

Hungary's Eastern Opening Policy as a Long-Term Political-Economic Strategy

Over the past decade, Hungary found itself increasingly isolated within the European Union due to the populist radical right Fidesz government's Eurosceptic rhetoric, controversial policies, and violation of fundamental EU values. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's announcement in 2014 that he seeks to remodel Hungary into an illiberal state, based on the model of countries like Russia and China¹ further deepened concerns over Hungary's democratic erosion and the ideological incompatibility of the Orbán government's plans with the EU's system which is based on liberal values and human rights.

Against this background, Hungarian foreign policy has, over the past decade, been marked by the open pursuit of closer relationships with Eastern states, in particular China, Russia, Turkey but also Central Asian countries, most notably Azerbaijan. These foreign relations now fall under the government's "Eastern Opening Policy".

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further united governments across the EU in helping Kyiv defend itself, the Orbán government, which seeks to preserve its beneficial political-economic relationship with Moscow, stood out from this unified Western response. Criticised by its Western partners and supposed allies, Hungary is increasingly isolated in the EU. These circumstances further reinforce the importance of Hungary's Eastern Opening Policy as a crucial economic cornerstone of Fidesz's foreign policy and underpin the Orbán regime's ideological reorientation away from Western liberal values.

Reorientation to the Eastern World

Hungary's ideological and economic reorientation to Eastern states and its parallel democratic decline have been subject to intense debate across the EU institutions. However, contrary to this/it being due to sheer ideological reasons, the Hungarian

government's plan to transform the country into an "illiberal democracy" to the likes of Russia, China and Turkey was in line with its broader foreign policy objective, introduced in 2011 as the "Eastern Opening Policy", known in Hungarian as "Keleti Nyitás". Orbán justified the introduction of this new foreign policy strategy by pointing towards broader geoeconomic trends and the global reorientation to the East, stating: "We are sailing under a Western flag, though an Eastern wind is blowing in the world economy"² during his visit to Beijing in 2009³, before his election in 2010. It is Hungary's main economic strategy⁴, intending to reduce Hungary's economic dependence on trade with Western partners⁵, above all the EU after the financial crisis of 2008⁶. According to prime minister Orbán, Hungary should become a "middle power" and refrain from the political and economic decoupling pursued by the West. Instead, the small central European country should "forge as many links as possible with other countries and market participants in the areas of trade, infrastructure and investment, including public diplomatic relations"⁷.

Although the Eastern Opening policy is largely associated with Fidesz's foreign policy since the party's takeover in 2010, it still contains some thinking from the former socialist government as regards the emphasis on increasing the country's global presence and economic ties to emerging economies⁸.

Before adopting the specifically eastern-oriented foreign policy, Fidesz's foreign minister followed a strategy largely known as "Global Opening", which emphasised five key regions, namely the post-Soviet space, Asia, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan African regions, North Africa, and Latin America⁹. The new strategy was led by the government's belief in a declining West and the resulting need to reorientate towards the East, as already noted by Prime Minister Orbán in

his 2010 remarks. The official term "Eastern Opening" for this new foreign policy approach was thus only introduced in 2011¹⁰.

Since the announcement of the Eastern Opening Policy, the government openly courted investments from powerful states, in the East above all Russia and China, resulting in plans for several projects. Over the past years, Hungary has also repeatedly demonstrated its diplomatic commitment to this foreign policy strategy. In August 2021 the government announced that it will continue to follow the politics of opening to the East¹¹.

A Trojan Horse? Hungary's relations with the East

Orbán's attempts to build commercial ties and build relationships with eastern states have been eyed critically by Hungary's European partners. As the relations with, above all, China and Russia strengthened the country has often been accused of being a Trojan Horse in the European Union¹². Several controversial, foreign-funded projects and their potential implications on Hungary's role as an EU member are among the main causes for the suspicions about the country's deepening ties to Moscow and Beijing. Moreover, Hungary's intensifying relationships with Russia, China and the Turkic states under the Eastern Opening Policy also demonstrate the transactional nature of these relations and the foreign policy approach.

