

## HUNGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA IN RELATION TO SERBIA AND THE PROCESS OF EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

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*Abstract:* The paper aims to discuss several crucial issues in Hungarian foreign policy towards Serbia and the broader Hungarian-Serbian bilateral context. First, it introduces the background of the analysis with regard to the further enlargement of the European Union, which is a priority question for both countries. Second, it covers some current challenges and opportunities from a Hungarian foreign policy perspective, tackling the consecutive chapters of Global Opening, soft power, as well as pragmatism in foreign policy. Third, an overview of the growing “China Connection” is offered, followed by the fourth section with a detailed summary of Serbian-Hungarian bilateral relations since the change in the political systems at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. Fifth, the current state of Serbia’s membership negotiations is provided, after which some concluding thoughts are presented.

*Keywords:* Hungarian foreign policy, Serbian-Hungarian bilateral relations, strategic partnership, EU enlargement, China–CEE relations.

### INTRODUCTION

For many years, the enlargement policy of the European Union has been a controversial topic, with arguments about why, who, and how being countered by arguments about deepening. Even though the eastern enlargement has been accompanied by a number of criticisms with early good news, the Community has also had to face its first exit due to Brexit. Ignoring the lessons of previous enlargement waves, internal problems, the

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development of nationalism, and protracted discussions with the United Kingdom have all postponed the likelihood of future admission, sometimes known as the European integration of South-Eastern Europe or the Western Balkans. Six nations in the region: Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, are not yet members of the European Union. But Croatia and Slovenia were included in previous rounds of eastern expansion. Four of the six nations are candidates, while Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are potential candidates, with the latter having filed for membership in the fall of 2016. Enlargement has not progressed significantly in recent years. Negotiations have been slow due to the Copenhagen criteria, and the member states are not clearly in favor of enlargement (France vetoed the opening of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania in the first round, and only agreed to open chapters a few months later), but candidate countries are not always able or willing to meet the accession requirements. In the meantime, external players interested in the region can be or appear to be more attractive than the European Union itself, and the residents of the region are growing increasingly disillusioned with membership. The EU has responded to all this with a proposal for change, reworking the accession procedure to make accession negotiations more appealing and transparent. The European Commission has suggested a reform with four focal areas: First, a stronger political steering, with closer control and continuous summits and ministerial meetings to boost the involvement of the member states in the accession process, helping them to monitor the process (es). Second, promising a more dynamic process, clustering chapters and making it realistic to join EU policies at an earlier stage, where the fundamental requirements will play a central and primal role in the process. Third, the reform includes predictability as well, helping candidate countries with crystal clear conditions. Fourth and final, clear incentives will provide benefits for the state and its citizens to help introduce the required reforms. In any case, accession remains a highly regulated bureaucratic process where, in addition to the supervision of the Commission, the continued unanimity of the member states is essential for any further advancement.

### **SOME CURRENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN HUNGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY**

Several of our previous publications have dealt with a number of the major dimensions and critical partnerships within the foreign policy matrix of Hungary since the change in the political system that occurred at the end

