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EASTERN OR WESTERN ORIENTATION?
CENTRAL EUROPEAN HUNGARY
IN THE ATTRACTION OF THE GREAT POWERS

INTRODUCTION

In modern history, the Central European region was geographically situated between the dominant Eastern and Western powers: with the strengthening of Russia in the 18th century and its turn towards Europe from the east, and with the Habsburg Empire and the rising Prussia and the German Empire from the west, the Central European region was always bordered by much stronger political entities. However, on other occasions, in other historical-political contexts, this region had also been able to become a centre of great power: see for example the medieval Kingdom of Hungary, the Polish–Lithuanian Union or the Austro–Hungarian Empire. In the 20th century, however, the “geopolitical buffer zone” character of the region had become even more prominent, which in turn fundamentally defined the national consciousness of the states located in the region.¹

The region was essentially a buffer zone during the world wars, but this position was for a time lost after 1945, and the region seemed to be permanently getting incorporated into the “Eastern Empire”, in other words into the sphere of interest of the Soviet Union. The disappearance or at least the transformation of the frontier character was not only a scientific abstraction, but it also indicated that the very idea of Central Europe was pushed into the background in Hungarian public life, and was replaced

¹ NAGY 2014: 29–38.

in almost every respect by the designation of Eastern Europe or “socialist countries”. Although the idea of Central Europe had already seeped back, first into academia and then into public life, in the 1980s, the real turning point came with the 1989 regime change, which increased the importance of the associations between the states of the region and made the need for Western integration clear. Central European countries, each having different geopolitical visions, were first united in the Visegrád Association, then became members of NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. The integration into Western structures had for a time essentially suspended the frontier character of the region, which had been its feature for the previous hundred years, pushing the borders of Western integration hundreds of kilometres eastwards.²

It is precisely the embeddedness of the Central European countries in Western integration and the improved geopolitical environment that this has ensured that makes it necessary to interpret the changes of the past decade and the relationship of the region and Hungary to Western integration. The Visegrád Cooperation, and even more so the governments of the V4 countries, are coming under increasing criticism for their perceived or real anti-Westernism or critical attitude towards the West. Some even consider the V4 to be a toxic brand because of its critical overtones towards the European Union.³ There is also an emerging literature on the half-hearted role of Central European countries in Western integration.⁴ However, all this is a complex and too well known topic for the scope of this paper, which will attempt to interpret the reasons for the region’s truly half-hearted attachment to Western integration by using Hungary as an example, and to assess the place of the individual centres of power, primarily the United States, Russia, China and Germany, in Hungary’s foreign relations.

² BARTHA 2019, 256–265.

³ BAGOLY 2021.

⁴ KRASTEV–HOLMES 2020.

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF HUNGARIAN
FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 2010

When talking about the foreign policy of Central European countries – or Hungary in particular – in the daily political communication discourse, we usually start with the domestic political determinants rather than the international environment, although the latter of course essentially determines the possible directions of foreign policy. In the international environment, there are two major trends that have, in a sense, transformed the foreign policies of most countries. Part of the first trend is the relative decline in the power of the United States and its retreat from the world, which was significantly accelerated by the 2008–2009 global financial crisis and the disputes over crisis management among Western allies. The first trend is therefore not only the retreat of the hegemonic power, but also the decline in the unity of the Western countries. The other major trend is, of course, the rise of Asia, which has resulted not only in the increased economic and political power of China, but also in the rise of several other Asian players.⁵ This environment has therefore brought about a much more equal distribution of power and wealth across space, in which the North–South divide is less and less a political reality.⁶ The retreat of the hegemonic power, a certain degree of multi-polarisation, creates an international environment in which the capacity of individual countries to act is increased, and this, in turn, reduces the political and economic costs for the middle powers of disrupting the status quo.⁷ In this less predictable environment, the need for smaller states to diversify their sources of security and prosperity inevitably increases.

Some of the basic principles of Hungarian foreign policy are clearly set out in key strategic documents. According to the National Security Strategy, our most important value is sovereignty: “A strong Hungary based on national foundations represents the guarantee of the survival of Hungary, the framework of our national existence. [...] Our national sovereignty is an unquestionable fundamental value that is naturally present in both the

⁵ UGRÓSDY 2021: 943–945.

