bilig
SUMMER 2025/ISSUE 114
25-52

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Central Asia and Organization of Turkic States in Hungarian Foreign Policy*

Halit Hamzaoğlu**

Abstract

It can be noted that Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, adopts a pragmatic approach when addressing international and regional issues. The Eastern Opening program, launched in 2010, was an important strategic initiative that demonstrated Hungary's pragmatic foreign policy approach. The strategy of Eastern Opening has sped up Hungary's relationships with the Eastern hemisphere and cleared the path for the development of efficient cooperation mechanisms. One of the main priorities in the Eastern Opening strategy has been to establish and develop relationships with Central Asian states. Effective cooperation opportunities, particularly regarding energy security and transportation, have arisen in this context. The strategic framework of relations has further expanded with Hungary's inclusion as an observer member of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2018.

Keywords

Central Asia, Eastern Opening, Hungary, OTS, Viktor Orbán.

* Date of Arrival: 22 January 2024 – Date of Acceptance: 9 October 2024
Citation: Hamzaoğlu, Halit. "Central Asia and Organization of Turkic States in Hungarian Foreign Policy." *bilig*, no. 114, 2025, pp. 25-52, https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.7873.

** Assoc. Prof. Dr., Kafkas University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of Political Science and International Relations – Kars/Türkiye
ORCID: 0000-0001-5249-1911, halithamzaoglu@kafkas.edu.tr

Macaristan Dış Politikasında Orta Asya ve Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı*

Halit Hamzaoğlu**

Öz

Viktor Orbán liderliğindeki Macaristan'ın uluslararası ve bölgesel konuları pragmatik bir yaklaşımla ele aldığını gözlemlemek mümkündür. 2010'da başlatılan Doğu Açılımı programı, Macaristan'ın pragmatik dış politika yaklaşımını ortaya koyan önemli bir stratejik açılımdı. Doğu Açılımı stratejisi Macaristan'ın Doğu yarımküresiyle ilişkilerine ivme kazandırmış ve etkin işbirliği mekanizmalarının ortaya çıkmasına zemin hazırlamıştır. Doğu Açılımı stratejisinde, Orta Asya devletleriyle ilişkilerin geliştirilmesi önemli önceliklerden biri olmuştur. Bu bağlamda özellikle enerji güvenliği ve ulaşım gibi konularda etkin iş birliği imkanları ortaya çıkmıştır. Macaristan'ın 2018'de Türk Devletleri Teşkilatı'na (TDT) gözlemci üye olması ile ilişkilerin stratejik çerçevesi daha da genişlemiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Doğu Açılımı, Macaristan, Orta Asya, TDT, Viktor Orbán.

* Geliş Tarihi: 22 Ocak 2024 – Kabul Tarihi: 9 Ekim 2024
Atıf: Hamzaoğlu, Halit. "Central Asia and Organization of Turkic States in Hungarian Foreign Policy." *bilig*, no. 114, 2025, ss. 25-52, https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.7873.

** Doç. Dr., Kafkas Üniversitesi, İİBF, Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü – Kars/Türkiye
ORCID: 0000-0001-5249-1911, halithamzaoglu@kafkas.edu.tr

Introduction

Hungary's significant and influential position on the European political map is due to its rich and long-standing history. Hungary's current foreign policy is greatly influenced by this strategic position (Önen 162; Ablonczy 11-12). Hungary started to make effective use of the opportunities provided by this strategic position, especially after 2010. Hungary's concretization of its role as a strategic bridge between East and West in terms of its own interests has enabled the diversification of regional trade and economic opportunities in particular. Thus, the dimension of trade and economic opportunities is one of the leading factors shaping foreign policy preferences.

Hungarian foreign policy in this context has been shaped to align with the evolving international system's requirements towards multipolarity. There are various criticisms of this foreign policy trend in Europe. European politicians see Hungary as a Trojan horse within the EU due to the Orbán government's foreign policy preferences and argue that the Eastern Opening will benefit international actors such as Russia and China.

However, it is clear that Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's pragmatic foreign policy approach has provided a positive framework for Hungary's position in international relations. The Eastern Opening program, launched in 2010, was an important strategic initiative that demonstrated Hungary's pragmatic foreign policy approach.

Eastern opening initiative, one of the biggest strategic engagements of Hungarian foreign policy, had a perspective that allowed for deepening relations with Central Asia. The Eastern Opening strategy aims to make Hungary an active actor in the East-West corridor. Aiming to strengthen its presence in the region by focusing on energy security, transportation, investment, and collaborative projects, Hungary seeks to serve as a strategic bridge between the East and the West. "The Eastern idea has engaged a significant segment of Hungarian intellectual public life with ever-renewing force from the beginning of Hungarian political modernity until the present day" (Ablonczy 5). "The question "Where are we from?" and the associated "What is our calling?" had aroused Hungarian public life since the beginning of the nineteenth century" (Ablonczy 5). For some Hungarian Turanists, the synthesis of Western and Eastern cultures is Hungarianness

itself. Therefore, it is out of the question to subtract Eastern culture from the West. However, for the other part of the Hungarian Turanists, Western technology is necessary, but Hungarians should return to their Eastern culture (Önen 332).

The article aims to address how Hungarian foreign policy adjusts to changing international and regional circumstances and to what degree this adjustment is apparent in its relationships with Central Asia/OTS. To analyze these questions thoroughly, we will examine Hungary's pragmatic foreign policy strategy, particularly after 2010, as well as the Eastern Opening initiative which is considered the most significant outcome of this strategy. The article is based on the hypothesis that Hungary intends to establish new areas of collaboration with non-European actors using economic and political mechanisms within the context of multipolarity discourse.

