

Hungarian Foreign Policy towards the Turkic States: A Motivation for a More Authoritarian-Leaning Political Model or a Pragmatic Will for Economic Gain?

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Abstract: *This study examines the relationship between the recent discussions that Hungary has moved away from fundamental democratic values and turned into an illiberal democracy and the transformation of Hungarian foreign policy by taking Hungary's relations with the Turkic states as a case. The dynamics of Hungarian foreign policy towards the Turkic states as part of Hungary's post-2010 strategy of Eastern Opening are taken as a case study and the influences of these dynamics on perception differences about Hungarian democracy are analysed. It is discussed whether Hungary's developing political and economic relations with the Turkic states since 2010 involve an emulation of the political models of these states and whether this has an impact on the so-called transformation of Hungarian democracy into an illiberal democracy. It attempts to reveal the extent to which foreign policy developments are decisive for Hungarian domestic politics and, in particular, to identify the triggering factors for Hungary's rapprochement with the Turkic states. It seeks to answer the question of whether Hungary's motivation to adapt a more authoritarian-leaning political model or pragmatic economic intentions are more hegemonic in the relationship between Hungary and the Turkic states.*

Keywords: *Hungary, foreign policy, Turkic states, illiberal democracy, pragmatism.*

Introduction

Hungary's ethno-cultural connection with the Turkic countries and historical claims about the Turkic roots of Hungarians have always been controversial topics when discussing Hungary's relations with the states outside the political map of Europe, especially in the Turkic states. Although the discussions on Hungary's European/Turkic identity are beyond the scope of this article, Hungary's observer membership in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's words 'We are Christian Turkic people and we stand firm on Kipchak-Turkic principles... we are honoured to live as the grandchildren of Attila' at the Turkic Council summit in Baku in October 2019 has undoubtedly put this historical debate back on the agenda within the framework of the current economic-political dynamics. However, in order to understand the fundamental elements of Hungary's relations with the Turkic countries in the 21st century, it is necessary to attempt an explanation with a much broader perspective, going beyond historical ethnic kinship debates by including the pragmatic influences of international politics, where economic interests predominate, in the analysis.

As the historian and Turkologist Hungarian diplomat János Hóvári (2022) has stated, Hungary is located to the east of the Stockholm-Hamburg-Munich-Rome line, in an area of much greater geo-economic importance than the west of this line. Hungary's geographical location at this intersection of transport and trade routes between Western Europe and the Turkic countries, with which each member of the European Union (EU) has more or less intensive economic and political relations, necessitates that Hungary reconsider its relations with these countries far beyond the ethno-cultural ties. From this point of view, in order to conceive and define the fundamental characteristics of the increasingly complex relations between the Turkic countries and Hungary, it seems necessary to explain the changes in the Hungarian foreign policy motivation with the effects of the elements imposed by the global political transformations and economic necessities, without resorting to reductionism.

In this sense, the risk of reductionism is most likely to arise when explaining Hungary's relations with non-Euro-Atlantic actors such as the Turkic states. This risk is often more apparent when the essence of the relationship and the impacts of what makes it necessary are not analysed. This superficiality, which can lead to a discourse in which the political models of the Turkic states are adapted to an EU member state through relative inferences, creates the risk of misinterpreting Hungarian foreign policy transformations and the dynamics that produce them, and of making inaccurate analogies in the final analyses. More precisely, inferences such as the beginning of Hungary's adoption of anti-democratic traditions – frequently discussed in the literature – stem mostly from the challenge of attempting to adapt the dynamics that determine foreign

policy to domestic policy by taking the Hungary-Turkic states rapprochement as a given case. For these reasons, the main aim of this study is to explain the extent to which pragmatic political and economic elements are hegemonic in the Hungarian foreign policy towards the Turkic states, without getting bogged down in the debates about Hungarian domestic policy, and ultimately to reveal what the outcomes of Hungary's strategic relations with the Turkic states are under this hegemony.

Conceptual framework: Pragmatism in Hungarian foreign policy

In order to understand the framework and extension of Hungary's relations with the Turkic states, it is necessary to be able to consider the reflection of pragmatic political behaviour in foreign policy. Pragmatism in contemporary international relations differs from the mainstream theoretical approaches in that it is eclectic, especially in an analytical sense, and that the agency, structures and identities of the interacting actors are drawn by pragmatist forms in some practices (Cochran 2012). From the point where structures and identities take on a pragmatic orientation, what is done or what can be done in practice, mostly shaped by a realistic mindset, becomes more important for the actor. Because it is inevitable that there are interconnected fundamental facts that affect the behaviour of the actors involved in the interaction and significantly determine the framework of the practice, actors cannot avoid interacting with their environment, and the primacy of practice emerges as the world interferes with the beliefs that shape behaviour (Hellmann et. al. 2009). Therefore, the role of practice is the key factor in the pragmatist mentality, and as the practices and actions are generally habitual and reflexive, they are essentially antecedents of the actor and the environment in which the behaviour occurs, and serve to generate the behaviour and the environment (Pratt 2016).

The significant element that shapes the behaviour of the actor is the instinct to act in the face of a development or to produce a solution in the face of a problem, and the existence of this instinct is perpetual. This is where the relationship between pragmatism and foreign policy comes into play. The instinct to take a stance against a foreign policy development or to find solutions to problems leads foreign policymakers to resort to the accumulated experience gained from practice. Because, foreign policymakers often have to deal with situations that require quick and decisive action, they have to make decisions without having all the information and being sure of the costs of the decisions (Tzvetkova 2018). This is the essence of pragmatic foreign policy behaviour and the basic link in the chain that extends from the level of the unit (state) to the level of the systemic order. The sum of the experiences revealed by practices constitutes the cornerstones of pragmatic foreign policy implementation, while the sum of foreign policy behaviour generates the order from regional to global at the

systemic level. In short, in the environment of pragmatic foreign policy intentions, foreign policy practices and the global order produce each other, or in other words, while foreign policy practices shape the order, the order builds the structural conditions that shape the foreign policy practices of the states (Franke & Hellmann 2018). Strategies of the states arise from this relationship between foreign policy and order, and when these strategies are synthesised with national interest, pragmatic foreign policy takes place. This foreign policy, which is politically realistic and implemented to adapt to various situations, including tactical adjustments and withdrawals, and establishing relations with non-traditional actors in order to achieve the goals determined in the national interest, is a strategically pragmatic foreign policy (Phua 2022).