Russia

Regarding Hungary's relationship with Russia, one of the most controversial projects between the two countries is the expansion of the Soviet Paks I nuclear power plant, a project that came to be known as Paks II. The agreement for the construction of two new power units was signed by the Russian and Hungarian governments in 2014¹³. The project, which was awarded to Russia

without open competition with other actors, will largely be financed with a Russian state loan of around €10 billion that will indebt Budapest to Moscow almost until the middle of the 21st century¹⁴. Due to the lack of open competition and the huge debt that is likely to increase Hungary's dependencies on Russia, the project is eyed with suspicion. Moreover, some experts previously called for a reconsideration of the site where the new project is planned to be constructed, as reports state that it is not suitable for construction¹⁵. According to an Austrian geologist, there are considerable differences between the geological site report and the resulting site safety report. Furthermore, the tectonic fault line running under the site should be considered active and thus capable of causing an earthquake that could have devastating consequences¹⁶. Neighbouring Austria is particularly opposed to the project, due to the specific risks associated with the project and even launched a lawsuit against the European Commission which approved Hungary's plan for the nuclear power plant in 2017. The Court, however, dismissed the case¹⁷.

Despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulting in EU plans to reduce energy dependencies on Russia¹⁸, the Hungarian government announced that it will stand by its Russian-backed Paks II project. In fact, the Hungarian government indicated in January of 2023 that it would block any EU sanctions on Russian nuclear energy¹⁹. In April 2023, Hungarian foreign minister Szijjártó and Rosatom's CEO agreed on amendments to the project's construction and financing agreement²⁰, which were needed as "life and the technological situation have changed so much"²¹. Szijjártó furthermore argued that there would be no energy security and no European green transition possible without nuclear energy, explaining the push for Paks II²². Hungary is thus set to carry out the Russian-financed project, despite the geopolitical circumstances and the international opposition to the project. Overall, it demonstrates that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has not decreased Hungary's readiness to conclude business deals and increase its overall dependency on Russia.

Besides the evident cooperation and realisation of Russian-financed projects within the Eastern Opening Policy, Budapest has also signalled in other ways that it seeks to keep its door for Russian money open and the relationship intact. One prominent example is the moving of the former Soviet and now Russian-backed International Investment Bank, sometimes even referred to as "Russian Spy Bank"²³, to Budapest in 2019²⁴. The bank's presence is considered highly controversial as its employees are granted diplomatic immunity, stoking concerns over potential Russian espionage and intelligence operations²⁵. Moreover, the IIB's high number of staff members despite its comparatively small size further raised suspicions that doors would not only be open to bankers but also spies²⁶.

While virtually every eastern EU member that was part of the IIB announced they would leave following the Russian invasion of Ukraine²⁷, Hungary neither quit nor expelled it from Hungary in the first year after Russia's invasion. It was only in April 2023, when the United States sanctioned the IIB stating the bank's potential to conduct influence-seeking and spying operations in Europe²⁸, that Hungary announced its withdrawal from the bank. The Hungarian government nonetheless alleged that it was pushed to do so, thereby implying that it was an involuntary move²⁹.

China

China is another important country for Hungary's Eastern Opening Policy. Since the announcement of Hungary's new foreign policy approach, it has actively courted investments from China, next to its participation in the 17+1, today the 16+1 format, which was also founded in Budapest.

Today, there are several flagship cooperation projects between the two countries, such as the Budapest-Belgrade railway under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the building of the Fudan University Campus in Budapest as well as the planned construction of the Contemporary Ampere Technology (CATL) battery factory near the eastern Hungarian city of Debrecen.