The article consists of five parts. The first part discusses the main priorities of post-Cold War Hungarian foreign policy. The second part emphasizes the importance of historical and cultural elements in shaping Hungary's Central Asia policy. The third part examines the changes in Hungarian foreign policy under Orbán in the context of the Eastern Opening initiative. The fourth part analyzes the economic and political factors underlying Hungary's policies towards the Central Asian region. The fifth part analyzes the general framework of Hungary's relations with the OTS.

Methodology, Data and Analysis

The study is framed as an exploratory and explanatory research that aims to understand the motivations behind Hungary's expanding policy towards Central Asia and its broader implications. The data collection, analysis, and methodology are designed to thoroughly investigate Hungary's pragmatic foreign policy strategy, particularly the Eastern Opening initiative, and its relationships with Central Asian states and the OTS. The methodology employed in the study is predominantly qualitative, focusing on descriptive and analytical approaches. A combination of qualitative sources was utilized to build its argument. These sources include the references speeches and policy documents from Hungarian political leaders, such as Prime Ministers József Antall and Viktor Orbán which provide insights into the official stance and strategic intentions of Hungary's foreign policy. The study also

makes extensive use of scholarly articles, historical accounts, and analyses from experts in international relations and Hungarian politics. For instance, works by Ablonczy, Önen, Jeszenszky, Pénzvaltó, Valki, and Varga are cited to provide historical context and expert analysis of Hungary's strategic decisions post-Cold War. Documents related to Hungary's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, such as NATO and the EU, as well as its strategic initiatives like the Eastern Opening program, are analyzed to understand the official policies and their impacts. The extensive use of primary and secondary sources adds depth to the analysis. The reliance on official speeches, policy documents, and expert analyses ensures that the study is well-supported by evidence.

The analysis in the paper involves historical contextualization. This historical approach helps contextualize current policies within a broader temporal framework. By examining specific initiatives like the Eastern Opening, the paper evaluates Hungary's strategic priorities and their practical outcomes. This involves assessing Hungary's aims to enhance energy security, transportation links, and economic cooperation with Central Asian states. The inclusion of Hungary as an observer member of the OTS and its implications for Hungary's foreign policy strategy is analyzed considering the benefits and challenges of Hungary's involvement in the OTS and its broader Eastern Opening strategy. The paper is based on the hypothesis that Hungary intends to establish new areas of collaboration with non-European actors using economic and political mechanisms within the context of multipolarity discourse. The author tests this hypothesis by examining the concrete steps Hungary has taken in Central Asia and its engagement with the OTS.

Priorities of Post-Cold War Hungarian Foreign Policy

After the Cold War, Hungarian foreign policy managed to build a mechanism for responding to various challenges and opportunities in a coherent framework. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the main priority of Hungarian foreign policy was to rapidly integrate with the European Union (EU) and other Western institutions. Two important factors shaped Hungarian foreign policy Post-Cold War. The first factor was the security vacuum created by the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions was of primary importance to address this security

vacuum. The second factor was related to the concepts in the nation-building process of Post-Communist Hungary. The presence of Hungarian minorities in the peripheral countries played a decisive role in this nation-building process. This situation had a framework to determine the direction of the development of Hungarian foreign policy (Varga 121-122).

With the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Hungary regained its freedom as an actor. But it also found that it was in a state of security vacuum (Jeszenszky 54). The notion of Hungary's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) gained more substance in 1991 after the departure of the last Soviet troops from the country's territory (Valki 3). However, the main issue affecting Hungary's view of NATO was the developments in the international system. The Hungarian political elite became aware that the end of bipolarity would not necessarily result in lasting peace when the Gulf War broke out in 1990 and war erupted in Yugoslavia in 1991. Furthermore, the triumph of the coalition led by the United States in the Gulf War created the perception that the West was nearing the achievement of the widely discussed "New World Order" in the post-Cold War era (Valki 4). In his speech to the NATO Council of Ministers on October 28, 1991, Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall thanked NATO for "protecting the freedom of Western Europe and thus offering the eastern half of the continent the hope of salvation." (Jeszenszky 54). In the Antall government's foreign policy program, the importance of bilateral relations with the great powers was quite striking. The program described Germany as a "key country", the US as a "country with privileges and special treatment", the UK as an "important direction" and Russia as a "key player in the region" (Varga 120). Hungary's main priority during this period was to quickly integrate into the Euro-Atlantic region due to security and economic concerns. In this framework, it signed the European Agreement with the European Community. In 1994, it formally applied for membership of the European Union. It became a party to NATO's Partnership for Peace Initiative in 1993 (Varga 120-121).

Western countries, led by the US, were also aware of Hungary's significance in Eastern and Central Europe. On the other hand, the integration of this country into NATO and the EU was also important for resolving the status of ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary. The presence of Hungarian

minorities residing primarily in Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine, and Serbia was a significant factor that greatly impacted Hungary's process of nation-building. Approximately 5 million Hungarians resided outside the country's borders following 1990. According to 2013 data, there were 1.2 million ethnic Hungarians living in Romania, 450 thousand in Slovakia, 251 thousand in Serbia and 141 thousand in Ukraine (Gergely 1). According to current data, 1.5 million Hungarians live mainly in Romania, 550 thousand in Slovakia, 300 thousand in Serbia and 150 thousand in Ukraine (EU Academy 1). When the Hungarian-speaking population living in other parts of the world is added to these numbers, it is possible to talk about a Hungarian diaspora of approximately 4.5 million.