The pragmatism of Hungarian foreign policy exemplifies this behaviour of adapting to different situations according to the dimension of the relationship between national interest and the systemic order. In this first quarter of the 21st century, dominated by global insecurities and national security concerns, Hungarian foreign policy began to override its traditional Western orientation, realising that other opportunities existed outside the traditional EU-NATO circles and concluding that it was a bad decision to give up the benefits provided by relations with actors outside the EU-NATO circles in the past, it began to implement a policy of redefining relations, especially with the powers outside the Euro-Atlantic axis (Tarrósy & Vörös 2020). This policy fits into a pragmatic framework as it aims to pursue an interactive foreign policy towards these actors by using closer partnerships as a political lever and an effective economic instrument (Kacziba & Hasan 2022). At this point, pragmatism, which manifests itself as Hungary's systemic reinterpretation of its existence within the global order and the redefinition of its foreign policy actions within this order, becomes the main feature of the Hungarian governments' projections to improve Hungary's economic relations with different actors through various policy instruments and to make rational decisions in a dynamically changing and vulnerable international environment. As a consequence of that, Hungarian foreign policy develops pragmatic relations with a number of important powers and regions of the globe (Tarrósy & Solymári 2022).

Transformation of Hungarian foreign policy: Eastern opening

The change in Hungary's approach to its relations with the Turkic states becomes meaningful when considered in the context of the significant transformation that Hungarian foreign policy began to undergo after 2010, when FIDESZ – Hungarian Civic Alliance returned to power. The basis of this transformation is undoubtedly the introduction of a new approach to the Hungarian foreign policy tradition, which includes economic determinants rather than viewing foreign policy solely within a geopolitical framework. In this respect, the most

decisive impact of FIDESZ and its leader Viktor Orbán has been the shaping of the new orientation in Hungarian foreign policy since 2010, in which economic instruments have also been given a high priority by putting the foreign policy in a new direction to serve the forging of commercial networks and to attract new business circles to invest in Hungary (Puzyniak 2022). This introduction of new foreign policy concept, in which there is a clear tendency to go beyond the traditional Euro-Atlantic orientation, has caused Hungarian foreign policy to follow an ambivalent path in the last decade. On the one hand, the effort not to put Hungary's place in the Euro-Atlantic into doubt remains evident; on the other hand, Hungary seemed to leave mainstream European strategies on international issues by increasingly taking a sovereigntist approach and defecting from common European positions on different international problems and developments (Hettyey 2021). This ambivalent path, especially after 2014, and more visibly at the end of the decade, curved towards a pragmatic Hungarian foreign policy that brought non-European commercial interests and geographical priorities into focus, and the strengthening of the country's economic competitiveness by focusing on non-Euro-Atlantic regions became the main goal in order to reduce and eliminate the influences of Euro-Atlantic structures on the Hungarian economy and Hungary's political dependencies (Müller & Gazsi 2023).

It should be underlined that there are both internal and external factors contributing to this transformation in Hungarian foreign policy. Although it is outside the scope of this study, despite the fact that Hungarian society is still more pro-European than the EU average with support for EU membership consistently above 70% (Bíró-Nagy et. al. 2023), the motivation for Europeanisation has declined, especially among the ruling elite in Hungary, during the years of economic disruption in the late 2000s. This was because European integration failed to provide the expected economic prosperity, as was promised during the EU accession process. This led to populist politics taking power, and the intense attempts of the populist circles to normalise the nature of relations with non-Euro-Atlantic actors by incorporating them into traditional foreign policy-making processes. More to the point, the external factor is that the effects of sharing hegemony in the global order, i.e. the transition from a unipolar world order to a multipolar one, in which different centres of power appear as poles, are increasingly influencing the foreign policy of medium and small-sized states. In this transition process of Hungarian foreign policy, according to Tarrósy and Vörös (2014), the evolution of multipolar relations in the changing unipolar international context has affected Hungarian foreign policy. As a result, Hungary, a small-sized European state, revised its foreign policy by accepting above all else the maximisation of national interest as the only valid and rational behaviour, and the new foreign policy began to focus pragmatically on repositioning Hungary on the global arena and pushing the country's economy and society in

a more dynamic development route. In this sense, the transformation of Hungarian foreign policy refers to a structural degeneration in which economic tools are integrated with the traditional instruments of foreign policy strategies. In particular, this new understanding of external policy in which foreign economic policy and foreign policy are intertwined, or more precisely the economisation of Hungarian foreign policy, particularly after 2010, represents an increase in the weight of economic relations and geographical extension within foreign interactions and a response to the changes and reorganisation taking place in world politics and economy (Csiki et. al. 2014).

The Hungarian government's persistent consideration of the global rift and the change in the balance of power from an economic-political perspective inevitably put the state of Hungary's economic relations with centres of power outside the Euro-Atlantic, the post-Cold War hegemonic axis, and the extent to which they could be improved, on the Hungarian foreign policy agenda. As a consequence, inherent economic motivations such as ensuring a positive trade balance by increasing Hungary's competitiveness and gaining a larger share of the trade volumes in fast-growing non-Euro-Atlantic countries led to the shaping and implementation of the Eastern Opening policy. Eastern Opening, which became the main economic policy strategy aimed at reducing Hungary's economic dependence on its Western partners, especially the EU, as the EU's global economic hegemony began to decline relatively in the 2010s in the eyes of Hungarian policymakers, especially following the 2008 financial crisis, progressed into a more complex foreign policy concept, involving the autonomous expansion of linkages with non-Euro-Atlantic countries and market actors in the fields of trade, infrastructure and investment, including public diplomatic relations (Greilinger 2023). The fundamental characteristic of this policy is the projection that Hungary's economic relations and the composition of investments coming into the country will not fulfil the targets of economic development and welfare increase in Hungary to catch up with the EU standards, and therefore the additional resources needed to finance the necessary public investments and economic growth acceleration should be obtained from 'rising' Eastern powers (Végh 2015). Thus, the Eastern Opening turned into a foreign policy practice that focused on the economic dimension of foreign relations especially after 2014, first in the Prime Minister's Office and then in the foreign affairs bureaucracy that later became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, pointing to a foreign policy phase in which economic interests were prioritised. Therefore, as a strategy for achieving the goals of this phase of foreign policy, the Eastern Opening primarily focused on Hungary's geo-strategic position as a transport hub between Asia and developed Western Europe, and was constructed as a political tool to facilitate Hungary's access to the markets of Asian and post-Soviet countries in particular.

