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Hungary between EU, NATO and Russia

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Saving Bridges and Lives:
Hungary between EU, NATO and Russia

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Abstract

The subject of this article is the specific position that Hungary has in the international arena, due to new conflicts on the European continent. During the reign of Viktor Orbán, Hungary has long been in conflict with the Brussels institutions of the European Union due to its insistence on sovereignty, defense against the introduction of illegal and unwanted immigration, and its pro-family policy. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Hungary has increasingly clashed with the EU and NATO due to its pacifist policy, which tries to maintain open communication with Russia, and has been pushing for an end to the war as soon as possible. In this article, we show how Budapest manages to balance between the EU, NATO, and China, Russia, Turkey and other countries with which it is building good relations.

Keywords: *Hungary, Orbán, European Union, Russia, NATO.*

The Greek international relations theorist Spyridon Litsas, in the footsteps of the theory of small states and their strategies, has been developing an interesting theory of smart states in recent years. He developed it in a book from 2023 (Litsas, 2023), and a number of texts. A conference held in Thessaloniki in June 2025 at his home University of Macedonia, was also dedicated to this idea[1].

Contemporary Hungary under Orbán's rule seems to be one of the better candidates for understanding the idea of smart states. It is trying to turn its not-so-pleasant geographical position, where various imperial vectors meet, and its surroundings by the Germanic and Slavic worlds into an advantage and, to the extent possible, to become a bridge between different worlds.

Among other things, Budapest probably has the best relations in Europe with Israel, which at times resemble forms of strategic partnership. Hungary recently withdrew from the

[1] https://www.uom.gr/17515-international-conference-university-of-macedonia-19-20-june-2025-smart-states-in-the-contemporary-international-system

jurisdiction of the International Criminal Tribunal in order to host Prime minister Netanyahu. But at the same time, it manages to maintain good economic and political relations with Turkey, with which it has many common interests and a similar position towards certain external factors that are working to overthrow both leaders, defining them as "authoritarian"[2]. Not only that, but Hungary even affirms the Turanian part of its identity, connecting with the Central Asian peoples, which today represent one of the fastest growing economic and demographic areas. Every year, a Turanian festival is held in Hungary, where thousands of representatives of these countries come, showcasing their cultural and economic products, but also opportunities for cooperation and investment. Relations with China are also particularly developed. Hungary is one of the centers of Chinese investment in Europe, but also the place where China rightly invests the most in academic cooperation and a kind of soft power.

However, for the purposes of this article, we will focus on the way in which Hungary tries to balance between Brussels, i.e. the EU and NATO (which, like the Union, is increasingly acting as a "community of values") on the one hand, and Russia on the other.

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Hungary is today the "black sheep of the EU"[3]. These are the recent words of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. However, it is often forgotten that his conflicts with Brussels began during his first term in office between 1998 and 2002. At that time, as a patriot at the head of the government during the negotiations for accession to the EU, he experienced a transformation from a pro-Western classical liberal to a conservative and a leader with serious reservations about what the West was doing and where it was going. He was aware of the tragic consequences of European policies for the demography and human capital of his country, and a particular conflict erupted over the radical undermining of Hungary's industrial and agricultural production that was almost imposed as a condition for entry into the EU (Hofbauer,

[2] The opposition in Hungary is ruling the capital, Budapest, for the second consecutive term after an electoral victory, and in Turkey, opposition candidates have won all major cities for the second consecutive term. At the same time, Brussels entities never use such characteristics for governments in countries where the opposition cannot win anywhere in the elections, as long as they are considered to be sufficiently geopolitically on the "right side of history".

[3] https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/orban-france-patriots-speech-hungary-christianity-brussels/

2004). In the end, Brussels already helped bring the socialist Gyurcsany to power in 2002 in order to prevent the conservative Orbán from introducing Hungary into the EU.

After eight years, he returned to power in 2010, with much more experience and far better prepared for the conflicts with Brussels, which he had entered into since taking power in the spring of 2010. First, he changed the Constitution, restoring the old name of the state and defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman. With a huge inherited debt, he resorted to very radical moves that scandalized Brussels, when he paid off and drove out the International Monetary Fund, nationalized private pension funds and introduced a special crisis tax for foreign banks and insurance companies[4]. In order for economic, but also political reforms to really work, he had to suppress the power of supposedly independent institutions, the Central Bank and the Constitutional Court, and return them to the service of the state, and not the globalist elite.