⁶ WADE 2011: 347–378.

⁷ NÉMETH 2019.

foreign and domestic policies of our country. Our primary security policy interest is to protect, preserve and strengthen the self-determination and freedom of action of the Hungarian state in the constantly changing circumstances.”⁸ The text clearly indicates that, contrary to previous perceptions, Hungary must adapt to an ever-changing international environment. The same document lists the priority security risks to our country as follows:

- ♦ illegal migration
- ♦ unexpected armed attack
- ♦ coordinated, large-scale, diplomatic, information and intelligence operations to destabilise Hungary
- ♦ a cyberattack that causes significant damage
- ♦ an act of terrorism
- ♦ efforts to infringe national sovereignty, to take away national powers, whether overtly or covertly
- ♦ permanent population decline
- ♦ a national economic crisis or a prolonged global trade slowdown
- ♦ a disruption in energy supply
- ♦ the emergence of serious and lasting instability (failed state) in the region
- ♦ groundbreaking technology falling into unauthorised hands
- ♦ organised crime
- ♦ attack with weapons of mass destruction in the region
- ♦ industrial accidents with a regional impact in the region
- ♦ epidemics causing mass and severe disease
- ♦ natural disasters
- ♦ climate change⁹

As can be seen, Hungary does not identify specific states among the security threats, but several different security threats can be associated with different states. The document identifies not only threats that pose an existential threat

⁸ Government Resolution 1163/2020 (IV. 21.) on Hungary’s National Security Strategy [hereinafter: NBS]. Articles 8–9.

⁹ NBS 2020: 124: a–q.

to Hungary, but also those that could permanently or significantly limit the country's sovereignty and room for manoeuvre, in line with the objectives set out earlier. The long-term guarantee of these values is, however, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which is the "cornerstone" of our security and which, together with the European Union, is seen as "the community of values of Western civilization".¹⁰ The National Security Strategy also describes the tense international situation between Russia and NATO, and states that Hungary is interested in risk reducing and confidence building measures, as well as the pragmatic development of Hungarian–Russian economic relations, but that it gives priority to preserving the cohesion of NATO and the EU.¹¹ It describes China as an increasingly important player in the international system, whose "military and security ambitions must be monitored in the long term". In terms of developing Hungarian–Chinese relations, the document highlights the benefits of joining the Belt and Road Initiative, but also mentions that the infrastructure investments will result in increased exposure of the critical infrastructure.¹² The document summarising Hungary's National Security Strategy thus favours pragmatic cooperation with both China and Russia, while also mentioning the risks involved.

This is in line with the perception of the Hungarian population and the Hungarian security community. Both the public and the security community clearly see the United States as Hungary's main partner, followed by Germany and the Visegrád countries. In terms of security threats, the dominant threats are not essentially those from other states, but rather non-state threats such as migration, terrorism or climate change and its consequences. Of the threats that come specifically from states, members of the security community highlight three countries that may pose a degree of security threat in certain contexts: Russia, Ukraine and China.¹³ Public perception is similar to that of the security community, according to another survey. This survey also found that the United States and Germany are our

¹⁰ NBS 2020: 14–17.

¹¹ NBS 2020: 118.

¹² NBS 2020: 119.

¹³ ETL 2020: 1–11.

most important partners, and the two countries that the public believes are doing the most to maintain international peace and security. It is also true that the public perceives that Germany's international strength has weakened in recent years. In addition, a significant difference is that while 40% of the pro-government respondents considered the directions of Hungarian foreign policy to be balanced, only 27% of opposition voters had the same opinion. 39% of the latter consider Hungarian foreign policy pro-Russian and 12% pro-China.¹⁴

It follows from this that, fundamentally, the Western orientation is the cornerstone of the country's foreign policy, which in a highly institutionalised form – through membership in the European Union and NATO – essentially determines the place of Hungary in the international arena. The Western orientation cannot be refuted either on the basis of strategic documents or on the basis of the perception of the security community or of one of Europe's most consistently pro-Western populations. It is clear, however, that the high degree of domestic polarisation also affects the perception of foreign policy, leading to a significant divergence in the perception of foreign policy orientation. To examine the perceived or real tendencies departing from the Western orientation, it is therefore necessary to look primarily at the field of foreign (economic) and political communication.