The integration of post-communist Hungary into Euro-Atlantic institutions was also crucial for the situation of Hungarian minorities. Apart from security issues, Hungary's integration into the West, together with its other neighbors, was key to avoid creating a new center of ethnic debate and even conflict in the middle of Europe. Tempering post-communist Hungarian nationalism was crucial as the priority program involved integrating the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as a whole into NATO and the EU.

During the tenure of Prime Minister József Antall (1990-1993), the emphasis on relations with the West was due to security and economic priorities, while the conservative bloc, Hungarian Democratic Forum, continued to prioritize the issue of minorities. In this particular context, Antall declared himself as the leader of the 15 million Hungarian individuals, which encompasses minorities residing outside the country (Kiss and Zahoran 47). The Office for Hungarian Minorities Abroad and Duna Television, which caters to Hungarian minorities, were established during this period. A decision was made in 1992 to reorganize the World Hungarian Congress. Thus, policies regarding Hungarian minorities were established within institutions (Kiss and Zahoran 48). Hungarian political parties closely followed the situation of ethnic Hungarians in the Balkans during the Yugoslav crisis. The rise of Hungarian nationalism was made possible by the war in the Balkans. In this context, Hungarians living in the Vojvodina region of Serbia returned to their homeland during the war due to security concerns.

Socialist Prime Minister Gyula Horn (1994-1998), who came to power after Antall, abandoned the national policy of the previous conservative

government. A clear indication of this new approach occurred when he referred to himself as the prime minister of 10 million Hungarians (Kiss and Zahoran 48). The Horn-led coalition of Hungarian socialists and liberals made the conditions for integration with the EU and NATO very favorable. In 1997, the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Hungary. In the same year, Hungary was invited by NATO to join. During a referendum held in November 1997, the Hungarian people expressed their support for NATO membership. Of those who took part in the referendum, 85.3% declared their desire to have Hungary become a member of NATO.

Despite the rising nationalist rhetoric of Hungarian youth during this period, especially due to the war in the Balkans, the government did not want to disrupt the integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Thus, contrary to fears, Hungary did not attempt to question borders and undermine the stability of Europe (Jeszenszky 54). The Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF), founded in 1987, and the Alliance of Young Democrats (FIDESZ), composed of young Hungarians who left the official Communist Youth Movement (MISZOT) in March 1988, played an active role in this process. The MDF was a conservative and nationalist organization that emphasized national issues and the historical past. The Fidesz youth, with an age limit of 35 and conservative elements, saw their liberalism in continuity with Hungary's historical progressive movements (Muray 4).

NATO membership, which was one of the primary objectives of Hungarian foreign policy, was achieved during Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's first term in power (1998-2002), leading to Hungary becoming a member of NATO in 1999. The Orbán government, while prioritizing Hungary's integration into the Euro-Atlantic geography, also focused on advancing Hungary's national interests and implementing a well-defined foreign policy strategy within this framework. During this period, Hungarian foreign policy developed in a predictable and constructive character. In particular, Hungary has approached cooperation with neighboring countries from an economic perspective (Varga 130).

Péter Medgyessy, who took office as Prime Minister from the Socialist Party (MSZP) in 2002, prioritized a policy of balance between the great powers in foreign policy. In this context, strategic steps were taken to gain the support of the great powers. At the same time, small steps towards reconciliation

with neighboring countries were also prioritized (Gömöri 77). In 2004, when Medgessy had to step down, Ferenc Gyurcsány became Prime Minister. Gyurcsány continued the "complementary foreign policy" of the previous period, prioritizing the improvement of relations with neighboring countries. The opposition, on the other hand, constantly criticized the Gyurcsány government for its "loose foreign policy" (Kiss and Zahoran 52). Especially during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, the cautious stance of Hungarian foreign policy was subjected to more criticism. The extent of these criticisms increased when the Hungarian leadership hesitated for a long time to support the revolution in Ukraine during this period (Kiss and Zahoran 52).

Historical and Cultural Factors Shaping Hungary's Central Asia Policy

The Central Asian region has a very important and decisive position in Hungary's Eastern Opening policy. Hungary prioritizes the region not only economically but also because of its *cultural ties*.

Interest in the East in Hungary began in the first half of the 19th century. Sándor Kőrösi Csoma (1784-1842), considered the father of Hungarian orientalism, traveled to Asia after studying Oriental languages in Göttingen with a British scholarship (Önen 49). On the path paved by Csoma, many Hungarian travelers went to Eastern countries. One of the most important names among them was Armín Hermann Vámbéry. His journey to Central Asia in the first half of the 1860s brought him great fame throughout Europe. With the efforts of Vámbéry, who was the first to introduce the Eastern Expansion, a chair of Turkology was established at the University of Budapest in 1870. Vámbéry was also the first chairman of the chair (Önen 49-50).

The Turan Society, founded in Budapest on November 26, 1910, represented a turning point in the history of Turanism. The Society played a central role in Hungarian political life until 1918 (Ablonczy 39). The historian Count Pál Teleki (1879-1941), who later served twice as Prime Minister of Hungary, was elected President of the Turan Society (Ablonczy 40). While Ármin Vámbéry and Béla Széchenyi were chosen as honorary presidents within the organization's nine-member presidium. In 1913, the Society published a magazine titled Turan. The magazine contained articles and essays on the culture, economy and social life of Asian peoples.