Arguably one of the most important BRI flagship projects in Europe is the planned high-speed railway from Budapest to Belgrade, which would shorten the duration of the trip from eight hours to less than half of it. However, the plan has been criticised due to its lack of transparency³⁰ and alleged limited value to Hungary itself. Given the railway's main purpose to transport cargo, it would help bring Chinese goods from the Port of Piraeus in Greece to Central Europe and thus largely benefit China.

As usual with BRI projects, the majority will be financed through a Chinese loan thus carrying the risk of being a "debt trap" and increasing dependencies on Beijing³¹. Moreover, studies suggest that this "corrosive capital"³² from China increases corruption and clientelism in Hungary, thereby further enriching Hungarian oligarchs. As such, the project is of limited value to the Hungarian people but beneficial to the Hungarian political and business elite.

The most recent announcement in August 2022 that the Chinese Battery production company CATL will open a plant near the Hungarian eastern city of Debrecen is again representative of the Fidesz government's readiness to court investments from the East. Moreover, it points to the success of the government's decade-long build-up of diplomatic and economic ties to Eastern powers. According to Chinese state media, Hungary is the ideal place for the new battery plant as the country offers "predictability in terms of policy and business environment"³³, indicating that China trusts Hungary not to suddenly change its mind due to political-ideological reasons. In a previous visit, Wang Yi, one of the highest-ranking Chinese diplomats, praised the country for its China-friendly policy³⁴, which could be interpreted as an indication that a pro-Chinese approach gets rewarded.

Economic investments aside, a striking example of a cultural-ideological exchange with China under the Eastern Opening policy is the plan to build a Fudan University campus, a prestigious, elite private institution, in Budapest. It should open in 2024 and would be the first Chinese University campus in the European Union³⁵. The Hungarian

opposition and parts of the public, who only learned about the plans in the autumn of 2020, oppose the project, particularly because the campus is supposed to be built where a student quarter hosting dormitories for low-income students was planned³⁶.

Besides, the project is concerning due to Fudan University's well-known alignment with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In 2019, references to "freedom of thought" were removed from the University's charter. Instead, it now features pledges to follow the Communist Party's leadership³⁷. According to investigations by Direkt36.hu, a Hungarian investigative centre, "Shanghai's Fudan University is also a prominent tool for [this] cultural expansion"³⁸ next to the widespread Confucius Institutes that are promoting Chinese culture outside of China, many of which have already been shut down across Europe - such as the one in Brussels - due to potential influence-seeking activities, and even banned entirely from Sweden³⁹. As reported by Direkt36, Fudan University collaborates with Chinese intelligence services⁴⁰ and even hosts its own spy school. As such, it could represent a national security threat to Hungary and the EU. Moreover, around a quarter of the University's professors and students are members of the Chinese Communist Party, hence leaving no doubts about the political alignment of the University⁴¹.

Overall, Hungary's relationship with China is beneficial to the Hungarian governing elite. While investments from abroad on the one hand help close the financing gap prevalent in the CEE region, they also come with fewer strings attached than EU money, and the lack of transparency allows for the continuation of clientelist corruption in Hungary⁴². Perhaps most importantly, considering the Orbán government's opportunistic foreign policy approach, Hungary's relationship with China equipped Budapest with political leverage to blackmail the EU, as it did in 2018 when it warned the EU that it would turn to China if Hungary does not receive more funding for infrastructure.⁴³ Moreover, it led to Hungary undermining the EU's unity on China in several instances. A prime example of this is Hungary blocking an EU statement on the

South China Sea Ruling of 2016, its silence on the arrest of Canadian-Hungarian citizen Michael Kovrig by China, as well as its expressed criticism of EU sanctions against Chinese officials related to their complicity in crimes against the Uighur population, even though Budapest previously agreed to these sanctions⁴⁴. Similarly, Hungary vetoed a common EU statement criticising China's Hong Kong security law in 2019, which further demonstrates Hungary's readiness to act as a protector of China and shield it from EU criticism. This behaviour, in return, harms the EU's image and credibility as a united actor and illustrates how Hungary's relations with China under the "Eastern Opening" affect the EU.