All this has caused enormous criticism and pressure from the Brussels institutions, penalties from the Commission, condemnations in the European Parliament, a process before the ECJ, etc. The European People's Party has effectively expelled Fidesz from the family of Christian Democratic parties, and the alliance with PiS in Poland was considered the biggest problem the EU has.

Essentially, there are two basic levels of conflict with Brussels and everyone who stands behind them. The basic level is actually a conflict over the value system, both in relation to the country's indebtedness and control of its market and resources, and regarding the anti-family and anti-Christian policies pursued by the EU. However, in recent years, the conflict over geopolitics and the geopolitical direction of the EU has become increasingly pronounced, which we will discuss separately here.

In September 2023, the European Commission issued a report on the threat to the rule of law in Hungary and Poland by applying brutal financial penalties. Poland had to pay a certain amount daily, while Hungary was deprived of the right to use Covid recovery funds and also had about 50% of the funds it was supposed to receive regularly from Brussels taken away. In total, it was estimated that about 12 billion euros were stopped. Although Hungary passed laws ensuring greater independence of the judiciary, sanctions remained in force due to the media issue and the alleged failure to address the problem of corruption. This was preceded by decisions of the European Court of Justice in October 2022, but also by an earlier decision of

[4] O'Sullivan, Pocsa, 2015, is an excellent early overview of the specific policies pursued by Orbán in his second term. Also, Đurković, 2011.

the European institutions in 2021, to start with financial penalties for alleged democratic setbacks. Hungary received some 10 billion euros in December 2023 (Blauberger et, 2025), but it is still under sanctions.

Since 2018, after the European Parliament called for sanctions against Hungary for alleged violations of the rule of law and threats to media freedoms, seven hearings have been held before the European Council with the idea of depriving Hungary of its voting rights under Article 7 of the Treaty. That type of sanction has not yet been applied, but the aforementioned financial sanctions have been applied. The latest objections for which Orban was questioned in May were over the ban on the gay pride parade and the announcement of a special law that would potentially restrict the work of foreign-funded media. Robert Fico threatened to veto such ideas back in 2024, but there is even pressure to exclude these two countries from the Council unilaterally, especially when it comes to opposing military aid to Ukraine and vetoing new sanctions against Russia.

The *black sheep* status is also evidenced by the refusal to give the Patriots for Europe group, in which Orban has one of the main operational positions, the position of EP Vice-President despite their excellent results and the fact that they have become the third strongest group in the EP.

The reason is primarily geopolitical, and that is the refusal to align themselves with the war front against Russia. Namely, it is easy to see that the main difference between Patriots and the ECR group is precisely in their attitude towards the war in Ukraine. Despite identical positions on the issue of family, values, transgender people, the Green Deal and other Brussels globalist projects, the ECR is strongly in favor of continuing the war and supporting Ukraine at all costs, while the PZE is trying to maintain relative neutrality and advocates for a quick peaceful end to the conflict.

There are degrees here, and Meloni rejected the idea of deploying Italian troops to Ukraine, while PiS continues with traditional Polish anti-Russian rhetoric and calls for war at all costs. The most significant step in the opposite direction was Orbán's shuttle diplomacy during the Hungarian presidency of the EU. He first visited Kiev on July 2, then went to Moscow three days later, where he met with Putin, and then flew to China. The tour ended with a meeting with then Republican presidential candidate Trump on July 11. This serious attempt to hear all sides and actively explore the possibility of interrupting or ending the war was met with condemnation and isolation from European institutions.

Moreover, there are often absurd accusations that Hungary is looking to take over the Transcarpathian part of Ukraine and annex it. This has been "reported" since the very beginning

of the war in Ukraine in 2022, although Hungary has not given any reason for this[5]. Most recently, in May, there was a plot by the Ukrainian service, which arrested two people, Hungarians from Ukraine on charges that they were allegedly working in this direction. Budapest has long accused Kiev of oppressing the Hungarian minority, forcibly recruiting them, and banning the use of their language and culture, while Kiev believes that Hungary has territorial claims to Ukraine and, as a "Russian agent", is stopping Kiev's entry into NATO and the EU.