The Hungarian Eastern Opening has been constructed as a strategy moulded according to the current world economic trends and global political balance fractions, which are projected to indicate the rise of Eurasian powers. In such a challenging projection, the rising economic power of the Eurasian space is predicted to contribute to the country's political success as a result of the creation of systems of instruments to promote the geographical diversification of Hungarian economic interactions by increasing the activity of Hungarian economic diplomacy in new foreign trade directions, strengthening the network of Hungarian foreign trade diplomacy and establishing trade structures primarily to help Hungarian actors access Eurasian markets (Bernek 2018). Despite different approaches and interpretations regarding the operation of these instruments and the political contribution of the outputs they produce, it remains a fact of Hungarian foreign policy in the last decade that Hungarian decision-makers insist on expanding the practices of the Eastern Opening policy. Although a wide variety of instruments are used to implement the strategy, especially the extensive support of Hungarian governments for the field activities of organisations such as business committees, the revitalisation of the economy-oriented structures, including the Turkic countries of Eurasia such as Türkiye and Kazakhstan, and the rapid increase in the number of high-level state organisations with the countries in the 'East' reflect the commitment of Hungarian governments to the Eastern Opening policy (Éltető & Völgyi 2013). Despite this stubbornness and the efforts made to implement it, it is quite difficult to claim that the policy of Eastern Opening satisfied expectations and that there has been a change in the trade balance in favour of Hungary, especially with the great powers such as China and Russia. However, the opposite is true when it comes to the Turkic states, which are closer to Hungary's calibre in terms of economic and political capacity. The situation is different in the case of the Turkic countries and Hungary is actively increasing its exports and economic relations with the Turkic partners, at the same time drawing economic interest from these countries to develop further cooperation (Gusseinov 2023).

Hungary's opening towards the Turkic states: Political aspects

In essence, Hungary's global opening in foreign policy proceeded by essentially dividing the non-Euro-Atlantic networks into two: the Opening to the South and Eastern Opening. While the former was doomed to failure due to the inadequacy of the elements that would provide benefits to Hungary in terms of the balance of economic interests, the latter, despite the problems and setbacks, continued to move forward under the influence of the priority of economic elements critical for Hungary, such as energy and transport. Conceived as a pro-Hungarian strategy that would serve the interests of the Hungarian national economy in the new world order, the Opening to the South aimed at reformulating Hun-

gary's economic relations with some countries of the Global South, especially by targeting Africa and Latin America. However, the new type of competition introduced by leading Asian powers such as China and India and rising powers such as Russia and Brazil on the African continent and Hungary's lack of capacity to sustain this race challenged the process of opening to Africa together with the shortcomings of Hungary's political networks and active government activities which created serious obstacles in the implementation of the strategy (Tarrósy & Morenth 2013). On the other hand, the opening to Latin America could not go beyond the development of Hungarian–Latin American relations in soft political areas such as student exchanges and cultural programmes and a limited achievement in economic terms, such as facilitating the entry of Hungarian companies into Latin American markets (Nagy 2019), and these factors led the Opening to the South strategy to a dead end. Ultimately, such failures elevate the discussion on the transformation of Hungarian foreign policy from a purely democratic value perspective and lead to an underestimation of the influence of other factors.

The conclusions that Hungary is moving away from Western values and leaning towards the autocratic practices in its relations with non–Euro-Atlantic circles is usually the result of not taking into account the consequences of pragmatic influence in foreign policy. In this respect, to respond to how we will evaluate when we see the Hungarian rulers sitting around the same table with their Turkic counterparts, it is necessary to find an answer to the question of whether the emulation of a new political model or the motivation for economic interest maximisation is hegemonic. For this reason, the nature of Hungary's *sui generis* relationship with the Turkic states, which constitutes a significant part of the Eastern Opening, plays a key role. And it is necessary to determine the extent to which political aspects have weight in this nature, only then can it be understood whether autocratic aspirations or economic pragmatism predominate in Hungary's relations with the Turkic states.

This Eurasianist ideological approach legitimises Orbán's frequent clashes with Brussels and his friendly relations with Russian and Turkic leaders. Orbán's government has pursued a foreign policy and trade strategy aligned with its ideological centring of Hungary as a link between Western liberalism and Eastern illiberalism (Haas 2023). In fact, Hungary's political relations with non–Euro-Atlantic, and especially Asian, actors is a relationship model in which pragmatic elements have historically been hegemonic. Hungarian policy towards the Eurasian powers was already constructed at the beginning of this century, when it was not yet a full member of the EU, on the perception that it was the most dynamically developing region of the world, and as a consequence of the breakdown of the bipolar world order and the comprehensive reorganisation of strategic forces, it became a geopolitical centre of gravity, so that Hungary had to structure its political and economic strategies on diversifying the choices of

the export-oriented Hungarian economy in the international system in order to diminish the influences of the EU's predominance (Terényi 2002). As Ablonczy (2022) puts it, especially the disappointment with the economic-oriented expectations, which were not sufficiently fulfilled after Hungary's accession to the EU due to the economic crises by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, triggered stronger public discourses demanding a turn away from Western political models, and they constituted the main source of the Eastern Opening in terms of the political aspect. However, as Ablonczy (2022) points out, the FIDESZ government, the architect of the Eastern Opening, never took political similarity with the Turkic states as a reference point, and they do not assign themselves the mission of turning Hungary to the Turkic East, but their political projection is related to the reorientation of Hungarian foreign policy and international relations by using the rhetoric to facilitate and to attract support for the government's endeavours to reconstruct Hungary's position in the transforming international system.