Turkey and the Turkic States

With Hungary's economic and ideological reorientation to the East, the country also increased diplomatic relations with Turkey and the Turkic states in Central Asia - among them Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan - an effort that is underpinned by more frequent visits, exchanges, and political cooperation between the Hungarian and their respective governments.

In particular, Turkey is an increasingly important ally and partner for Orbán's Hungary. Over the past years, the two countries held various meetings and visits, a prominent one being Erdogan's 2018 state visit to Hungary during which Orbán praised his regime's stability and called on Europe to increase strategic cooperation with Turkey⁴⁵.

Turkey and Hungary, both NATO members, have also demonstrated increased coordination in the international arena and within multi-governmental formats. A recent, striking of this was the delaying of the ratification of Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO membership. While every other NATO member quickly ratified their accession, Hungary and Turkey prolonged the process for months. Once Turkey announced its ratification of Finland's NATO accession, Hungary quickly followed suit⁴⁶. As Ankara delayed the ratification of Sweden's application, claiming the country welcomes

militants from the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group in Turkey and Europe, Hungary did so, too⁴⁷. The most astonishing about the Hungarian delay of Sweden's NATO accession is that there seems to be no precise cause for it. Over the months, the Fidesz government named numerous, dubious reasons for their delay of the process, one of them even being that they would "pay special attention to Turkey's reservations", thereby admitting to their coordination with Turkey⁴⁸ - even though these reservations have nothing to do with Hungarian national interests. Now that Erdogan announced Turkey will ratify Sweden's NATO accession in October⁴⁹, it is likely that Hungary will soon follow suit: Only a day after Turkey's announcement, the Hungarian foreign minister reiterated the country's support for Sweden's accession⁵⁰, thus demonstrating their readiness to change course and follow Turkey.

Although the deepening ties to Turkey and the Turkic are largely due to Hungary's objective for energy diversification given Hungary's strong dependence on Russian energy and its vulnerabilities due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, their rapprochement started years before. Already in 2018, Hungary invited several Central Asian foreign ministers to discuss common challenges as well as opportunities for economic cooperation. Hungary also received observer status in the Organization of Turkic States in 2018, formerly known as the "Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States - Turkic Council"⁵¹. The Organization was established "on the four main pillars of common history, common language, common identity, and common culture," however, it "does not limit itself to the confines of these commonalities. Rather, it aims to broaden the existing bilateral cooperation areas such as economy, science, education, transportation, customs, tourism, and other various fields among the Member States into multilateral cooperation for the benefit of the region."⁵²

Most recently, in October 2022, Orbán travelled to the summit of the Organization of Turkic States, underpinning that he is interested in continuing to seek closer cooperation with Turkic and Central Asian coun-

tries. According to the summit's slogan, its objective was "to strengthen "common development and prosperity" and open "a new era of Turkic civilization". Orbán, in his remarks, emphasised that Budapest fully supports the Organization's work and aims to help them realise the "Turkic vision".

It is important to note that the Orbán government's newfound interest in closer relations with and support for the Turkic states lies in the – formerly far-right – narrative that the origins of Hungarians lie with the Turkic-speaking people of Central Asia. However, this counterfactual tale runs contrary to the established scientific consensus on the Finno-Ugric origin of the Hungarian people. The government's propagation of the alternative history of the Hungarian people's origins in Central Asia serves as a useful justification for the government's reorientation to the East and is by now even embedded in the national school curriculum⁵³.

Overall, Hungary's cooperation with Turkey and the Turkic states complements its Eastern Opening and further demonstrates the transactional and opportunistic nature of the policy.