of the 1980s. We were investigating, amongst others, some new (or re-visited) items on the agenda, together with certain challenging issues and connections, such as changing foreign policy priorities in a changing global system (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2014), the policy of “Global Opening” (Tarrósy & Morenth, 2013), the increased pragmatism of Hungary in fostering relations with China, Turkey, Russia, the Gulf states, Sub-Saharan Africa and other emerging regions of the world, but also the refugee crisis and climate change, to name some crucial ones (Tarrósy & Vörös, 2020). In the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine (at the time of the writing of this paper), it needs to be highlighted that one of the most daunting foreign policy challenges for Hungary as a member state of the European Union is certainly its relations with Putin’s Russia and the navigation the Hungarian government can execute upon possessing a detailed understanding of Russia’s geostrategy in the region, based upon the Primakov doctrine (Lechner, 2021, pp. 20-21; Sz. Bíró, 2014, p. 41). Since 2010, Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz, with its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People’s Party (KDNP), has been the confident winner of national elections. In all of the last four elections (2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022), he won by a constitutional majority regarding the total number of seats in parliament. Numerous changes in internal and foreign policies have been implemented, resulting in managing relations with an array of “non-traditional” partners as part of the new chapters of the doctrine of Global Opening (Puzyniak, 2018). While the turn towards the East (especially to Russia, Central Asia, and China) and re-engagement with the South (in particular with Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America) have dominated priorities, the importance of minority and diaspora politics has not lost momentum, but rather has got a boost in the past decade. How to deal with the Hungarian minority communities living abroad has had several ups and downs since the early 1990s in the policy approaches of the left-wing and right-wing political parties (Kiss & Zahorán, 2007). Orbán’s governments firmly institutionalized all platforms and tools to keep close contact with Hungarian communities living abroad. For instance, a “State Secretariat for Hungarian Communities Abroad within the Prime Minister’s Office has been in charge of engaging with Hungarians abroad” (Kovács, 2020, p. 248). In Orbán’s incumbent government, after the April 2022 national elections, this state secretariat has kept its significance and position. With more focused attention to international visibility, Hungary has been playing the “soft power card” rather successfully, in particular after the introduction of the Stipendium Hungaricum state scholarship in 2013 (Császár et al., 2022; Tarrósy & Vörös, 2019). As Katsiba concludes, “Hungarian foreign policy is becoming more and more active (...), on the periphery of Europe, Asia, and

some African countries". Also, it is spreading in neighboring countries and throughout the diaspora (Kacziba, 2020, p. 82). This, however, is not widely known across society at large; rather, emphasis is laid on the protection schemes the government provides against all odds and challenges in the form of refugee flows, energy dependency, or the ongoing war in the immediate neighborhood of the country. Pragmatism is a tangible manifestation of Hungarian foreign policy, which caters to a great deal of enhanced neighborhood policies, too. First and foremost, the security considerations of the wider macro-region (in addition to many other dimensions of a largely shared history, intercultural ties, as well as economic interests with the neighboring countries) drive a closer collaboration with Serbia, also supporting its accession to the European Union.

### THE CHINA CONNECTION

The region, and Serbia in particular, is not only linked to the European Union but also to external actors and interests. In particular, Russia, the Gulf States, Turkey, and China should be mentioned. Beijing is certainly a prominent player in the region if judged only by the media reports and statements by politicians, and although there are fears of an increased Chinese presence within the EU, it could even help to build a relationship in-between Europe and across the region. Focusing on the Chinese presence, usually the infrastructure projects and not really investments we can talk about, as Szunomár notes, "while the majority of Chinese outward FDI flows to core EU countries, infrastructure projects are implemented rather in European peripheries such as CEE (Central and Eastern Europe). Similarly, within the CEE region, EU member CEE countries host relatively more Chinese outward FDI, while already implemented or ongoing infrastructure projects are more common in the non-EU CEE states" (Szunomár, 2020). The geographical position of the Western Balkans, and especially Serbia, is one of the key drivers behind their presence, connecting Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, or, as Conley et al. put it, providing access from the sea to Europe's "inner core" (Conley et al., 2020, p. 3). Piraeus, a port in Greece, has been transformed by COSCO Shipping Lines Co., Ltd. into the largest port in the Mediterranean Sea since it took over management of the port in 2009. This arrival of China generates not only criticism but also fear. Addressing these, Zweers et al. and Eszterhai have already highlighted: "China could derail countries from their path towards the European Union. China's mere presence in the (Western Balkans) obstructs EU norm diffusion in political, economic, and security terms. The legal approximation of the