In a video message on Facebook, Orban accused Kiev of waging a dirty campaign against Budapest over the Hungarian government's intention to hold a referendum on Ukraine's EU membership, which Budapest has been very clear about. As it announced, Hungary blocked the decision to start negotiations on Ukraine's EU membership at the June 26 European Council meeting, citing the 95% of voters who voted against Ukraine's membership. Furthermore, at the beginning of July he added another issue, that Ukrainian secret services have been very active at the Hungarian soil, working together with Brussels to meddle into coming parliamentary elections. Both are, according to him, helping the opposition in order to get a more pro-Brussels oriented government.[6]

On the other hand, it should be noted that Hungary has had a very clear anti-war stance from the beginning but has correctly and consistently applied sanctions against Russia and fulfilled all its obligations as a member of NATO and the EU. Budapest voted in favor of all six UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the other hand, Hungary primarily took care of its ethnic population living in Transcarpathia, where there are still about 80,000 ethnic Hungarians. The fact is that this area of Ukraine was not bombed by the Russians, as it is probably the only part of Ukraine that was spared of destruction. The position and survival of this population is the main task of Orbán and the Hungarian government in relation to the war there. Their recruitment and suffering in the war is an important reason for Budapest to insist on peace at all costs. A part of this population came to Hungary to escape the war, and a number of people died as conscripted members of the Ukrainian army.

There are two other important economic interests for which Budapest was attacked. Hungary continued its cooperation with Rosatom, the Russian national atomic energy agency, after 2022. The Russians built Paks 1, a nuclear power plant on the Danube, and it was

[5] Hungarian scientists and officials are being questioned about it even by very serious persons such as MP of Bundestag.
[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEZaFLVCmwA

previously agreed that Rosatom would design and build new units with the same technology, which is among the most efficient and cheapest in the world. Hungary has clearly indicated that the continuation of this cooperation, both on the construction of new units and on the regular operation of existing capacities, is a vital issue for its economy and households, and this cooperation is taking place without interruption. Finally, at the end of June 2025, the US lifted sanctions on this area, thus enabling Hungary to continue its cooperation with Rosatom on the construction of new units, completely legally.

An even more important and politically controversial issue is the import of gas arriving via Ukraine, but also via the Turkish Stream. On this issue, Orban has the full support of Slovakia, but also the tacit support of other countries that are also interested in continuing to purchase Russian gas as a much cheaper source of supply than other alternatives, which often boil down to buying the same gas through intermediaries in the form of LNG. Of course, at a much higher price. That is why Hungary and Slovakia vetoed the latest proposal to further tighten sanctions against Russia.

Orban did not go to Moscow to celebrate May 9th, like Slovakian Fico[7]. But he has insisted since the beginning of the war on the need to maintain open channels in order to prevent the worst-case scenarios such as the use of nuclear weapons and generally shares Trump, Mearsheimer and Sachs' version of the reasons for the outbreak of war, according to which the main cause is NATO expansion and disregard for Russia's basic interests, including security issues.

This is the main pattern of the growing geopolitical distance from Brussels. Namely, after Trump's victory, large parts of the former Biden administration and what is called *the deep state* began to treat the EU as a reserve position and to use it as the main force and instrument for the continuation of the exhausting war with Russia. Orbán, however, is closely linked to Trump and his administration, and supports efforts to end this war as soon as possible, with probable concessions that would guarantee Russia's security, return Ukraine to neutral status, thereby ensuring peace in Eastern Europe and restore the necessary ties with Russia, i.e. it would be re-integrated into the European security system. Brussels, however, is increasingly clearly moving in the direction of a new Cold War and confrontation with Russia, probably in

[7] During World War II, hundreds of thousands of Hungarian soldiers participated in the fight against the USSR. In January 1943 alone, in what Hungarians call the *Voronezh Disaster*, about 30,000 soldiers were killed and another 50,000 were captured.

the future and with China at various points, including the Arctic, probably the most important source of geopolitical conflicts in the coming period.