According to Ablonczy, Turanism was the most characteristic Hungarian illusion. It was an average combination of a failed imperialism and the search for a national mirage. However, the situation was more complex. Turanism emerged in Hungary as a specific response to the cultural and ideological tension between the Hungarians' perceived Eastern origins and their aspiration to align with Western models of modernity. However, this dynamic was not unique to Hungary. Similar tensions between East and West—and the search for a distinct national identity—also gave rise to comparable ideological movements in other parts of Eastern Europe. For instance, elements of Hungarian Turanism resonate with Sarmatism in Poland, Eurasianism in Russia, and Panturkism, which also gained traction within the Russian Empire (Ablonczy 9-10). These movements, like Turanism, reflected efforts to construct alternative cultural and geopolitical frameworks that challenged Western-centric narratives and sought to reclaim Eastern or indigenous civilizational roots.

The history of Hungary has a direct or indirect connection with Turkic geography, culture and history in various ways. This connection becomes more understandable with the concepts of common geography and cultural proximity. Furthermore, this connection serves as a factor that strengthens the bond between Hungarians and Turks. Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán's statement during his visit to Kyrgyzstan in 2018: "In the West, they see us as the most westernized country in the East, and we see ourselves as such, and we are quite happy and proud of this situation" is a remarkable approach in this context and points to the historical background (Magyarország Kormánya).

In general terms, the idea of Turanism gained popularity in Hungary during the weakening of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the early XXth century. Hungarians attempted to utilize the concept of Turanism as a binding force amidst their Slavic and German neighbors. The idea was able to take hold in Hungarian politics due to the strong cultural and historical connections with Central Asia and the overall political geography of Turkic countries. The role of Central Asia in Hungary's grand strategy has been strengthened by changes in Hungarian foreign policy after 2010, as well as transformations in the international system. Hungary effectively utilizes the concept of cultural proximity in pursuit of its economic and political

objectives, with the aim of attaining middle power status. The influence of the cultural concepts and systems of thought mentioned above is evident in Hungary's presence and policies in the region. Nevertheless, it is evident that the foreign policy of Orbán's Hungary is built upon pragmatic principles and prioritizations. Hence, it is important to not disregard the fact that the Hungarian foreign policy strategy after 2010 has evolved with a focus on economics and projects.

Trends of Hungarian Foreign Policy in the Second Orbán Era and the Eastern Opening Initiative

To a certain extent, Hungary's foreign policy can be described as pragmatic in the new international order that is dominated by global insecurities and anxieties. In addition to the traditional Western focus of Hungarian foreign policy, which has been influenced by systemic changes, it also embraces a pragmatic approach that acknowledges the presence of other regional and global opportunities (Tarrosy and Vörös 132).

Since Fidesz's electoral victory, Hungary has structured its foreign policy grand strategy based on two significant approaches. These approaches were conceptualized as Global Opening and Eastern Opening. The Orbán government has implemented a foreign policy called the Global Opening strategy, which gives priority to five major regions: the former Soviet territory, Asia, the regions of Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, and Latin America (Greilinger 1).

Global Opening and *Eastern Opening* policies were complementary strategic initiatives. After 2010, one of the main changes in Hungarian foreign policy has been the expansion of relations and dialogue with eastern countries. Upon taking office, Orbán's government immediately declared the Eastern Opening (*Keleti Nyitás*) program in foreign policy. This policy was aimed at strengthening economic relations with countries in the east, particularly China. The Orbán government aimed to reduce economic dependence on the EU. The Eastern Opening program aimed to develop trade relations not only with China, but also with Russia, Azerbaijan, Japan, South Korea, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Over time, this program turned into a strong alternative in

relations with the EU. Eastern opening was the basis of the second Orbán government program (Puzyniak 232).

Hungary attached special importance to relations with China, especially for economic reasons. The central issue of the Eastern Opening policy was the diversification of economic cooperation. In this context, relations with China were treated as a key priority. In 2011, a comprehensive economic forum was organized in Budapest, supported by the countries of the region and initiated by China. In 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao presented formal proposals for China-Central and Eastern European cooperation in the 16+1 format to the countries of the region in Warsaw (Kuz 73). The format, known as the 16+1 Cooperation Platform, included Hungary and other former Eastern Bloc countries. Eleven of these countries were members of the EU and 12 of them were members of NATO (Kuz, 2021). Hungary approached the platform pragmatically and considered it as an appropriate and compatible area of cooperation to diversify its economy. The countries participating in the 16+1 platform were located on the One Belt One Road project route. In terms of the scope and dimensions of the One Belt One Road project, the 16+1 platform with Central and Eastern European countries played a constructive regional model role and was complementary in this context (Xiaozhong 99).

Hungary's economic objectives revolved around major concerns, including the representation of Hungarian companies in the Chinese market, China's direct investments in the Hungarian economy, the construction of the Budapest-Belgrade railway, and the transportation of Hungarian goods to the Balkans via this railway (Irimescu 10-12).

The Orbán government emphasized relations with Russia as part of its Eastern Opening policy. Orbán's pragmatic foreign policy approach allowed for mutually beneficial stability in relations with Russia (Shishelina 14). The main agenda item in relations with Russia was new cooperation mechanisms in the energy field. In this context, Hungary had a positive approach to the construction of the South Stream project. The South Stream project offered Hungary many strategic advantages as a transit country. The cooperation agreement that caused the most impact was in the nuclear field. In this framework, the modernization of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant, the largest investment in Hungary since 1989, was awarded to the Russian State

Nuclear Corporation Rosatom. The Paks Nuclear Power Plant was built in 1982 using Soviet technology. The modernization and development of the nuclear power plant was therefore offered to Russia. The familiarity of Russian experts with this technology played a decisive role in this process (Borodenko 108).