In fact, the main direction of the foreign policy opening towards the East points to the regeneration of political relations with the emerging regional powers of Eurasia, such as Türkiye and the Central Asian Turkic states. Based on this perception, a new geopolitical narrative has crystallised over the past decade on the part of Hungarian governments, which is summed up in the construction of Eurasia in the sense of an economically oriented political approach. Particularly after the economic depreciation of 2008, when the expectations of the Western economic model remained unfulfilled for broad sections of Hungarian society, this made the partial shift of foreign policy preferences to the East more acceptable. Hungary's collective history with the Central Asian peoples represents a specific direction in Hungarian foreign policy, where focusing on the Turkic countries is an affordable priority (Salamin, Megyesi & Klemensits 2021). At this point, the main problem is whether the pragmatic economic part of this priority overrides the part of emulating a political model, or vice versa. It would be far-fetched to argue that Hungary's unique and increasingly close relations with the Turkic states involve taking inspiration from the autocratic-leaning political models, because the evidence suggests that economic pragmatism prevails. In this sense, Hungarian foreign policy towards the Turkic states functions as an instrument where geopolitical interests supplement economic ones. This policy stands out as a strategic model that blends Hungarian foreign and economic policy with a multi-vector feature. This Hungarian foreign economic policy allows Hungary to act as a catalyst in the Turkic states' desire for economic-political rapprochement with Europe and the West, and Hungarian foreign policy plays a distinctive role in supporting Hungary's foreign economic relations in order to obtain a greater share of economic resources in relations with the Turkic states (Vasa 2021). Considering that the volume of Hungarian foreign trade with the Central Asian Turkic countries and Türkiye

has been steadily increasing over the last decade, from a strategic point of view, this active Hungarian participation in economic-political cooperation with the Turkic states is projected as a key to establishing a bridgehead for Hungary to interconnect Western Europe and Asia. This is because the Turkic states are perhaps the most important target countries for such a geostrategic projection (Gyene 2023).

The hegemony of the pragmatic effect in this projection is likely to be discussed by touching upon two cases. For instance, Hungary, as an EU member, is moving towards some strategic policy partnerships with the two Turkic states of Türkiye and Azerbaijan. While Hungary is taking a common path with Türkiye in slowing down the NATO membership process of Sweden and Finland, it is ignoring Armenia and taking a firm stance in favour of Azerbaijan in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict as a state defending Christian values in the Euro-Atlantic world. This kind of policy choice is mainly due to the fact that in Hungary, where economic interest is a central theme as an outcome of the aim of balancing the country's embeddedness in the EU's trade networks, the overall policy towards the European institutions does not include the ultimate target of keeping Hungary out of the Euro-Atlantic circles because of the financial benefits (Végh 2021). When the Turkish government pursued a stalling strategy by putting forward political conditions for the NATO membership of Sweden and Finland on the grounds that these countries allowed the activities of terrorist organisations that threatened the security of Türkiye, the Hungarian government, drawing strength from its close relationship with Türkiye, also implemented a hostage-taking strategy by associating the NATO membership of these two countries with its unresolved conflicts with EU institutions on the rule of law (Müller & Slominski 2024). However, since the critical attitude of Sweden and Finland towards Hungary was directly related to freezing the flow of EU funds to Hungary, the Hungarian veto threat became a means of softening the Swedish-Finnish attitude towards the release of the funds. The fact that these two Scandinavian countries linked the unfreezing of EU funds to Hungary's commitment to being a democratic member of the EU, coupled with Prime Minister Orbán's (and Türkiye's) belief in the decline of the West, motivated Hungary to punish Sweden and Finland over their NATO membership process (Zalewski 2023).

When considering the direction of Hungary's relations with Azerbaijan, it seems relatively less difficult to embrace the hegemonic feature of the pragmatic effect in the Hungarian-Azerbaijani political affinity. This is because the undeniable influence of energy in Hungarian-Azerbaijani relations easily triggers pragmatic foreign policy behaviour and, more interestingly, adds continuity to this pragmatism. Before Orbán, and particularly during the Gyurcsány government from 2006 onwards, Azerbaijan was already a key actor in terms of Hungary's energy security. Notably, in the post-2010 period, this prominence

enabled Azerbaijan, as a target country in the post-Soviet geography of Hungary's Eastern Opening, to evolve into a strategic economic partner for Hungary with more complex commercial connections (Racz 2012). Fundamentally, the need for security and diversity of energy supplies made Azerbaijan the partner with which Hungary most dynamically developed and deepened its relations in the South Caucasus, ahead of Armenia. The fact that Azerbaijan is rich in mineral resources and serves as a jumping-off point for Hungarian economic actors to access the Caucasian and Central Asian markets, which are Russia's backyard, motivated Hungarian rulers to establish more intimate relations with Azerbaijan (Herczeg 2013). Furthermore, Armenia's diplomatic moves, whose rationality is uncertain, have had an impact on the development of Hungarian-Azerbaijani relations towards a strategic partnership over the past decade. Following the extradition of an Azerbaijani military officer convicted of the murder of an Armenian officer during a NATO training programme in Hungary, 'Christian' Armenia, who had completely cut off diplomatic relations with Hungary, was replaced by 'Muslim' Azerbaijan with the momentum created by the energy dynamics. In this process, Azerbaijan became one of Hungary's energy providers, and at a time when Armenian-Hungarian diplomatic relations were severed, the emergence of the potential for Azerbaijan to become one of Hungary's third-largest gas suppliers in the near future, with an annual capacity of one billion cubic metres, within the scope of the strategic partnership (Kránitz 2024), inevitably represented a political outlook in which Hungary appeared to be on Azerbaijan's side.