Although it is common to call the Hungarian government populist, in fact, on many issues, they are the only ones who act openly, honestly and without populism. A good example is the European Union's enlargement policy. Since Thessaloniki in 2003, there has been a nominally open invitation to the countries of the so-called Western Balkans. Some of them, such as North Macedonia, have been in the process of European integration for more than thirty years. But instead of Brussels completing this process, it was effectively halted after Croatia's accession in 2013. The peoples of the Balkans have long lost their enthusiasm for joining the EU (Đurković, 2020), and governments are dealing with European integration ritualistically, just as Marxist phrases were repeated during the time of late socialism, which no one in Eastern Europe believed in for a long time. Instead of the EU, NATO was imposed on the Balkan candidates (Montenegro and North Macedonia), and Brussels overnight renamed the Eastern Partnership policy to the integration policy and declared that the entry of Ukraine and Moldova is a priority.

However, Foreign Minister Szijjártó has repeatedly drawn attention to the fact that it is precisely his fellow ministers who are acting populist and hypocritical. “My colleagues say one thing in front of the cameras, and another when the cameras are turned off,” he recently asserted at the Yerevan Security Dialogue held at the end of May. Thus, public support is being given to Ukraine’s entry as soon as possible, but in reality, no one would think of accepting a country at war, with an uncertain fate and uncertain future borders. The Netherlands long ago came out with its rejection of Ukraine’s entry into NATO and indeed into any Western association that would drag the EU into direct conflict with Russia.

It is also a fact that a number of Western European countries are profiting from the fact that millions of Ukrainian women with children have come to their countries and the majority of them will stay there. This will at least partially solve the demographic crisis, with a white, educated, working population that is usually easy to integrate, unlike non-European immigration. Hungary reiterates that the Western Balkans are a priority for many reasons, including, of course, Hungarian interests, but also the interests of the EU, which is losing ground in this area. Support for Serbia's entry into the EU among the population is no more than 30%, so the EU embassy in Serbia has begun to resort to such marketing tricks as ordering its clients to produce all materials and public advertisements in Cyrillic, the traditional Serbian script.

In the meantime, other powers, such as China, Turkey, Israel, and, earlier, Russia, etc., have begun to fill the vacuum with their investments, security interests, technology, energy, and soft power. Therefore, Hungary mostly supports and imposes the Western Balkans agenda, while Brussels continues to work in the interests of NATO above all. It seems that the expansion of the EU is treated geopolitically, primarily in the function of NATO expansion, which is one of the reasons for the war in Ukraine.

However, instead of seeking a way out of the war that has caused enormous damage to Europe and the European economy, the European Commission continues with the policy of prolonging the war in Eastern Europe and, moreover, is strengthening its armed capabilities for war. Hungary is expectedly against Draghi's plan and the White Paper that sees arming the EU as a path to economic recovery. Recently, in March, the ReArm Europe document was published, which foresees 150 billion in debt and a total of 800 billion in defense investments[8]. What is obvious after reading this document is that the foundations of the EEC as a peace organization and peace project are being lost, the euro as a currency and the entire economic space are being called into question because it recommends “budgetary flexibility” in the once strict criteria, e.g.

The document is very interesting to analyze but let us highlight here the section that insists on continuing to help Ukraine by all means, which means a direct path to war with Russia.

During these three years of war, and the previous eight years that meant a low-intensity war between the same parties, Hungary managed to maintain a relatively neutral position. Although it adhered to the agreed obligations within the EU and NATO alliances, similarly to Turkey, it tried and largely succeeded in maintaining distance from the conflicts and discursive neutrality. Turkey has made serious profits by selling drones to Ukraine, but it has also maintained a sufficiently good level of relations with Russia, has not imposed sanctions on it, and has thus earned the right to be a venue for negotiations between the warring parties in several cases.

But Hungary has also managed to maintain a high level of neutrality and, in cooperation with its surrounding countries, has slowly established a belt of relatively neutral and connected states that, in the event of a future Cold War and Cold War-like confrontation through proxy

[8] ReArm Europe, European readiness 2030, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2025/769566/EPRS_BRI(2025)769566_EN.pdf

countries, could maintain a buffer position. This is a line that runs from Switzerland, through Austria (both countries are formally neutral), then Slovakia and Hungary, descends through Serbia and rounds off with Turkey. Budapest has strategically important relations with Serbia and Slovakia, very close ties with Austria, and as we have already said, very good relations with Turkey and the Turanian world, so it is in fact the key pivot country of this undertaking and therefore also under attack from pro-war forces.