[Western Balkans] with the EU, as required in their path towards EU membership, requires the full adoption and implementation of EU standards on good governance, macro-economic stability, environmental protection, public procurement (transparency), corruption, human rights, privacy, and data protection. In all these fields, engagements between China and the Western Balkans have frequently caused the latter to drift away from EU-intended reforms. "As well as confronting [the Western Balkans] with deviating standards, China's increased role in the Western Balkans has furthermore undermined the mechanisms of socialization and conditionality through which the EU has sought to draw the region closer" (Zweers et al., 2020, p. 3). It was also stated by Eszterhai that infrastructure investments are not transparent, and as a result, they violate EU norms, standards, and laws (Eszterhai, 2017). As a result, the states wishing to join the EU should be aware of this potential threat, and EU officials should be aware of this possibility as well: the longer the accession talks are delayed, the more citizens in these countries will be pessimistic or critical about the accession process in general. (Vörös, 2022). What makes this criticism questionable is that the room for manoeuvre for China has opened up as a result of the EU's inactivity and passivity in the region: "Over the past decade, Beijing has successfully taken advantage of the passiveness of the EU and gained both economic and political influence with loans and major projects across the region" (Đorđević, 2021), and without changes, lack of development may open up further and further windows for China in the coming years, or even decades as well (Shopov, 2021, p. 10). Getting back to media reports and politicians, we also have to highlight that they are interested in exaggerating the influence of outsider actors such as China. Matura points out that "one of the most important findings [...] is that national governments tend to offer an inflated picture of China's presence in their respective countries. Figures presented by governments tend to include investment plans previously proposed but otherwise never implemented by the Chinese side. [...] It must be emphasized that infrastructure projects financed by Chinese loans do not fit into the category of Chinese foreign direct investment, rather they are investments made by the host country and merely financed by a loan that happens to come from China" (Matura, 2021, p. 7). When comparing Serbia's trade in goods with the EU and China as a percentage of total trade in 2019, it is clear that the EU is the dominant actor, accounting for 59 percent of imports and 68 percent of exports, while China accounts for 9 and 2 percent, respectively (Zweers et al., 2020). China will continue to be attractive due to the limited conditionality that the Chinese government may offer, as well as the fact that Chinese cash, investments, and loans can be used as leverage

against the EU. In addition, as the example of the Belgrade-Skopje railway (the continuation of the Budapest-Belgrade railway) demonstrates, which will be financed by the EU according to a recent decision, China's presence in the region can be viewed as an opportunity to learn from past mistakes and reconsider policies, especially in the Western Balkans region, where there is an urgent need for infrastructure that can and will shape the future of these countries rather than simply serving China's interests. In addition to providing links for China, highways and railroads have the potential to boost regional and local economies (Vörös, 2022).

### HUNGARIAN-SERBIAN RELATIONS SINCE THE CHANGE IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEMS

Although today, Hungary is one of the most important international partners of Serbia, definitely among the top five most significant partners in economic, business, and trade terms for years, the two countries have "a long history of cold or openly hostile relations" (Drajić, 2020, p. 5). Stradner and Rohac (2022) point out an important dimension of historical ties when they mention that both Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić "exploit grievances about their countries' lost territories and prestige". Both countries had several instances of historical wounds and discontent as a consequence of the many armed conflicts throughout the past centuries, and therefore, constructed policies to serve the re-establishment of grandeur on both ends: for Serbia under the notion of the "Serb World", for Hungary revisiting the idea of the "Great Hungary". As Reményi et al. (2021, p. 808) confirm, "the transformation of Hungarian-Serbian relations – which need to be seen in the Western Balkans context – is a 180-degree turn: relations [...] have never been so cordial". From a historical perspective, first, it is to be recalled that on August 13, 1990, Prime Minister József Antall gave a statement that he was the prime minister of 15 million Hungarians "in spirit", and as Schöpflin (1993, p. 12) underscores, this "was guaranteed to inflame suspicions that Hungary had political designs on its neighbors, that at the very least the Hungarian state would play an active role *vis-à-vis* the minorities and would thereby interfere in the internal affairs of the successor states".<sup>1</sup> This was particularly delicate in the