After his victory in the 2014 parliamentary elections, Orbán reaffirmed his will to continue the Eastern Opening in foreign policy. Orbán emphasized that foreign policy based on ideology is a method imposed on other countries by smart countries. He stated that, in this context, Hungary prioritized its economic interests in its foreign policy rather than an ideological one. The main agenda of this foreign policy was to encourage investment in Hungary and increase exports (Vegh 51). Hungary's foreign policy after 2014 has led to the country being described as an "illiberal democracy". Such a characterization was directly related to the general orientation of Hungarian foreign policy. Hungary's pragmatic, flexible and national interest-oriented foreign policy strategy was not acceptable to the European establishment. The pragmatic economic-oriented relations with Russia and the long-term joint economic mechanisms with China, in particular, have faced widespread criticism. Additionally, Hungary's position regarding the conflict in Ukraine has laid the groundwork for the geopolitical aspect of these criticisms.

In 2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict in eastern Ukraine posed new challenges to Europe's security architecture. The Hungarian leadership considered it a top priority that the Ukrainian conflict should not be an obstacle to the Eastern Opening policies. The Hungarian government considered the annexation of Crimea unacceptable. However, it emphasized that without cheap and affordable energy supplies from Russia, European economies would suffer serious damage. On the other hand, the main focus of Hungary's policies towards Ukraine was the status of the Hungarian minority in Trans-Carpathia. Another important factor determining Hungary's view of the Ukrainian conflict was directly related to changes in the international system. In this context, the multipolar world discourse played an important role in Orbán's pragmatic foreign policy.

Hungary's position diverged from that of neighboring countries following the 2022 Russian aggression against Ukraine. From the beginning of the war, the Hungarian government refused to sell arms to Ukraine. Hungary was

severely criticized by the EU for this stance and was considered to undermine "European solidarity". However, Orbán advocated for the establishment of efficient negotiation mechanisms between the EU and Russia in order to bring an end to the war. According to the Hungarian leader, "if negotiations are not initiated by the Europeans, the Russians and the Americans will eventually reach an agreement that will leave Europe perplexed" (Presinszky et al.). Hungarian officials emphasize that "Europe must be ready for the coming multipolar, post-Western world of hegemony".It is crucial for Europe to establish its own standing army within this context, in order to defend itself and decrease its reliance on the United States in terms of security policies. It is also vital to preserve the national sovereignty of the peoples of Central Europe and the distinct political and cultural identities of European countries in general (*Hungary Today*, "Europe Must Prepare").

Orbán's foreign policy strategy has come under severe criticism both in Europe and in Hungary. Orbán's illiberal "tentacles" extend beyond the borders of the EU. Orbán, increasingly distanced and isolated from Brussels, approves and inspires the authoritarian behavior of Balkan politicians with dubious democratic credentials. In this context, he puts the interests of these authoritarian politicians above the interests of the EU institutions. With this approach, Orbán tends to build his own illiberal bloc outside the EU. His allies in the region include leaders such as Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic or Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik (Domenech 3).

While the Fidesz-led government has had considerable capacity to influence foreign policy decisions since its landslide election victory in 2010, it initially focused on institutional reforms that consolidated its domestic power. At this stage, there was little talk of de-Europeanization of foreign policy institutions. However, after the second election victory in 2014, foreign policy itself increasingly became the focus of the dominant party, Fidesz. Foreign Minister Szijjártó promoted an ambitious reform agenda that resulted in a fundamental de-Europeanization of Hungarian foreign policy institutions (Müller and Gazsi 410). Under Szijjártó, the de-Europeanization of Hungary's foreign policy institutions profoundly affected an increasingly wide range of institutional features (Müller and Gazsi 410).

Orbán's foreign policy in recent years has been criticized mostly by Hungarian socialists and green parties. The Democratic Coalition led by former

Socialist Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsany is the leading representative of the opposition. The Democratic Coalition disapproves of the Orbán government's distant attitude towards the West and attributes Orbán's desire to turn Eastward to the fact that corruption and authoritarianism are not tolerated in the West (Koenen 2).

Hungary's Political and Economic Relations with the Central Asian Turkic States

The Central Asia policy of Hungary aligns with the Eastern Opening program and places emphasis on collaborative economic endeavors in particular. In this context, it is possible to state that the strategy of establishing an economic bridge between the East and West has been embraced. Prime Minister Orbán asserts that the central focus of their national economic strategy is to transform Hungary into a hub for the most advanced companies from both the East and West. Orbán firmly believes that the upcoming global economic era will be characterized by mutually respectful connections and cooperation, and he asserts that establishing a new and prosperous European economic strategy is unattainable without linking Central Asia and Europe. Orbán stresses their viewpoint of Central Asia as a region that serves to connect transportation, trade, and digital routes between Europe and the East (*Hungary Today,* "The Great Potential").

The Hungarian leadership considers the Central Asia strategy and the Eastern Opening in general as an appropriate platform to keep pace with international political/economic transformations and changes. It describes his Central Asian policy activity in terms of adapting to rapidly changing international conditions. In this context, Central Asia is considered both an important market and a strategic transportation corridor.

Energy cooperation and the establishment of mechanisms based on this cooperation undeniably hold a priority position at the core of Hungary's interest in the Caspian and Central Asian region. It is important to underline that Hungary's regional energy policies align with those of the EU. Despite criticism from the EU bureaucracy, Hungary's emergence as a player in the regional energy map is viewed positively, given the context of the Orbán government's foreign policy strategy.

In 2019, Hungarian oil company *Magyar Olaj – és Gázipari Részvénytársaság* (MOL) signed an agreement with Chevron Global Ventures Chevron Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline (BTC) to acquire stakes in exploration and production, transportation and storage in Azerbaijan. The agreement effectively includes a 9.57% non-operating stake in the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil field and an 8.9% stake in BTC. MOL has the chance to collaborate with global energy firms like British Petroleum (BP), Exxon, Equionor, and Azerbaijan State Oil Company (SOCAR), all thanks to this crucial strategic concession (Obucina 2).