At this point, the question arises as to whether it is the enthusiasm for a political model or the motivation to gain an economic advantage that is hegemonic in Hungary's foreign policy towards the Turkic states. Essentially, this Hungarian foreign policy behaviour has the dual characteristic of being both strategic and pragmatic, and it would be a reductionist approach to see it as purely economic-pragmatic. On the one hand, this foreign policy is strategic, because, although Hungary, as a member of the EU, is heavily dependent on the EU in economic terms, it cannot, by its very nature, remain immune to the influences of global changes. Hungary sees itself as an actor on the strategic path between China and the EU in the global balances evolving from unipolarity to multipolarity, and for this reason, it considers the Turkic states of Central Asia to be in a strategic position in the China-EU economic interaction. As an EU member, it is located at the easternmost end of the EU side of this interaction, so Hungary is intensifying its relations with the Turkic countries, and in the big picture, this Hungarian-Turkic states relationship on the EU-China strategic route stands out as an element that brings political/strategic and economic benefits to Hungary. On the other hand, the Hungarian policy is pragmatic, because Hungary considers these countries to be alternative energy suppliers in order to balance its energy supply dependence on Russia, and at this point the

aim of making an economic benefit emerges. In this economic motivation, the Hungarian ruling elite defines itself as relatives to the Turkic peoples, making the cultural connection a beneficial instrument.¹ Hungary is definitely a country with European identity, and yet it would be an outrageous challenge to establish a direct link between the current Hungarian sociological structure and Central Asian ancestry. This is because the Hungarian identity has been formed by several factors over the centuries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), in which different cultural elements have been involved. However, there is a widespread public belief among Hungarians that Hungarian society is of Central Asian origin. And while recent archaeological research on Hungarian historical settlements indicates that their roots go back to the very early Middle Ages in the Urals and Central Asian basin (Molnár 2001), modern Hungarian identity has been developed with influences of different peoples living in the CEE region, and here kinship with Turkic countries is actually constructed as an effective tool that helps to expand the strategic and pragmatic space in Hungarian-Turkic states relations. Hungary's observer membership in the OTS is the result of such a unique construction, and thus Hungary's foreign policy towards the Turkic states is basically built on this projection, and it seems that the significant target is to achieve geostrategic and geoeconomic gains rather than to emulate the political models of these states. Therefore, it makes sense that the Hungarian strategy towards Central Asia seems to establish a connection between economic perspectives and geopolitical arguments. The narrative of historical roots paves the way for forthcoming economic strategies. Meanwhile, Hungary's approach to the Turkic states represents the world view of the Orbán governments, which has been constructed on the idea that the global economic future will be Asian. Thus, Hungary's economic and political connection with the Turkic countries symbolises a reasonable effort to find a place in this future (Jaeger 2019). For instance, a political will has arisen in the Azerbaijan-Türkiye-Hungary trio, with significant attempts already made, especially within the OTS, to work on joint infrastructure projects. In the field of energy, 30% of Hungary's natural gas imports are planned to come from Azerbaijan by 2025, indicating the slowly growing influence of the OTS countries on the Hungarian economy.²

1 The discussion on the dual characteristic of Hungarian foreign policy and its impact on Hungarian-Turkic states relations through the strategic dimension of China-EU economic interactions is the conclusion of prof. Márton Krasznai. It is taken from the interview with prof. Márton Krasznai held on 18 April 2023. Prof. Krasznai is the scientific director of the Corvinus Centre for Central Asia Research at the Corvinus University of Budapest and is a well-known professor for his studies on Hungarian policy towards Central Asia.

2 Interview with Kanat Ydyrys on 17 May 2023. Kanat Ydyrys is Kazakhstan's diplomatic representative to the Representation Office of the Organization of Turkic States in Budapest. In our interview, Ydyrys pointed out that Hungary is looking for alternative sources for investment projects as the EU cuts back on funding and stops the flow of funds in some areas. While China is the most important alternative source, the OTS countries also stand out as alternative economic partners, especially in energy and trade.

It is also a projection that includes a long-term strategic mindset behind the deepening interest in Hungary to build relations with the Turkic states, and there are two components to this eagerness. On the one hand, there is a fundamental understanding in Hungary that there is huge economic potential in building relations with this region. Economic relations with Türkiye are already strong, but there is still room for development, while the potential of the Central Asian region has been left unused. Inevitably, energy is a crucial question, but far from being the only relevant one – boosting non-energy related trade and investment is also coming to the forefront. On the other hand, the Hungarian government recognises fundamental changes taking place in the international and global order, which highlights the importance of Türkiye as a regional power and the Central Asian Turkic countries as a battleground region. In this sense, both the Hungarian government and the diplomatic circles recognise that there is a culture-based sympathy which is used as soft power for Hungary to build economic relations with the Turkic states and there is a general thinking that the observer status in the OTS helps Hungary build economic and political relations and enlarges the soft power of Budapest (including economic) with a mid-level guidance and conceptualisation of belonging to the political Turkic world. In terms of domestic political discussions, some Hungarian opposition factions believe that Orbán favours Turkic governments because their domestic political system and values are more similar to his own than to those of European countries. However, it is still an exaggeration to claim that the Hungarian government takes the ethnic kinship and political culture as historically given. Neither the Hungarian government, nor the Hungarian opposition really considers ethno-cultural ties to be important in this regard, and when Prime Minister Orbán held a speech about Hungary's 'Kipchak' identity at the OTS summit, it was not a matter of ethno-cultural identity even for many right-wing Hungarian politicians. So, the essence of Hungary–Turkic states relations is more related to the realisation of the new quasi-multipolar order, in which Turkic states play key roles regionally. From the Hungarian point of view, it involves an economic expectation for the future, but at the same time a political reflection of the ongoing transformation in the global politics; however, that does not mean that Hungarian and Turkic states' interests rely on each other, and that is the distinctive characteristic of the pragmatic perspective of Hungary's rapprochement with the Turkic world, which does not signify a motivation to absorb political authoritarianism.³

It is necessary to remember a frequently repeated observation among the Hungarian public. Hungarian foreign policy had almost completely forgotten

3 Interview with Dr. Máté Szalai on 15 May 2023. Dr. Máté Szalai is a member of the Corvinus University of Budapest, an expert on Hungarian foreign policy towards Türkiye and the Middle East, was the Middle East and North Africa Research Program coordinator at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs at the time of the interview.