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC POWER CENTRES AND HUNGARY

This chapter shows the extent to which the Hungarian economy has been integrated into the Western economy, and in particular into the economy of the European Union, since its accession to the EU in 2003. We shall look at traditional indicators, such as the country's main trade and foreign direct investment partners.

¹⁴ SZABÓ 2021: 44–62.

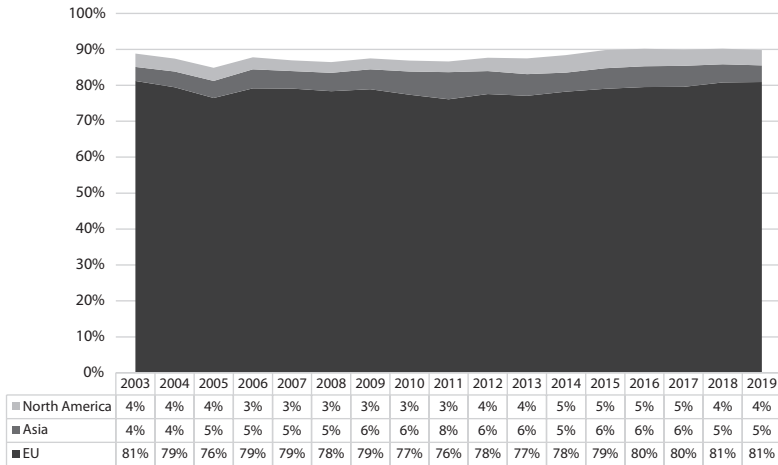


Figure 1: Hungary's main export partners by region

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2021

Hungary is one of the most open economies in the world, with a trade turnover significantly higher than its gross national product. *Figure 1* shows that Hungary's dominant export partner is the European Union. Since Hungary joined the European Union, the EU's share has been in the 76–81% range, dwarfing the other regions. In 2019, the EU's share of exports was 81% (*Figure 1*).

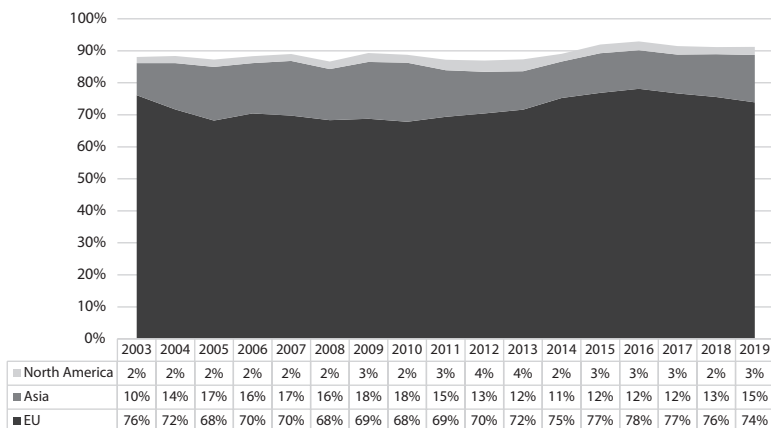
It is noteworthy that in 2019, all of our top ten export destinations were EU Member States, with Germany standing out with a high share of 28% of the total turnover (*Figure 2*). Such a high share of the German export market shows a high degree of trade dependence. Other important export markets for Hungary outside the EU are the USA (2.8%), Ukraine (2%), Russia (1.7%), Turkey (1.6%), Serbia (1.5%) and China (1.4%).

Table 1: Top ten export destinations for the Hungarian economy in 2019

Rank	Country	Value of export million EUR	Share %
1	Germany	30,214	27.7
2	Slovakia	5,724	5.2
3	Italy	5,601	5.1
4	Romania	5,516	5.1
5	Austria	5,040	4.6
6	France	4,716	4.3
7	Czech Republic	4,677.3	4.3
8	Poland	4,621.4	4.2
9	Netherlands	3,786	3.5
10	United Kingdom	3,594	3.3

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2020

Hungarian import statistics show that Hungary is deeply integrated into the EU economy in this respect as well. In 2019, the EU's share of product imports was 74%. Since Hungary's accession to the EU, the EU's share has been in the range of 68–78%, while other regions continue to be dwarfed (*Figure 2*).