According to Hungary's 2020 National Security Strategy, diversifying energy sources is identified as one of the country's key strategic goals (Hungary's National Security Strategy). In pursuit of this objective, Hungary initially prioritized developing relations with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Subsequently, ties with Turkmenistan were also elevated to a similar level of strategic importance.

The energy policies of Hungary mostly coincided with the strategies of the neighboring countries to expand their energy export routes. In this context, Hungary, as a European actor in the region, was very keen on establishing technical and commercial cooperation mechanisms for the diversification of energy supply. The construction of mechanisms based on energy cooperation was the main motivation for Hungary's relations with the countries of the region.

Energy cooperation was considered a priority in Hungary's relations with the Central Asian states. Furthermore, the prioritization of joint business forums, particularly in bilateral relations, was also taken into consideration. In this framework, it was envisaged to deepen economic cooperation through the provision of loans by the Hungarian Eximbank to the countries of the region.

Kazakhstan has a decisive position in Hungary's relations with Central Asian states. Kazakhstan ranks first in Hungary's foreign direct investments among the countries of the region. Kazakhstan is Hungary's fourth largest partner among the Post-Soviet countries after Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (Rustemov 1).

Since 2012, the Hungarian energy company MOL has been making efforts to establish its presence in the Kazakh energy market. The Eastern Opening

program prioritized relations with Kazakhstan, as well as Azerbaijan. The *Kazakhstan-Hungary Direct Investment Fund* was established in 2015. The main investors of the fund are KazAgro and Hungarian Eximbank. The investment fund focuses on the development of cooperation, specifically in the agricultural sector. Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjártó's visit to Kazakhstan in 2021 provided a renewed momentum to the bilateral relations. The discussion during the visit focused on the Hungarian Eximbank's provision of a loan worth 165 million dollars and its investments in the Kazakh economy. In 2021, Hungary's exports to Kazakhstan increased by 58%. Hungary considered further improvement of this figure to be a priority. It was mutually agreed during the visit that Hungarian companies would construct a cooling plant valued at 4 million dollars (Moldicz 4). While visiting Kazakhstan in 2023, Orbán referred to it as his home and expressed that the positive outcomes of the past ten years in bilateral relations were evident (Tengri News). The visit of French President Emmanuel Macron to Kazakhstan, which followed his previous visit, was regarded as a new stage in relations between the two countries. During Orbán's meeting with Kazakh President Kasym-Jomart Tokayev, cooperation mechanisms in areas such as energy, transportation and logistics were the main topic of negotiations.

The extensive tour of Central Asia by Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó in February 2020 was very important. On February 18, Szijjártó visited Uzbekistan, where he attended the opening of the Uzbek-Hungarian business forum. During the forum, the Hungarian Foreign Minister proudly stated that Hungary possesses the most elevated export numbers out of all Central European EU member states. He emphasized that for the third year in a row Hungary belongs to the "elite club" of 35 countries with exports exceeding 100 billion (*Eurasia Daily*). One of the most prominent agreements during the visit was the provision of a $100 million credit line by the Hungarian Eximbank to create a financial basis for Hungary-Uzbekistan trade relations.

By agreement in 2021, Hungary established a laboratory in the Yukorichirchik district of Tashkent for the production of seed potato varieties for the domestic market. The Hungarian-Uzbek laboratory is expected to increase root crop yields by 30-50% and replace seed imports with a harvest of 21 thousand tons by 2024 (Turdimov 1).

It was announced during the visit that as part of Hungary's cultural policy, Hungary will be launching a scholarship program for Uzbek students to study at Hungarian universities, with 30 quotas available per year, and even one of the biggest Hungarian universities will establish its campus in Uzbekistan (*Eurasia Daily*).

After his visit to Uzbekistan, Szijjártó went to Kyrgyzstan and attended the opening ceremony of the Hungarian embassy in Bishkek. A Kyrgyz-Hungarian business forum was also opened during the visit. At the forum, Szijjártó sharply criticized his "Western friends" who criticize the Eastern Opening policy because they do not want to see Hungary as a competitor in the market (*Eurasia Daily*). In order to revitalize economic relations, it was announced that Hungarian Eximbank will create a joint investment fund in the amount of 50 million dollars. Hungary also offered assistance to Kyrgyzstan in the context of environmental problems. Szijjártó announced that 75 Kyrgyz students will start studying at Hungarian universities from September 2020 (*Eurasia Daily*).

Orbán visited Ashgabat in June 2023 and started to improve relations with Turkmenistan, which adopted the principle of "permanent neutrality" after its independence. Economic cooperation opportunities were discussed during the meetings with President of Turkmenistan Serdar Berdimuhammedov and former President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, the leader of the *People's Council of Turkmenistan*. Opportunities for cooperation in the field of pharmaceuticals and medical equipment were at the center of attention. Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov proposed to Orbán to establish a joint production center for pharmaceuticals and medical equipment in Turkmenistan (*Hronika Turkmenistana*). Orbán also addressed the energy issue and stated that "energy must come from Central Asia to Europe, and for this we need new sources, routes and infrastructure". He added that Turkmenistan could be a "great partner" for Europe and Hungary. The Hungarian leader stated that "the classical East-West transportation and supply routes have been disrupted, so we need to look for new routes and new partners".In this context, it was necessary to further increase cooperation mechanisms in the fields of energy and transportation and to involve potential partners such as Turkmenistan (*Hungary Today*, "Viktor Orbán").