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<sup>1</sup>The original Hungarian statement is as follows: „kormányfőként lélekben, érzésben tizenötmillió magyar miniszterelnöke szeretnék lenni.” See: <https://antalljozsef25.hu/emlektoredek/a-rendszervaltoztato-miniszterelnok/675-lelekben-tizenotmillio-magyar-miniszterelnoke>

context of Serbian-Hungarian relations, which were not at their peak in the early 1990s due to the fact that in the war in Croatia, the Hungarian government was more supportive towards Croatia and Slovenia than towards Serbia. The rather complex picture included substantial fears that the Hungarian ethnic minority in Vojvodina was in danger, especially from the extremists. The “ethnicisation of the state bore hard on the minority” (Ibid, p. 17), but Hungarian minority politicians (especially in the Democratic Community of Vojvodina Hungarians party, VMDK) could strengthen their positions in the regional, national, and federal parliaments, bearing sufficient legitimacy even to “demand territorial autonomy” (Ibid, p. 18). Three pillars were built among Hungary’s foreign policy priorities right after the political system changed: European accession (as the country’s number one priority), NATO membership, and neighborhood policy with a heavy focus on Hungarian communities across the Carpathian basin (and beyond). Concerning minority policy, the Hungarian government also emphasized providing sufficient democratic space for ethnic communities to establish their minority self-governments (MSGs). With reference to autonomy, a “bottom-up approach was followed by the first law adopted in 1993: the MSGs were elected at the municipality level (at the same time as the local self-governments), and the national MSGs were created by the latter through indirect elections” (Dobos, 2016, p. 6). The number of Serbian local MSGs in Hungary today is well over 40, placing the representation of the Serbian communities in the mid-range of all MSGs (again based on the work of Dobos 2016). One of the major aspects of bilateral relations has been the domain of intellectual exchanges, in particular cultural, academic, and scientific collaboration. In this respect, both national funds provided by both states as well as regional (e.g., CEEPUS) and European (e.g., first Tempus, then, Erasmus and Erasmus+) funding schemes proved to be essential to cultivating and fostering closer ties. In addition, sister city cooperation (such as, for instance, between Pécs and Novi Sad/Újvidék, or Szeged and Subotica/Szabadka), strategic-level university partnerships, and collaborative linkages between the national academies of sciences, have all offered the ground for mutually meaningful relations in the longer run. The real improvement in bilateral relations is attributable to the rise to power of Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister in 2010 and Aleksandar Vučić, first as Prime Minister President (between 2014-2017), and then as President in 2017. During this time, not only did political ties intensify, but economic cooperation also began to expand significantly, and the region, and Serbia in particular, became an important partner for Hungary. Several factors have influenced and continue to influence Hungarian interests, including those

which can solely be understood through a complex approach: Serbia and the Western Balkans region are important not only because of the expansion of MOL and OTP but also because of small and medium-sized enterprises. We must not overlook the Hungarian minority in Serbia, as well as the region's interest in joining the EU, how the incumbent Hungarian Commissioner for Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, can assist in this process, and the fact that Hungary took over the largest NATO mission in Kosovo in late 2021. The ongoing migration and refugee crisis, however, complicates Hungarian foreign policy toward the region. As Németh highlighted, "The economic presence of Hungary in the Western Balkans is not a new phenomenon; over the past decade, not only large Hungarian-owned companies, but also small and medium-sized enterprises with the appropriate support and knowledge, have chosen the region for their investments and, where appropriate, for their outward investments. Thus, Hungary's economic influence in each of the Western Balkan nations is on the rise. The COVID-19 pandemic caused a minor setback, but the country's recovery has put economic relations back on a positive track. Although Hungary's FDI attractiveness remains significantly higher than domestic capital inflows, Western Balkan nations have witnessed a significant increase in Hungarian FDI stock. In 2015, Hungarian FDI in the region totaled 690 million euros; by 2020, this will increase to 1.5 billion euros. From €2.1 billion in 2015 to €3.5 billion in 2021, exports of goods and services to the Western Balkans are also expanding rapidly" (Németh, 2022, p. 4). In addition, the author points out that over sixty percent of these investments are directed toward Serbia. It is of the utmost importance for Hungary to resolve the situation of Hungarians living outside of its borders, which, based on examples from recent years, can be properly addressed without causing conflict with neighboring states by introducing dual citizenship and dismantling European borders. In this regard, Serbia is a further step in a process that will allow an additional 250,000 Hungarians living across the border to maintain and strengthen their ties to their home country. It is not a coincidence that Hungary is one of the most vocal supporters of Serbia's accession, despite the parties' divergent stances on Kosovo. While Budapest is interested in recognizing Kosovo (consider the attempts at autonomy for Szeklerland), Belgrade refuses to accept its independence. In any case, Budapest's commitment is demonstrated by the fact that Hungary was able to obtain the position of Commissioner for Enlargement in the new European Commission, and the aforementioned Commission reforms, which were also prepared on the proposal of Commissioner Várhelyi, constitute a clear step toward rapid accession. As the Commissioner noted



