parliament. He can already count on the support of France's far-right leader Marine Le Pen and Dutch far-right leader Geert Wilders.

The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party will also be joining Salvini's "European Alliance of Peoples and Nations" group in the next parliament, and so will Salvini's allies from Denmark and Finland. Spain's Vox party, which entered the country's parliament at last Sunday's general elections, might also side with him.

Salvini has been courting Poland's governing Law and Justice party, as well as Orban, to join the new alliance.

He plans to demonstrate the full force of his new group on 18 May, ahead of the EU elections, in Milan, but Orban declined to say if he would attend the showcase meeting.

"If the left continues to govern, Europe will turn into an Islamic caliphate. For our children to live behind a caliphate and sharia law in our cities is not something I want, and I will do everything possible to prevent this," Salvini told reporters in Budapest.

Salvini said he wanted to present an alternative in the EU, and to get rid of being subjected to banks, multinational companies and political correctness.

Orban added that Europe needed new leadership, because, currently, Europe does not protect itself, does not respect member states, its economic performance has weakened, and it does not listen to the people.

Orban and Salvini visited Hungary's southern border with Serbia on Thursday. Orban built a fence there in 2015 to stop the migrant flow, and has praised Salvini for stopping migrants on the Mediterranean Sea.

The CDU's Bavarian ally, another EPP member, CSU leader Markus Soder called Thursday's meeting between Salvini and Orban a "bad sign".

"It is clear to us that there is no European co-operation with rightwing populists," he added.

On Monday, Orban will receive another far-right leader, Austria's vice chancellor Heinz-Christian Strache, and the head of the Freedom Party.

Orban is due to meet the US president in Washington on 13 May.

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