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## European bloc makes a rare rebuke of Hungary's Orban by suspending party

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Brussels — Europe's most important political family penalized Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban on Wednesday over concerns that he is leading his nation down an undemocratic path, suspending his party's membership until further notice.

The move fell short of an outright expulsion, sought by some within the center-right European People's Party, and Orban painted it as a compromise he had a role in shaping. But it was still the strongest move against him from a political group that until now had done little to condemn his use of anti-Semitic imagery, his steady erosion of democratic institutions and his disdain for what Europe has often said are its core values.

Under the terms of the suspension, Orban's Fidesz party will be unable to attend or cast votes in EPP meetings or propose candidates for posts. A committee will monitor his compliance with the EPP's values. Orban will still lend his strength to the centrist political family instead of joining forces with other crusading far-right politicians, who are poised to storm the European Parliament after elections across the European Union in May, even though the rabble-rousers are perhaps more of his ilk.

"We remain committed to European values, but we also don't want migration," Orban said at a nonconfrontational news conference after the decision in which he appeared to seek to defuse the situation while conceding little. "We want to continue to protect Christian values. We will continue to make that clear."

The decision to suspend Orban rather than expel him, made in a 190-to-3 vote of EPP members, was a measure of his continued within the group despite concerns about his rule. Without Fidesz lawmakers, the political family would no longer be the largest in the European Parliament, taking away its leading role within the legislature and diminishing its influence within E.U. institutions. Orban also has benefited at home from EPP membership, with the group's centrist image conferring a veneer of legitimacy on him even as he has moved more aggressively against his opponents.

The center-right group includes German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats and the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, led by Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, among others.

“After a very intensive and not-easy discussion inside of the EPP, we came to clear and constructive results,” said Manfred Weber, a German lawmaker who is the EPP leader in the European Parliament. “Fidesz will not have any say in the future developments of the EPP,” he added. Weber is seeking the European Commission presidency after the May elections, a powerful post he is unlikely to win without Hungarian support.

After years of inflammatory actions from Orban, the final straw for many inside the EPP was his decision to target one of their own, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, alongside billionaire Hungarian American financier and philanthropist George Soros, in a recent anti-E.U. advertising campaign in Hungary.

Weber had demanded that Orban welcome back Central European University, founded by Soros, which has been forced to move from Budapest to Vienna. Orban made no public promises Wednesday about the university’s fate.

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