during a meeting in Montenegro, he began his term with the objective of having “at least one Western Balkans country finalize its EU accession processes by the end of his term” (Mr. Várhelyi, 2021). Although he is advocating for Serbia, Montenegro has the upper hand in the discussion. This push is so obvious that criticism also arrives at Olivér Várhelyi. As Politico notes, “According to more than a dozen officials from multiple institutions and an analysis of internal documents, European Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi has overseen a push to play down concerns about the rule of law and human rights in candidates for EU membership. And although the Hungarian diplomat is meant to produce even-handed assessments of all would-be members, he’s pushing the candidacy of one country above all: Serbia – despite the fact that Belgrade has failed to make progress on key issues and even regressed on some, according to democracy watchdogs”. (Olivér Várhelyi, 2021). In addition to all these, Hungary has a significant role in NATO’s current largest mission in Kosovo, with Major General Ferenc Kajári and Hungary taking over its command in 2021, firstly making it important for Budapest to solve the challenges, and secondly, linked to the potential tension in Kosovo mentioned earlier, putting Hungary in a difficult position. *The migratory events of 2015 and the unfolding “refugee crisis” in Europe changed both the political landscape and societal perceptions about international migration all across Central and Eastern Europe and basically in the entire European Union. Among the responses of the member states, despite their many different positions on numerous issues connected with migration, the question of border control and the enhanced protection of the territory of the EU gradually crept high on all political agendas (Tarrósy, 2021). The Strategic Partnership Agreement between Hungary and Serbia, signed on September 8, 2021, includes numerous bilateral agreements in various sectors ranging from technology and innovation to European integration. “Interior Ministers, Sándor Pintér and Aleksandar Vulin, signed the Protocol on mixed patrols along the common border” (MFA Government of Serbia, 2021). This strategic partnership was reaffirmed in May 2022 after the two leaders got re-elected. Prime Minister Orbán revisited the concept of Hungary being the “bastion of Europe”, protecting the continent and the European Union in particular. It was underscored that Serbia and Hungary “will have to strengthen their southernmost defense lines to stop migration” (Hungary Today, 2021). This continuous effort from the Serbian perspective will surely play a role in Serbia’s EU accession talks.*