*Figure 2: Hungary's main import partners by region*

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2021

Germany has been Hungary's most important import partner since the regime change. It typically accounts for about a quarter of total imports. China's share of imports has been slowly increasing over the past decade, in line with global economic trends; but its weight is still dwarfed by Germany. Out of non-European countries, the top ten import partners include Russia with 4.3% and the Republic of Korea with 3.6%. The share of the United States is only 2.7% (Table 2).

The other key indicator for examining Hungary's foreign economic orientation is the foreign direct investment. If we look at the breakdown of Hungarian FDI by country of final investor, we also find a dominance of European countries. The National Bank of Hungary has been publishing data on this from 2014 onwards, using a uniform methodology, which shows that the weight of Europe increased steadily between 2014 and 2019, reaching 70% in 2019 (*Figure 3*). Germany is the main source of FDI, accounting for 22.8% of total FDI in 2019. In parallel, there has been a decline in investments from North America and a dynamic increase in Asian investment. The main non-EU investors in 2019 were the U.S. (9.7%), the Republic of Korea (5.5%), Japan (3.9%), India (3.1%) and China (2.9%).

Table 2: Top ten importing countries for the Hungarian economy in 2019

Rank	Country	Value of export million EUR	Share %
1	Germany	23,334.2	22.3
2	China	11,512.5	11.0
3	Poland	4,564.7	4.4
4	Russia	4,468.8	4.3
5	Austria	4,375.8	4.2
6	Italy	3,917.1	3.7
7	Czech Republic	3,859.6	3.7
8	Republic of Korea	3,745.2	3.6
9	Slovakia	3,447.0	3.3
10	France	3,347.0	3.2

Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office 2020

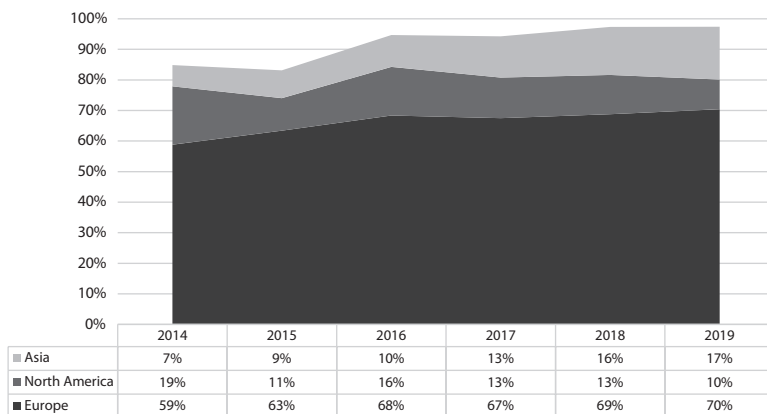


Figure 3: FDI in Hungary by region of final investor

Source: National Bank of Hungary 2021

Analysing the above data, the following conclusions can be drawn. Hungary is extremely dependent on the economy of the European Union. In addition to geographical proximity, the main explanation for this is that the Hungarian economy is linked to the world market through German value chains, primarily as a production base for the German manufacturing industry, which relies on a relatively low labour input.¹⁵ The semi-peripheral dependency of the Hungarian economy is shown by the fact that, despite EU accession in 2003, the Hungarian economy has not been able to catch up with Germany in terms of per capita income (*Figure 4*). In the light of the above, it can be concluded that despite its economic importance, EU membership alone has contributed little to Hungary's economic catching-up with developed countries, technical and structural modernisation and structural reforms.¹⁶

¹⁵ LENGYEL et al. 2019: 163–184.

¹⁶ LOSONCZ 2019: 21–33.

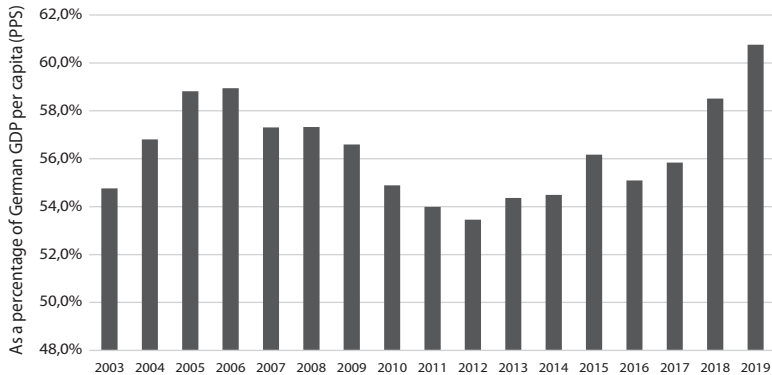


Figure 4: Hungary's per capita income as a percentage of German per capita income in purchasing power parity