its relations with the former Soviet countries (including the Central Asian ones) and the non-Euro-Atlantic countries (during the Euro-Atlantic integration process), and the Eastern Opening emerged as a result of the requisition to rediscover Hungary's relations with the non-Euro-Atlantic players generated by this oblivion. Some strategic deficiencies in this rediscovery process created a miscommunication regarding the Eastern Opening, and therefore the Eastern Opening was perceived as an initiative towards autocracy leaning. Hereby, the Turkic countries occupied a *sui generis* place due to the existence of an ethno-cultural connection, although this connection is not strong in socio-political terms. It is worth noting that this ethno-cultural connectivity was not formed upon the enforcement of Viktor Orbán to accompany his populist narrative, but that scientific opinion almost agrees that the origins of the Hungarians are based on Central Asian nomadic ancestors, although Hungarian social traditions and language have changed a lot as a result of migrations and other factors in the historical process. What makes Orbán's politics distinctive at this point is that he uses the ethno-cultural connection as a justification for making the Hungarian national identity more nationalistic in terms of domestic politics. In foreign policy, he constructs a background for Hungary to attribute more than a pragmatic economic framework to the relations with the Turkic states, and instrumentalises it in the Hungarian-Turkic states relations. If we look at how this instrumentalisation is reflected in the Hungarian foreign policy practices, it is possible to realise that Orbán thinks that there is a power shift in the global system from the Euro-Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific and that he is trying to position the Hungarian foreign policy in favour of connectivity between East and West. In other words, Orbán's Hungary defines itself as an actor that will contribute to connectivity in the form of a bridge between Asia-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic, and this strategic positioning is a complementary element in the argument of the Hungarian bridge between Central Asia and Europe to further the relations with the Turkic states. From this point of view, Hungary's observer membership in the OTS represents a status that will benefit both Hungary and the Turkic states. This is because, thanks to this status and its active involvement in the OTS, Hungary has a comfort zone for special access to the economic resources of these countries, while the Turkic states can use Hungary's presence there as a facilitator in their relations with Europe.⁴

Despite these notional discourses, in the political realisation, the extension of the adaptation of common economic strategies among the OTS states, since many economic fields have a high degree of public incentives in the OTS countries, which makes the political decisions at the OTS level influential on

4 Interview with Dr. Péter Wagner on 17 May 2023. Dr. Péter Wagner is an expert and researcher on Hungarian foreign policy towards Central Asia and the Middle East, and was a senior research fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs at the time of the interview.

the future directions of their economies, and establishing a bridge between the OTS states and the EU are considered as practically realisable from the point of view of Hungarian foreign policy (Baranyi 2022). The most important indicator that Hungary does not have a tendency to adapt to the authoritarian-leaning disposition in practice is the stable course of political relations within the OTS and the increasingly complex context of economic relations.

Hungary's relations with the Turkic states in the spheres of economy and transport

The OTS is an institutional driving force for cooperation among the Turkic countries and currently coordinates cooperation in almost twenty different areas among the member states. These areas of cooperation range from political and economic cooperation to sectoral, technical, social and more specific areas such as customs, transport, tourism, education, information and media, youth and sports, diaspora, information and communication technologies, energy, health, migration, agriculture, law, humanitarian issues and development, human resources, international organisations (Ercan 2023). As a matter of fact, the main governing body and instrument for the management of the cooperation areas, where the main directions for further cooperation are given, is the political area, as the heads of state and the Council of Foreign Ministers gather under this cooperation area.

When the main data on the OTS countries in terms of geographical area, population, total value of the GDP and the trade figures are examined, the economic potential of the OTS countries can be comprehended. The basic figures show that the population of the OTS countries is 173.8 million people, which is almost 2.2% of the world's population; the total area of the OTS countries is 4.8 million km², which is nearly 1% of the world's total area; the total sum of the GDP of the member states is USD 1.5 trillion, which is 1.6% of the world's total, and more to the point, the overall trade of the member states is USD 1.1 trillion, which is 2.4% of the world's total, while Central Asia covers vast natural resources such as oil and gas and uranium (Gasimli 2023). The economic profile of the OTS countries displays the fact that the economies of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are mainly dependent on oil and gas, and therefore these countries export oil and gas to Asia and Europe. On the other hand, Türkiye, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have more diversified economies and export mainly manufactured goods, ores and metals.

Comparing the size of the GDPs of the OTS member and observer countries, Türkiye has the largest GDP at USD 803 billion, followed by Kazakhstan with a total GDP of USD 164.79 billion. Hungary has a GDP of USD 154.3 billion. Uzbekistan has the fourth largest GDP at USD 69.24 billion. Azerbaijan ranks

fifth with a GDP of USD 54.52 billion. Azerbaijan is followed by Turkmenistan with USD 45.23 billion and Kyrgyzstan with USD 7.4 billion (Baghirov 2022).

Hungary has an export-oriented economy and the export in 2021 was USD 141.256 billion. Hungary ranks 35th in the world in terms of exports. When the export figures of the other OTS members are examined, it will be seen that Türkiye ranks 29th in the world with exports worth USD 254.264 billion, Kazakhstan ranks 49th in the world with USD 56.805 billion worth of exports, Azerbaijan ranks 72nd with USD 22.206 billion worth of exports, Uzbekistan is in 80th place with exports worth USD 14.024 billion, Turkmenistan is in 96th ranking with exports of USD 8.973 billion and Kyrgyzstan ranks 141st in the world with exports worth USD 1.658 billion. In 2021, Hungary's total imports were USD 139.1 billion and there was a surplus of USD 2 billion in 2021; however, the balance was negative in 2022 due to the increase in the energy and resource prices.