## THE CURRENT STATE OF SERBIA'S MEMBERSHIP NEGOTIATIONS

Serbia was recognized as a possible candidate country in 2003. It submitted an official application in 2009 and was given EU candidate status in March 2012. After monitoring the situation and preparing for the negotiations, the Council accepted the negotiating framework late in 2013, and Serbia formally launched negotiations at the beginning of 2014. As of May 2022, Serbia has opened eighteen chapters and provisionally closed two chapters (Science and Research, Education and Culture) – but the process in the first years was quite slow, and while there is an improvement with the latest accession reforms and Serbia could open four chapters simultaneously in December 2021, critical issues remain unresolved. After the 2022 elections, High Representative Josep Borrell and the Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, while congratulating Aleksandar Vučić, encouraged “Serbia to deliver real and tangible results, in particular in the area of the rule of law and on the normalization of relations with Kosovo through the EU-facilitated Dialogue, which determine the overall pace of EU-accession negotiations” (Serbia: joint statement, 2022). So, the rule of law and relations with Kosovo are the key areas where Belgrade is not yet performing up to expectations. The question of the rule of law is going to be essential with upcoming accession talks in all cases, given the recent problems with Poland and Hungary, and the question of the recognition of Kosovo will be a deal breaker – the then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated in 2021 that the Kosovo issue must be resolved prior to Serbia’s entry into the EU (Merkel, 2021). The slow process and the communication of the Serbian government throughout the global pandemic did affect the opinion of citizens towards the EU. A media report (CSP, 2021) highlighted that in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the most prominent themes, also revealing the existence of highly emotive pro-Chinese and anti-European narratives over the COVID-19 pandemic in the media: “In general, the pro-government media, and especially the tabloids, are in favor of a type of reporting that criticizes the EU with a lot of emotions and glorifies its “rival” actors in Serbia, mainly using the allegations of state officials. Thus, the European Union is an entity that often conditions Serbia and asks it to give up key identity determinants (Tesla, Kosovo), as well as its traditional friends (China and Russia) for the sake of membership in that organization, inconsistently and unjustifiably criticizes it (for buying weapons from Russia and China), and leaves it stranded in crises (COVID-19). The President of Serbia defends the Serbian people from

the attacks of Brussels and manages, despite the enormous pressures to which he is exposed from often indeterminate (Western) centers of power, to independently make the best decisions in the interest of Serbia” (CSP, 2021, p. 31). As an outcome, a poll done by Ipsos and published in April 2022 found that 44% of respondents are against membership while 35% are in favor. For the first time in twenty years, the number of Serbs opposed to joining the European Union outnumbered those in favor of the country’s membership (For the first time, 2022). According to Milivojević, whereas these critical voices once dominated discussion about the EU, there appears to be a shift occurring recently. He highlighted that Vučić has expressed a positive view of the Community, which may have something to do with Putin’s reference to Kosovo in connection with the liberation of the breakaway republics in Ukraine – although Serbia has not yet joined the sanctions against Russia and there are still Serbian politicians who are critical of the EU. Milivojević, quoting the Serbian president, underlined that Serbia’s trade exchange with the EU makes up “62.5% of [their] foreign trade balance, that is 30+ billion euros; 300,000 people are directly or indirectly employed in companies from the EU; the biggest investments come from the EU, 1.9 billion euros last year; [...] in the last 16 years, Serbia also received over 3.6 billion euros in grants from the EU. Moreover, the country receives 200 million euros annually from IPA funds” (Milivojević, 2022).

## CONCLUSIONS

Even though there are some disputed questions (such as the divergent stances on Kosovo), it is evident that a multifaceted and strategic partnership has been strengthened by the governments of Serbia and Hungary since their regime changes. Both countries are driven by pragmatism in their foreign policies, which can mutually embrace viable solutions to a number of shared burning issues, ranging from enhancing interregional connectivity – in certain particular cases with the active involvement of China, e.g., with the Belgrade-Budapest railway project – to the handling of the flow of refugees across the wider macro-region, the protection of borders, as well as the enlargement of the European Union. With regard to the latest, our analysis can underscore that from a number of aspects – for instance, that of the Hungarian minority community in Serbia – it is in Hungary’s interest to support Serbia’s accession. Serbia, at the same time, surely needs regional support via Hungary for a successful entry into the EU. Finally, an even wider market opportunity for the entire European Union, together with an enlarged security community with a possible Serbian membership, may

seem to be of increased importance amidst growing insecurities all across Europe and beyond.

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