Challenges and Opportunities for the Eastern Opening Policy

Overall, Hungary's Eastern Opening Policy serves as a reminder that the country's government sees the West as in decline and Russia, China, and Turkey, as well as the Turkic states as crucial partners when it comes to the future. This geopolitical thinking is consistently demonstrated by the Hungarian government's behaviour, most recently in February 2023: As numerous leaders and decision-makers met for the 2023 Munich Security Conference to discuss the challenges of our time and particularly Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Hungarian government officials have been absent. Instead, they received leaders and politicians from Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, and China in Hungary, thereby exemplifying the significance of these countries and the East in general in the government's overall geopolitical strategy. Moreover, in autumn 2023, Orbán is reportedly travelling to

China⁵⁴, thus illustrating the importance of continuing Hungary's Eastern Opening.

In addition, certain actions by the Fidesz government, such as watering down sanctions, working to remove certain individuals from sanctions lists as well as blocking joint statements and condemning specific EU actions are means to signal Hungary's continuous support towards these undemocratic states despite being a NATO & EU member. It serves as a signal that Hungary is still their partner despite its membership in the EU and NATO. Orbán's reorientation towards these illiberal regimes, furthermore, underpins his 2014 announced plan to remodel Hungary into such a state. Hence, Hungary's new focus in its foreign policy goes hand in hand with its ideological remodelling and is supported by it.

As several examples of cooperation and collaboration within the Eastern Opening Policy demonstrate, the policy presents several challenges to Hungary itself and the EU. For Hungary, the close cooperation required a diplomatic balancing act between its Western partners and the East. A powerful example of this was the country's present approach to Russia ever since the invasion of Ukraine. While other EU member states vowed to decrease dependencies on Russia, condemned the states' actions, and have been supporting the EU's sanctions on Russia, Hungary doubled down on its fierce criticism of the economic measures on Russia, threatened to block new sanction packages and managed to water them down. While the purpose of these actions could be to signal to Russia that Hungary stands by its relationship, it also strained relations with other EU members, above all its former ally, Poland, demonstrating that Hungary is not a reliable partner⁵⁵. Lastly, Hungary's reorientation towards the East and the country's readiness to betray allies further undermined the already challenged unity of the EU, specifically when it comes to condemning certain actions by authoritarian actors, most notably China and Russia.

The overall success of the Eastern Opening is difficult to assess. Analysing the policy's success in purely economic terms shows that the policy itself cannot be deemed

successful. As an analysis by the Hungarian news outlet Telex proves, despite serious efforts undertaken by the Hungarian government to cosy up to the Eastern partners, the data fails to show any economic gains of this policy⁵⁶. On the contrary, the Hungarian economy's heavy reliance on Western exports even grew⁵⁷. Aside from the lack of economic gains, it remains questionable whether the direct investments from the East and the political dependence that ensues from it would ever be a viable alternative to the EU funding Hungary receives as a top net⁵⁸.

Nonetheless, the investments received from sources outside of the EU prop up Orbán's regime and help diversify foreign investment in Hungary, which might prove to be critically important as it is still uncertain whether and when the EU funding, that was blocked under the Rule of Law Mechanism, will be transferred to Hungary. The investments from and the relationships with illiberal states also provide Orbán with leverage in the EU and the potential means to blackmail allies. Thus, the Eastern Opening Policy not only provides Orbán with the opportunity to receive investments from sources other than EU funding but also gives him leverage vis-à-vis the EU. Moreover, as critics have noted, the Orbán government's turn to the East is also due to the fact that the country's authoritarian drift and corruption are criticised in the West⁵⁹ but irrelevant in its relations with countries within the Eastern Opening Policy. Thus, Hungary will continue seeking economic and diplomatic ties with these states as they provide not only financial investments but also further legitimise the government's illiberal turn.

Overall, as Orbán seeks to transform Hungary into a "middle power" in Central Europe with ties to the West and the East, the Eastern Opening serves as a crucial means to this end⁶⁰. Nonetheless, this opportunistic balancing act between the East and the West, brought about by its Eastern Opening Policy, will only continue to strain Hungary's relationship with its Western partners and further undermine EU unity.

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