But for a long time now, Hungary has had problems with the Brussels bureaucracy because it has become the informal capital of conservatism, the renewal of right-wing and conservative thought, and the entire movement of the new radical right in Europe.

By expelling the Central European University, a decades-old cancer that has destroyed the fabric and institutions of numerous Eastern European countries, the Orbán government achieved a huge result despite formidable pressure from Brussels and Democratic circles in the United States. This truly meant the salvation of Hungary, but also a significant symbolic transfer of the CEU from Eastern to Western Europe, where it belongs. CEU was a kind of globalist ideological center where young and talented people from Eastern European countries were brought, ideologically trained in the direction of left-wing liberalism, globalism, the LGBT agenda, and then returned to their home countries to implement that agenda in all parts of the public sphere, from state administration, academia, journalism, politics, etc.

In the past fifteen years, Hungary has built an entire system of conservative institutions, faculties, think tanks, publishing houses, which has resulted in the most focused, most thoughtful, and most successful pro-family conservative policy in Europe. Holding the European CPAC in Budapest for four years now is a kind of pick and recognition for all that work.

With such a policy and its refusal to accept potentially dangerous immigration from the Third World, Orbán's Hungary has become a leader in the resistance to Brussels' obvious plans to change European nations. Hungary is the bearer of a clear vision of family renewal and procreation, in contrast to the Brussels idea of *grand replacement* (Camus, 2011). There have also recently been new solutions to ban the propaganda of homosexuality, similar to what Margaret Thatcher introduced in 1988. This includes a ban on holding a gay pride parade, which has caused a new conflict with the Brussels administration and the European left, which has organized itself to come to Hungary in violation of its laws. In this sense, accusations are made that Budapest is closer in values to Moscow than to Brussels, but it is overlooked that this is precisely the basis of Trump's domestic policy. In this sense, the whole of Eastern Europe is far more Christian and pro-family than Western Europe.

An excellent example is the divisions that arose around the so-called Istanbul Declaration (Đurković, 2022). This is a document of the Council of Europe adopted in 2011 in Istanbul. It is the first international document that defines gender as a construct and imposes this idea on all signatories. This extremely dangerous ideological document was adopted and implemented without major problems in Western European countries except in UK which ratified that late in 2022, (although resistance in France was very strong on the streets). There is almost no country in Eastern Europe that has not rebelled in some way and at some stage. At least six countries have still not ratified this document, and Russia and Azerbaijan have not even signed it. Turkey withdrew from it in 2021, when it realized what it was about. Ukraine rejected it twice in parliament but was blackmailed and ratification of this declaration was the only condition Brussels demanded of them in order to receive candidate status for EU membership.

The Hungarian Parliament not only hasn't ratified this document but also instructed the Government to fight against it and its harmful consequences in every way. The Center for Fundamental Rights from Budapest, together with the Ordo Juris organization from Warsaw, is the bearer of the legal fight against anti-family laws and policies in the European Union, etc.

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To conclude. In the last fifteen years, Hungary, despite difficult circumstances and great instability in the environment, has been trying to pursue a consistent policy based on sovereignty, national interest, preservation of national identity, but also responsible fulfillment of those international obligations it has undertaken in the alliances and associations in which it is a member. Hungary openly and publicly expresses its views on those issues with which it disagrees with its allies and, above all, consistently advocates for ending wars and returning the world to normal. On the other hand, Brussels, as the joint headquarters of the European Union and NATO, is becoming more and more radical, and with the new militarization of Europe, it is plunging into new conflicts and new wars. The European Union is the bearer of a very dangerous idea of a foreign policy based on messianism and proselytism, and it is increasingly approaching the war in Ukraine from these positions. Hungary is therefore not only defending itself and its interests, but also the interests of the people of Europe, whose political elite is becoming separated from its own people, is becoming a prisoner of the defeated globalist forces in the USA and is ready to bring the European peoples into conflict with Russia for the third time since 1914 for the sake of other people's and corporations' interests.

With its policy, it has become a symbol for the people and the state that is striving to preserve the bridges of dialogue and cooperation, but also the lives of the European continent, which is increasingly facing problems with demography and fertility.

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