Source: International Monetary Fund 2010

Against this background, it is not surprising that the Orbán Government, which came to power in 2010, has taken active steps to reduce dependence on external trade with the EU. In addition to the fact of dependency, the financial crisis of 2007–2008 played a key role in the decision behind the new policy orientation, because this crisis showed that the Hungarian economy was extremely vulnerable due to its extreme exposure. For the Orbán Government, this inevitably meant targeting Asian markets. Indeed, most Asian countries managed to avoid the financial crisis of 2007–2008, mainly because of the Chinese Government's economic policy aimed to stimulate demand. In addition, China became the world's second largest economy in 2010. This fact, combined with the growing international role of the BRICS group of emerging countries, reflected the increasingly multipolar nature of the post-Cold War international order characterised by U.S. and Western leadership. Moreover, Hungary was relatively late to recognise the changing international trends, unlike the leading European economies, in particular Germany, Hungary's most important economic partner. The policy of "Eastern Opening" was announced for the reasons mentioned above, in the framework of which the Hungarian Government consciously

improved its relations with Russia and Asian countries, above all with the strengthened China. This was not, of course, an abandonment of Western engagement, but a pragmatic step towards reducing European dependence, recognising the changes in the world.

Despite the apparent turn towards foreign policy diversification, only limited results were achieved in the two areas where the economic objectives were clearly articulated (reducing the dependence on Europe in Hungarian export ratios and the diversification of foreign investment), as the above figures show. The problem lies in the structural characteristics of the country's economy. Hungary's dual economic structure meant that there were very few globally competitive domestic companies, and therefore they were unable to enter the distant and culturally different Asian market. While foreign-owned Hungarian subsidiaries and their supplier networks are competitive, they access the global market through their own value chains, which the Hungarian Government has no control over and no meaningful information on how they operate. There has also been no significant breakthrough in foreign ownership investment. The growing weight of Asian players has been mainly in investments serving German value chains (e.g. production of car parts), with only a few really high value-added investments made in Hungary.¹⁷ All this meant that the Hungarian economy continued to be hit hard by its unilateral dependence on the European economy.

COHESION WITHIN THE ALLIANCE

The discrepancy described above, in other words, the contradiction between the Western commitment laid down in the national security strategy, the "pro-Western sentiment" of the security community and public opinion, the unilateral Western economic dependence on the one hand and the need for diversification in economy and economic policy on the other, requires further investigation. The Orbán Government, in power since 2010, is often criticised for not showing sufficient alliance loyalty towards

¹⁷ ESZTERHAI 2017b: 1–10.

the European Union and NATO. The security, political philosophy and political communication background to this issue will be explored in the section below.

Hungary has been interpreting its defence issues within the framework of the transatlantic alliance since it joined NATO in 1999, but even before NATO accession, the defence policy guidelines issued by the Hungarian Parliament referred to the transatlantic alliance as the guarantee of Hungarian security policy.¹⁸ Since then, one strategic document after another has reaffirmed the country's commitment to the Western alliance system, including the National Security Strategies (2002, 2004, 2012, 2020) and the related National Military Strategies, such as the most recent one, published in 2021.¹⁹ Hungary was one of the first countries to respond to the U.S. demand that European countries bring their defence spending closer to the 2% minimum threshold. Already back in 2017, Hungary committed to raise its defence budget to 2% of Hungarian GDP by the deadline and to keep this ratio continuously. Moreover, the government has started implementing the Zrínyi 2026 Defence and Military Development Program, which will channel the increased budget into a well-structured transformation of the armed forces and the revitalisation of the defence industry.²⁰

The new defence procurements recently announced under Zrínyi 2026 show that Hungary is seeking to diversify its options and does not wish to rely on a single country for its procurement and the delivery of its requirements.²¹ Some of the purchases come from Hungary's natural industrial partners, Germany, such as the Leopard 2A4 and 27+ tanks, the Panzerhaubitze 2000 self-propelled armoured personnel carriers, and the Lynx KF41 infantry fighting vehicles, which represent world-leading, state-of-the-art technology.²² At the same time, Hungary also has other U.S. offers on the table: in August 2020, the Ministry of Defence announced a one

¹⁸ Parliamentary Resolution 94/1998 (XII. 29.) on the Principles of the Security and Defence Policy of the Republic of Hungary.