Central Asia, which holds a crucial position in Hungary's Eastern Opening, is characterized as an important market in the Hungarian grand strategy with its natural resources. The mechanisms developed with the Central Asian countries offer Hungarian companies the opportunity to become players in a dynamically growing market. Hungary's ambition to become a medium-sized power is in line with its strategy in the region. Central Asia is a region with many opportunities for Hungary to diversify its energy relations. In this context, the phrase "Eastern country of the West" refers to a rational conceptual framework within the new international system, which Hungary is attempting to align itself with. Orbán emphasized the need to reassess the strategic importance of Central Asia in the emerging new circumstances and that the region's potential as a bridge between East and West has increased even more in the current circumstances. This emphasis reveals the strategic framework of Hungary's Central Asia policy and the political and economic conditions imposed by the new international system.

Hungary and the Organization of Turkic States

The Turkic Council has expanded geographically since then, as Hungary was granted observer status in 2018 and Uzbekistan became a full member at the Summit in Baku in 2019. Turkmenistan officially integrated into the Turkic organization in 2021" (Amreyev 3).

The member states at the OTS Summit in Baku expressed their welcome towards Hungary's accession to the organization as an observer. The Summit Declaration emphasized the importance of Hungary's constructive contribution to the OTS agenda. It also emphasized the importance of encouraging intensified cooperation with Hungary (Türk Dili Konuşan Ülkeler İşbirliği Konseyi Yedinci Zirve Bildirisi 12). The Summit Declaration welcomed the opening of the Representative Office of the OTS in Budapest and thanked the Hungarian Government in this regard (Türk Dili Konuşan Ülkeler İşbirliği Konseyi Yedinci Zirve Bildirisi 12).

Hungary's participation in the OTS as an observer member further enhances the international character of the organization. The OTS is viewed as a complementary aspect of the Hungarian foreign policy strategy from the Hungarian perspective, and in this context, it intersects with the Eastern Opening initiative.

OST's European Representative Office in Budapest enables the organization to increase its international character. The Budapest Office was opened on September 19, 2019, hosted by the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó. The 10th Extraordinary Meeting of the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Turkic Council was held in the premises of the OTS Representative Office, which was inaugurated on the same day. Mr. János Hóvári, former Ambassador to Ankara, served as the Executive Director of the OTS Representative Office in Europe. Mr. Hóvári made significant contributions to many issues such as the establishment of the Hungarian office of TIKA and the research work on the tomb of Suleiman the Magnificent. When Ambassador János Hóvári passed away last year while he was the coordinator of this office, Prof. István Vásáry, a former Ambassador to Ankara and Tehran, was appointed in his place.

During his speech at the 2022 OTS Summit in Samarkand, Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó stressed the significance of global peace, and he expressed his concern that the language promoting war holds more power than the language promoting peace, and that the voices of peace advocates are overshadowed by those supporting war (Moldicz). In his speech, Szijjártó described the OTS as a forum for peace and mentioned Türkiye's constructive role. He emphasized that Türkiye, as a peace mediator, "is the only country that can contribute to the resumption of grain exports from Ukraine" (Moldicz).

Türkiye has a special importance in Hungary's Eastern Opening policy. Hungary supports Türkiye's EU membership. When the refugee crisis hit Hungary in 2015-2016, Budapest supported Türkiye's efforts to deal with illegal migration and was sympathetic to its policies in northern Syria or in the Eastern Mediterranean (Egeresi 2). The two states and their citizens are connected by many cultural and historical threads. Although the renovation of Ottoman-era monuments or the popular television series Magni Cent Century evokes the period of Hungary's conquest, the image of the Turks in Hungarian popular culture is generally not hostile (Pénzvaltó 100).

Szijjártó stated that trade between Hungary and the OTS countries has increased 2.5 times over the past 12 years, reaching 4.5 billion euros—a significant development.

The Hungarian Foreign Minister emphasized the fact that 990 students from OTS countries annually enroll in Hungarian universities for their studies, while also highlighting the opportunities offered through the Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program (Moldicz).

At the Astana summit of OTS in 2023, the Hungarian leader Orbán said that "Europe is faced with difficult dilemmas, and the OTS is needed to provide a strong response to these dilemmas." Orbán argued that the dilemma facing Europe was linked to the international system. In this respect, Europe had to decide "whether it wanted the formation of blocs in the world economy or the strengthening of global ties" (*Hungary Today*, "The Turkic World"). Orbán stated that a viable and enduring European security structure cannot exist without the inclusion of Türkiye, emphasizing the need for representation of Türkiye and the Turkic world in the new European security framework. According to Orbán, the role of the OTS is gaining more significance in the present global situation. Orbán highlighted that the OTS members operate in a constructive manner that minimizes the chances of conflicts escalating, and he emphasized Hungary's intention to enhance this aspect within the OTS (*Hungary Today,* "The Turkic World"). The Hungarian leader also emphasized the importance of deepening economic cooperation and in particular expressed their willingness to participate in the work of the Turkish Investment Fund. In this context, he confirmed that they stand by their previous commitment to contribute 100 million euros (*Hungary Today,* "The Turkic World").

Hungary's special interest in the OTS countries and the Turkic World in general can be explained by two points (Moldicz):

1) The main motivation and objective of the Eastern Opening policies was the need for diversification in trade and investment. In this framework, it is possible to consider cooperation with the OTS countries in line with this motivation and purpose

2) The second issue is related to the potential role that the OTS countries can play in Hungary's energy security. Hungary is turning to different alternatives for energy security, especially after the war in Ukraine.

   EU member Hungary's position in the OTS and its observer member status is very important for the organization's presence, especially in the

Western hemisphere. It can be stated that this association, which aligns with Hungary's current foreign policy strategy, is also in harmony with the international mission of the OTS. This collaboration is in accordance with the nature and functioning of the evolving international system.