The trade figures of Hungary with the OTS member states show that the largest trading partner of Hungary in the Turkic world is Türkiye, as the trade turnover between the two countries was USD 4.6 billion in 2023. Since 2013, Hungary and Türkiye have elevated their relations to a strategic partnership and set a target of USD 6 billion for their bilateral trade. For the development of economic and trade relations among the OTS member and observer countries, the OTS has established ministerial and working group structures since its foundation, and within the scope of this structural formation, in addition to the summits of heads of state, the OTS has developed a number of mechanisms and tools to further increase trade and investment relations among the OTS member and observer countries. The activities of the Turkic Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the establishment of the Turkic Trade Houses in the member states, the business forum meetings and the Turkic business portal are important elements of economic cooperation within the OTS. As part of these efforts, the OTS strives to facilitate trade between member and observer states by eliminating trade barriers. In this respect, Hungary seems to be benefiting from its position in the OTS in order to create room for manoeuvre in the international arena while strengthening economic ties with the Turkic states, and the trade between Hungary and Turkic partners has been gradually increasing since 2010 as a result of economic agreements structured to support Hungary's commercial cooperation with Turkic countries (Egeresi 2023).

The recent establishment of the Turkic Investment Fund (TIF) is another development on the way to strengthening economic relations between the OTS member and observer states. With the aim of supporting the SMEs of the OTS countries, the presidents at the Samarkand Summit in 2022 tasked the OTS Secretariat with the establishment of the TIF. The TIF will be responsible for carrying out joint projects of the OTS countries and will exert efforts on the way to work on agriculture, logistics and transport, energy efficiency, renewable and alternative energy, industrial projects in manufacturing, information and

Table 1: Key indicators of the volume of Hungary's foreign trade with the OTS countries (Million USD)

Year	Country						OTS Countries (Total)
	Azerbaijan	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Türkiye	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan	
2010	84.75	324.16	13.23	2163.61	35.46	59.03	2680.25
2011	81.56	394.48	12.74	2542.37	12.25	63.81	3107.24
2012	53.65	323.59	14.14	2227.28	13.94	71.11	2703.74
2013	71.68	308.88	13.59	2782.74	112.20	78.37	3367.49
2014	82.56	227.95	18.78	3017.53	27.38	69.20	3443.42
2015	74.01	189.17	10.26	2998.30	55.02	48.58	3375.36
2016	64.99	204.85	10.11	2966.73	32.73	44.68	3324.11
2017	58.93	588.60	8.29	3189.17	18.65	61.61	3925.27
2018	68.18	693.37	10.77	3292.23	14.54	52.42	4131.54
2019	58.48	447.65	9.78	3388.72	15.45	94.32	4014.43
2020	47.14	354.16	8.77	3508.54	15.10	120.12	4053.87
2021	53.11	436.65	13.22	4052.18	10.36	116.23	4681.78
2022	70.59	444.56	24.17	3775.08	28.72	96.61	4439.78
2023	137.79	603.01	32.36	4633.81	6.73	122.87	5536.60

Source: Compiled from data on <https://www.ksh.hu>

communication technologies, tourism, infrastructure projects, public-private partnership projects, human development, creative industries, natural and urban environment schemes. The TIF plans to receive contributions from various potential investor groups including the OTS observer and future partner countries, government agencies, national and international financial institutions. Hungary has also already started to participate in the TIF and all other initiatives aimed at facilitating trade flows and increasing trade turnover among the OTS countries (Organization of Turkic States 2022).

One of the most crucial intersection points in Hungary's relations with the OTS is the European Office of the OTS in Hungary. The Office plays a crucial role for the European connection by bringing together the main actors of the Turkic cooperation. The Turkic Business Forum, which was held on 23 September 2021 in Budapest, is an important event organised in this regard. The Forum which was attended by the secretary general of the OTS, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, the Hungarian Export Promotion Agency and the board members of the Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry, brought together more than one hundred business representatives from member and observer states. The Forum was an opportunity for the Turkic states to increase their economic and trade links with Hungary and Europe. Indeed, in the open-

ing speeches, the authorities mentioned the great potential of the OTS for cooperation in the economy and Hungary's future expectations in this field of cooperation. In the opening speeches of the Forum, the executive director of the Representation Office mentioned that economic cooperation is the main area of cooperation between Hungary and the OTS. Both the OTS and the Hungarian authorities mentioned the potential benefits of this cooperation by referring to the economic figures of the OTS countries (Organization of Turkic States 2021). According to the figures indicated in the speeches, Hungary's exports to the OTS region have increased by 77%, while trade has doubled since 2009, when Hungary started to focus on the region. Further, in order to increase trade and investment with the OTS countries, Hungary has opened credits worth EUR 577 million to the OTS countries. In this context, EUR 195 million have been allocated to Türkiye, EUR 80 million to Kazakhstan, EUR 80 million to Uzbekistan, EUR 80 million to Azerbaijan and EUR 27 million to Kyrgyzstan. Péter Sziijártó stated in Baku in 2019 that Hungary has doubled its trade with the countries of the OTS, which has reached about USD 4 billion in 2020 (Egeresi 2020).

The potential of the OTS in the field of transport and Hungary's economic-political position in the OTS

Strengthening the transport cooperation between the OTS countries has always been one of the main priorities of the OTS. Through its various mechanisms, such as the regular meetings of the ministers of transport of the OTS, Transport Coordination Committee, Working Group on the Development of Transport and the 'Sister Ports' process, as well as the implementation of projects aimed at the widespread use of digital tools in transport and transit procedures, such as ePermit, digital TIR and eCMR, the OTS serves to actively promote practical cooperation and strengthen the transport potential of the Turkic countries in line with its strategic document 'Turkic World Vision – 2040'. At the Samarkand Summit in 2022, the OTS heads of state increased the efforts for cooperation in the field of transport with the Combined Freight Transport Agreement and Transport Connectivity Program. Hungary is also one of the parties to the Transport Connectivity Program (Güngör 2022).

Assessing the geopolitical potential of the OTS in the area of transport, it could be seen that the OTS members are horizontally spread across Eurasia, which is already an inherent political advantage for them. They are important players between Europe and China, and the Middle Corridor connects China and the EU through Central Asia, the Caucasus, Türkiye and Eastern Europe, and the corridor is considered to have the potential to transport up to 10 million tonnes per year (Baghirov 2022).