¹⁹ Government Resolution 1393/2021 (VI. 24.) on the National Military Strategy of Hungary.

²⁰ SZENES 2018: 43–65.

²¹ STEPPER 2019a: 115–119.

²² STEPPER 2019b: 172–194.

billion dollar contract with the U.S. Raytheon and Norway's Kongsberg for the purchase of NASAMS medium-range air-to-air systems. The NASAMS system includes the battle-proven U.S. AMRAAM extended-range missiles, capable of intercepting both aircraft and incoming enemy missiles. Once deployed, these systems could replace the current AN-26 ground-to-air systems that are using the Soviet technology of the 1960s.²³ The rapid pace of the reform of the armed forces and the extensive, but non-exclusive, procurements made with the closest NATO allies are a clear sign that Hungary is a committed member of NATO and, more broadly, of the Western alliance system.

There is no alternative to the Western alliance system in Hungarian foreign relations: Hungary does not conduct joint military exercises with either Russia or China, nor does it make significant purchases from either country. On 24–25 March 2021, Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe visited Budapest, which some analysts saw as evidence of “closer Sino–Hungarian defence relations”, but the Hungarian Government stressed in its statement that the minister was in the Hungarian capital to return an official visit made in 2019.²⁴ Hungary has purely bilateral relations with Russia, while it also cooperates with China in the framework of the “16+1 cooperation”. Hungary is not only a member of the latter, but in 2015 the Hungarian Government was the first EU country to sign a cooperation agreement with China in the framework of the “16+1 initiative”. Although this move had political implications, it is basically nothing more than a structured, regular meeting of the leaders of the Central European countries with the Chinese leaders (at prime ministerial level until 2019 and then at head of state level). But in fact, the need to maintain cooperation at a structured level is a clear indication that Sino – Central European relations are much less institutionalised and therefore necessarily weaker.²⁵

However, if the “alliance cohesion” with the West is so one-sided and strong, and if we cannot talk about more than a partnership with the “East”, then why has the issue become a topic of debate in the Hungarian political

²³ BROCKHAUS 2020.

²⁴ The Government of Hungary 2021.

²⁵ ESZTERHAI 2017a.

context at all? To answer this question, it is worth going back to the political philosophical views of the governing Fidesz, which are best illuminated by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's own speeches given at the Bálványos Summer Open University. While the Fidesz-led coalition sees itself as entirely pro-Western, it has a quite harsh opinion on Western integration. Their basic political-philosophical premise is that "the West is in decline". This is not to say that it is not currently the world's most politically, economically and militarily powerful integration, but that it is no longer able to control certain processes (migration, economic growth, social mobility). This is not just at a macro level, but also in the perception of individual citizens: some young people in Western Europe no longer have the certainty of previous generations that, with hard work and determination, they can certainly achieve higher levels of success than their parents. This is also the reason for the European elite crisis which is constantly fragmenting the centre parties and reshaping the European political map with the emergence of populist politicians.²⁶ This "relative decline" of Western Europe is not a process taking place in the abstract future, but a very tangible reality, as Germany's economy has already started to show signs that its economic growth will soon slow down due to political-ideological preferences. The "non-market" logic of the CDU–Green coalition in Germany is transforming the economy in a way that will make it less competitive, and this will undoubtedly affect Hungary, as Berlin is its number one trading partner.²⁷

In the Hungarian governing party's view, the West, which it defends either on the issue of migration or on the question of preserving the Christian way of life, is a Western world that has been lost, or at least is in decline, in many places in Western Europe itself. However, in this light, the European Union must not be weakened, but strengthened, and there are three important steps to achieve this goal: reforming its institutions according to the concept of the "Europe of Nations"; continuing EU enlargement; and making the EU a global player through the development of a common military force and an independent foreign policy vis-à-vis non-EU actors. As Viktor Orbán said in his speech at the 28th Bálványos Summer Open University,

²⁶ Bálványos 2016.