Central Asian countries rely more on Hungarian support to reach the EU. This paves the way for the countries of the region to see Hungary as a gateway to the EU (Bárkányi 580). Although the Orbán government's foreign policy preferences are severely criticized by the EU, Hungary's gaining prestige in Central Asia as an EU member is perceived positively in terms of European diplomacy. Because the consolidation of Hungary's cultural and economic "soft power" in the region against Russia is a positive development for the EU in the medium and long term. However, the cautious approach of European politicians towards Orbán's Eastern Opening shows that the EU's relationship with Hungary's regional countries has a certain limit.

The representation of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) at the OTS summit held in Shusha, Azerbaijan on 5-6 July 2024 at the level of leaders for the first time caused a great repercussion in the EU. The EU said that Orbán, who attended the OTS summit as an observer, where Northern Cyprus was also represented, did not represent them and stated that they were against the "legitimization" of the TRNC. The Hungarian leader, on the other hand, stated that it was in Hungary's interests to develop friendly relations with the OTS member states (DW).

The concept of Hungarian Turanism, which Hungary often refers to its relations with Central Asian countries, and its political meaning are at the center of Russia's attention. Orbán's support for the development of Turanism in Central Asia makes him an unpredictable ally (Makendontsev 2). The notion that Hungary's interest in its Turanian roots is driven primarily by pragmatism suggests that its engagement with the region is motivated largely by access to natural resources and infrastructure. However, Orbán's consistency in building bridges with states where Turkic culture is represented leaves no doubt that for the Hungarian leadership the idea of Greater Turan has acquired a civilizational dimension rather than economic dimension (Averyanov 2).

Economic cooperation and transportation projects are the main factors shaping China's view of Hungary. Hungary's presence in Central Asia is in line with China's One Belt One Road initiative. Because although the initiative is Eurasia-oriented, it is clear that its ultimate goal is to reach Europe (Rózsás 220). Since Hungary is the destination of the majority of China's foreign direct investments, the economy has a decisive role in bilateral relations (Szunomár and Peragovics 7).

Conclusion

Hungary's post-2010 foreign policy strategy is in line with the realities of an international system evolving towards multipolarity. Implemented since 2010, this policy aimed to achieve middle power status, which is a primary objective of Hungarian foreign policy. This status would allow Hungary to pursue a more pragmatic foreign policy. Under Orbán's leadership, this pragmatic foreign policy approach, which emphasizes economic cooperation, has both elevated Hungary's position in the multipolar international system and created new opportunities in a context of geopolitical instability.

Expanding relations and dialogue with eastern countries has been one of the priority areas in Hungary's post-2010 strategy. The new foreign policy opening, conceptualized as Eastern Opening, is essentially shaped by three main objectives:

1) The first objective is directly linked to the functioning of the international system. The Orbán governments embraced and implemented the concept of a multipolar international system as their approach. In this regard, the establishment of parameters for relations with non-European actors becomes the central concern of Hungarian foreign policy agenda

2) Second, Hungarian foreign policy has prioritized mutually beneficial bilateral relations through the Eastern Opening. The involvement of influential global actors, specifically Russia and China, holds significant importance in shaping these bilateral relations. Hungary seems to act with a pragmatic approach in its relations with these two powers and is determined to create an economically oriented configuration. Despite the EU's criticism of this approach, the attitude and policies of Hungarian foreign policy, especially in regional crises, have not

undergone any change. Hungary's stance in the Ukraine war is an important example in this context.

3) Another important issue of Hungary's Eastern Opening strategy is relations with Türkiye and the Turkic World. Hungary's view of the Turkic World is shaped by cultural and economic factors. Orbán's definition of Hungary as an "Eastern country" within the EU emphasizes its strategic bridging role. Hungary has begun to solidify this role by becoming an observer member of the OTS in 2018. New effective mechanisms with the Central Asian countries on economic cooperation and energy security in particular constitute the main axis of Hungary's regional policy. Hungary's participation in the OTS is also important in the context of the future vision of the organization. In this context, Hungary's presence in the organization and its active demonstration of this presence provides a strategic value to the international activities of the OTS.

It is possible to evaluate Hungary's recent foreign policy behavior in two frameworks. First, it is necessary to examine the basic assumptions of Orbán's policies that are increasingly moving away from the West. Orbán approaches the Eastern Opening from the perspective of Hungarian national interests. In this context, he emphasizes the diversification of Hungarian economic gains. The second framework is shaped around the question of the extent to which these policies affect Hungary's relations with the EU. The Hungarian opposition associates Orbán's Eastern policies with a shift towards authoritarianism.

This discourse is in line with the EU's conclusions about the Orbán government's policies. At this point, it seems inevitable that Hungary's strategic choices will affect the political configuration of Central Europe and the Balkans in the medium and long term. The consolidation of Orbán's strategic choice directly depends on the speed and scope of the process of change in the international system. This situation increases the polarization in Hungarian politics. In order to avoid geopolitically oriented polarization, Orbán may need to return to the foreign policy philosophy that manifested itself in the early years of his government, which includes more pragmatism and, most importantly, predictability. This would provide an appropriate, rational and predictable basis for avoiding regional geopolitical turbulence.

It would be beneficial for Hungary to consolidate trade and economic gains by taking more initiative in its relations with Turkey and the OTS. In this context, Hungary's participation in the CTS is key both from a geo-economic and connectivity perspective. In particular, Hungary should play a leading role in transforming the economic potential provided by the Central Corridor into an OTS-Europe cooperation area.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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