Before discussing Hungary's specific weight here, it would be beneficial to recall some of the key actions taken by the Hungarian governments to strengthen

Hungary's position and political intentions within the OTS. For example, the Hungarian government, with the coordination of the OTS Secretariat in İstanbul and the OTS Representation Office in Hungary, organised the 5th Meeting of Ministers of Transport of the OTS member and observer states in Budapest in October 2021. The meeting, which was hosted by the then minister of innovation and technology of Hungary, László Palkovics, was attended by high-level ministers from Türkiye, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Hungary. During the meeting the Hungarian side emphasised its willingness to transform Hungary into a strategic transport hub of Europe by building modern railroad infrastructure and ensuring efficiency and transparency in the transport sector. The participants of the meeting highlighted the significant economic potential of the Turkic states. The meeting mentioned the capacity of the Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor and highlighted the steps to be taken to improve the transit potential of the Middle Corridor by reducing logistics costs and speeding up transport and customs procedures. This meeting was another milestone event that practically transformed the OTS geography into a hub where the impediments against trade were to be eliminated (Organization of Turkic States 2021).

The Russia-Ukraine war in particular increased the significance of the Middle Corridor. The blockade of the northern route caused by the war led many countries to turn to the Middle Corridor in order to save time and ensure the safety of cargo transport. Today, additional volumes of transit cargo from the countries of East and South Asia, the Middle East and Europe are joining the Middle Corridor.

The transport in the Middle Corridor has already increased by 120% from January to March 2022 compared to the same period in 2021. The leading companies from Denmark, Finland and Germany such as Maersk, Nurminen Logistics, CEVA Logistic, Azerbaijan's ADY Container and some Chinese rail operators have started to use the Middle Corridor. In the upcoming years, the volume of cargo passing through the Middle Corridor is expected to be six times higher than in previous years (Eldem 2022).

The newly established Quadrilateral Coordination Council between Türkiye, Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary for the improvement of cargo capacity and infrastructure is another crucial development for the importance of the Middle Corridor. On 5 July 2022, Adil Karaismailoğlu, the then minister of transport and infrastructure of Türkiye, stated that the essentiality of the Middle Corridor is increasing. According to the minister, if the Northern Sea Route through Russia is chosen, 10,000 km could be covered in 20 days, while in the Southern Corridor, 20,000 km could be covered by ship through the Suez Canal in 45–60 days. In the Middle Corridor, on the other hand, 7,000 km can be covered in 12 days by train via the route through Türkiye. These figures, according to the Turkish minister, put forward the increasingly advantageous and secure

position of the Middle Corridor in global trade, especially between Asia and Europe (T.C. Ulaştırma ve Altyapı Bakanlığı [R.o.T. Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure] 2022).

Another significant development, which further increases the importance of the Middle Corridor, is the victory of Azerbaijan over the Armenian occupation in the internationally recognised territories of Azerbaijan in 2020. Until the end of the war, the connection between Azerbaijan and the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic was not established. With Azerbaijan's victory, the possibility of opening the Zangezur Corridor is expected to contribute to the smooth operation of the Middle Corridor, as this new connection also provides a route between Türkiye and Central Asia. With the recent efforts to reach a peace agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, the possibility of the Zangezur Corridor coming to life is closer than ever.

With all the initiatives of the OTS countries and the inclusion of Hungary in these efforts, and with the Russia-Ukraine war, the OTS region and the Middle Corridor are becoming a crucial transport network for global trade. The OTS countries from the borders of China to Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Türkiye and from there to Europe with the connection of Hungary are planning this route as the most important and viable way for East-West trade.

Conclusion

The Hungarian government's Eastern Opening policy, which has been implemented since 2010, is primarily aimed at improving the relations with China and Russia, but rising powers outside the traditional alliances, such as the Turkic partners, are increasingly occupying an extensive place in this policy. Hungary's economic challenges and the tectonic shifts in the global system have made it necessary for Hungary to establish stronger contacts with the countries of the East. Hungary's dexterity in quickly adapting to and predicting the rise of the East was reflected in its relations with the Turkic states. Soon after the initiation of the Eastern Opening, political and economic relations between Hungary and the Turkic states began to develop, culminating in Hungary's observer status in the OTS, where Hungary hosts the only OTS Representation Office in Europe. Hungary's application of a multi-vector approach to its foreign policy, particularly in the spheres of trade, transport and energy cooperation, has made it an influential player in the OTS region and a bridgehead between the OTS and Europe.

The most distinctive conclusion of this study is that there is a strong impression that economic motivation has a hegemonic role in shaping the political dynamics of Hungarian-Turkic states relations. Hungary's trade with Türkiye and Central Asian countries has increased by 51.5% since the early period of the Eastern Opening, and technical areas have become a more significant focus

point for Hungarian decision-makers, thanks to the projections within the OTS, which mostly highlight the economic rather than the political aspect, such as infrastructure and transport, and these two distinguishing constituents allow us to conclude that pragmatic gains occupy a larger place in Hungarian foreign policy mindset. In this sense, the answer to the question of whether Hungary emulates the political models of the Turkic states still points to a vague area. This vague area seems to be a political sphere where Hungarian foreign policy behaviour is developed in order to preserve the pragmatic position of a small state like Hungary, based on the prediction that there are fractures in global geopolitics and a new international balance is being formed. Therefore, Hungary is following the path of maintaining its relations with the Turkic countries by steadily advancing them on the economic level, without creating doubts about the existence of the values it has adopted as a result of its historical position in the traditional Euro-Atlantic alliance, but by keeping the ethno-cultural affinity discourse on the populist agenda on the political level. Accordingly, this situation creates a picture that Hungary's pragmatic will for economic gain is covered by the political relations with the Turkic states, which can sometimes cause a delusion that Hungarian rulers are inclined towards authoritarian-leaning political models. Although this is described as a delusion for the time being, it cannot, of course, be admitted as an estimation or anticipation, given the historical experience of where political power holders can direct a country's orientation; however, the data and the current essence of the issues prioritised by Hungarian policymakers in their relations with the OTS states engender an outcome that Hungary's partnership with the Turkic states to be based on economic interests to prevail.

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