²⁷ Bálványos 2019.

the way to reform the European Union is through the regulation of illegal migration and steps towards a common European army. If this is achieved, the next task is: “We must realise that in the world economy the economic competitiveness of the European Union is in continuous decline. We must restore our competitiveness. This means reducing debt, and introducing flexible terms of employment. Once we’ve done that, our Western European friends, who are tired of enlargement, must frankly admit that there will be no peace in Europe without the full EU integration of the Balkans. We must therefore enlarge the European Union, and must first of all admit the key state, Serbia – however absurd this idea may appear at this point in time. And once that’s also done, we must conclude two overarching, historical agreements which have economic, military and political dimensions. We need a historic agreement with Turkey, and we need another historic agreement with Russia. Once all that’s done, we can say that we have reformed the European Union, and that over the course of the next few decades it may be able to compete with the world’s other continents.”²⁸ Hungary is thus essentially the only small country, and for the first time in a long time, to play a role in setting, or at least shaping, the agenda of the European Union in a direction that would make the integration of European States more competitive, more sovereign and more resilient in its traditional values in a changed, multipolarised environment. This is not only the product of daily political communication, but also a clear, analysable foreign policy line. András Hettyey sees that the alleged “de-Europeanisation” of Hungarian foreign policy is not really visible in the various areas, but the steps taken to “Hungarianise” EU foreign policy are very much visible, for example in the areas of minority rights, agriculture, freight forwarding, enlargement policy, as well as in the opposition to the harmonisation of tax regulations in order to protect national-cultural particularities. This means that Hungarian foreign policy, contrary to the daily political communication exaggerations, is not only not “preparing to leave” the European Union, but it is precisely this attempt of “Hungarianisation” of the EU that shows most clearly that it is not possible to talk about “de-Europeanisation”.²⁹

²⁸ Bálványos 2017.

²⁹ HETTYEY 2020: 125–138.

As a result, the argument that Hungary's "goal" is to leave the European Union or to distance itself from the broader Western alliance system is not a coincidence, but a product of Hungarian domestic political polarisation. In Hungarian foreign policy decision-making, which was largely consensual for a long time, from the 1990s onwards, the significant difference between the left and the right was most noticeable in terms of the importance and the way of protecting Hungarians abroad; however, the Western economic-political integration (which had no alternative) was not a conflict area. Since 2008, however, the relationship with Russia has begun to breach the consensus between the two sides. It is worth recalling that a U.S. diplomatic cable leaked to Wikileaks said it was strange that the Hungarian Government at the time remained "relatively quiet" about the 2008 Georgian–Russian war, which Fidesz denounced at the time.³⁰ However, in the long run, the lessons learned from the 2008 economic crisis have led to a growing openness to accessing Eastern markets, which was not only an economic but also a political question. The policy of "Eastern Opening", which has become an official government policy since 2012, and subsequently the policy of "Global Opening", have served this purpose and have been able to proceed essentially unhindered with the support of the two-thirds supermajority Fidesz won in 2010. This supermajority, and its decisive political, even foreign policy, use, has further increased the frustration that the connotations of the Eastern Opening have caused for some domestic political actors. It was a natural step for the opposition, which endowed dictatorial qualities to Viktor Orbán, who is governing with an overwhelming majority in Parliament, to reject the Hungarian foreign policy line along with the dictatorial leaders of the countries of the Eastern Opening.³¹

However, the Hungarian Government always emphasises the "pragmatic" nature of the Eastern Opening, meaning that it does not accept a "political package" in exchange for stabilising economic relations. But quite the opposite: one of the aims of diversifying relations is precisely to reduce the political package that is necessarily accepted. This is clear from the reports of non-governmental organisations, which acknowledge that Russian

³⁰ WikiLeaks 2008.

³¹ See for example SERES 2017.

influence in Hungary is of a very different nature from that of the other Visegrád countries, for example, and that our country is much less exposed to any mass attempts at influence. According to Tamás Matura's 2018 study, Hungary's relations with China were also basically seen as an economic opportunity, independent of political issues, and unlike in the Czech Republic, for example, sensitive issues were not significantly represented in the discourse of any political or public actor. In 2018, it could even be said that all parties had implicitly supported opening up to China.³² This has fundamentally changed with the Trump Presidency's more confrontational policy towards China and the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to some opinions and surveys, it was exactly the coronavirus epidemic that has brought China's image to a historic low in the past year and a half.³³

Not only the foreign policy context has changed in the past year and a half, but also the domestic political context. Elections will be held in Hungary in April 2022, and given the overwhelming Western orientation of society, there is political potential to give an East–West dimension to the struggle between government and opposition. All this was clearly visible in the 2021 summer primary election campaign and the related media coverage. The first test of the relations with the East was the issue of Eastern vaccines, as vaccines not approved by the European Union were systematically used in Hungary, and as a result the issue of vaccination became increasingly political.³⁴ Although most later admitted that the purchase of Chinese and Russian vaccines was a good choice at the time, the issue of Chinese and Russian relations was again at the heart of the campaign. The case of Fudan University, which was planning to establish a campus in Budapest, was also memorable, causing considerable domestic political tension and leading to large-scale protests by opposition parties and movements in early summer. In addition, the opposition-led capital has replaced street signs around the proposed campus site with ones that could offend the political sensibilities of the would-be Chinese investor.³⁵

³² MATURA 2018.

³³ SILVER et al. 2020.

³⁴ VERSECK 2021.

³⁵ BBC News 2021.

It was the Momentum Movement, which appeals most to young people, that has made suspicion of China a political identity.³⁶

Beyond the day-to-day issues, the discourse on the government's alleged "anti-Europeanism" was given a further boost by an opinion piece published in a newspaper close to the government in the summer, entitled "It Is Time to Talk about Huxit". Although the author of the article did not take a position on leaving the European Union, he believed that this option can no longer be considered as completely absurd.³⁷ Slightly earlier than this was the primary election campaign of one of the most prominent opposition parties, the Democratic Coalition, which partly focused on the ruling party's criticism of the EU. "Don't let Viktor Orbán take Hungary out of the European Union" was indeed the dominant discourse of the opposition primaries for a while.³⁸ Later on, the technicalities of the opposition coalition and the domestic political thematisation that is otherwise typical of election campaigns naturally reappeared in the opposition primary campaign, somewhat obscuring the discourse on the West–East divide. It seems, however, that as a result of the constellation of the right domestic and foreign policy factors, foreign policy will become a part of the 2022 campaign, and may even reinvigorate this discourse, thus turning the question of foreign policy orientation into a tool of political communications.

SUMMARY

The states of the Central European region are clearly the winners of the geopolitical changes of the late 20th century, as they not only regained their sovereignty, but also left their frontier status permanently behind. However, since 2008, this geopolitical gain has been coupled with the realisation that unilateral dependence on European integration is not enough in a crisis situation and that the country's foreign policy and foreign economic relations need to be diversified in an increasingly multipolar world. This need for

³⁶ MATURA 2019.

³⁷ FRICZ 2021.

³⁸ Gondola 2021.

diversification and multi-vectoral foreign policy is a regional trend, but it is also more pronounced in Hungary than in other Central European countries.

The country's strategy documents show clear political, economic and security ties with the countries of the Western integration, while these documents also draw attention to economic opportunities, alliance expectations and potential threats in relation to China and Russia. Looking at Hungary's foreign economic figures, we can conclude that the country is almost unilaterally dependent on its Western European partners, while at the same time striving for economic diversification. In the spirit of alliance cohesion, Hungary is a committed member of NATO, and strives not only to achieve the 2% defence minimum as soon as possible, but is also strongly linked to NATO members, especially Germany and the United States, through its structured armed forces reform and defence cooperation and procurement. On a political philosophical level, this Western orientation can be nuanced if Hungary is critical of the EU in the spirit of traditional values, national sovereignty and economic competitiveness, and wishes to act as an independent actor in the integration framework, influencing the agenda in a meaningful way. This qualified Western orientation is, however, significantly distorted by political communication, which on the one hand reinforces criticism of Western societies and on the other identifies Eastern political systems with the political preferences of the Hungarian partner. However, political communication, which can gain a disproportionate amount of space during campaign periods, is unlikely to have a lasting impact on a country's stated strategic goals and foreign policy orientation.

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