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- Nagy Milada: A török külpolitika izraeli vonatkozásainak két évtizede
- Báhidszki Réka, Kovács Máté Gergő, Pálfi Gábor: A Gül Baba Türbéje Örökségvédő Alapítvány szerepe a magyar–török kulturális kapcsolatok alakulásában
- Hasan Deniz Pekşen: 60 Years of Türkiye-European Union Relations: Challenges and Prospects
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- Sáringer János: Kövecsi-Oláh Péter – Emre Saral: Török–magyar diplomáciai kapcsolatok a két világháború között (1920–1945)

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TRANSACTIONALISM IN HUNGARY-TÜRKIYE RELATIONS BETWEEN 2013 AND 2024

László Szerencsés

Introduction

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan significantly boosted Hungary-Türkiye relations through at least 19 meetings between 2013 and 2024.³⁸ In Hungary's foreign policy since the early 2010s, the turn towards the East to complement the West in economic dependency has motivated this cooperation in the FIDESZ government's official rhetoric (Magyari, 2010). This has been part of Hungary's "Eastern Opening" (Keleti Nyitás, in Hungarian), a foreign policy strategy commenced by the FIDESZ government in 2010 propagating for closer relations with countries to the East from the country. It has three main pillars: East Asia, Russia, and the Turkic world. This article discusses the Turkic element, focusing on Türkiye and the Organization of Turkic States, of which Hungary has been an observing member since 2018.

Hungary, a small Central-European post-Socialist NATO and EU member state, has been an integral member of the Western security and political architecture since the end of the 1990s. However, due to historical grievances such as the 1921 Trianon Treaty that led to the shrinking of Hungary's pre-World War I territory by 2/3, there has been a primarily far-right intellectual tradition (Turanism) that imagined Hungary's geopolitical identity in the East (Akçalı & Korkut, 2012; Korkut, 2017). In addition, primarily due to the language theories positing Hungarian as a Turkic language (Sándor, 2020), Hungary became the heartland of research on Turkology. Thus, ample intellectual and human capital in Hungary has propagated closer relations with the Turkic world even though their ideas were mostly ignored during the Cold War and later between 1991 and 2010. Alt-

38 The sources of the meetings are the Turkish Presidency's and the Hungarian Prime Minister's websites (Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda, 2022, 2024; Miniszterelnökség, 2014; T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2024).

though FIDESZ, Hungary's incumbent since 2010, has not come from this tradition, it embraced elements of it. In the second half of the 2010s, Hungary's relations strained with the EU and the US because of issues with the rule of law and migration. Since then, Budapest has become relatively isolated inside the EU and NATO. Thus, the role of Türkiye, another NATO member with a critical attitude towards the West, and the Turkic world appreciated politically.

Ankara's interest in Hungary is less surprising. Türkiye emerged as a middle power in the early 2000s due to its NATO and G20 membership, growing defense industry, diasporas abroad, rapid economic growth, and ability to step into mediation efforts in international conflicts (Arkilic, 2022; Aydın-Düzgit, 2023; Bastian, 2024; Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). Middle powers typically engage in multilateral diplomacy, concentrate on niche areas of global governance, and form alliances in foreign affairs. However, authoritarian middle powers exhibit different behaviors (Aydın-Düzgit, 2023; Kutlay & Öniş, 2021). Their populist governments tend to take a confrontational stance and justify it with national interests and security concerns (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021: 3052). Türkiye's emergence into a middle power status in the late 2000s has enabled a foreign policy that often challenges the Western alliance (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020; Dalay, 2022; Tsarouhas, 2023). Türkiye's ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and President Erdoğan are in a different league than their Hungarian counterparts. Still, Türkiye has upgraded Hungary's status in its foreign policy agenda because the like-mindedness of Prime Minister Orbán and Erdoğan is beneficial for Türkiye to challenge NATO and the EU from the inside occasionally.

This paper argues that contemporary Türkiye-Hungary relations are primarily transactional and driven mainly by the Orbán and Erdoğan governments' alignment on themes where they can obstruct cooperation in the West. The relationship is transactional because on values-based files, such as the Israel-Hamas war or religion, the two countries are on opposing sides. Yet, their governments' critical views of the West bring the countries together occasionally. For instance, Hungary and Türkiye have shared the will to halt migration and took a similar stance when postponing Sweden's NATO accession. This does not mean that all aspects of the relationship, such as cultural, economic or energy-related cooperation, would fall under the

anti-Western and transactional stamps. Nevertheless, the anti-Western cooperation explains the increased attention given to each other between 2013 and 2024.

The first section of this paper introduces the milestones of Hungary's Eastern Opening and Türkiye as a potential economic partner. The second section briefly discusses why Türkiye became a political priority for Hungary in the mid-2010s. Finally, the third section explores the cooperation between Ankara and Budapest within NATO.

Hungary's Eastern Opening and Türkiye as a Potential Economic Priority

Hungary's interest in the East was initially a rhetorical opening commenced by the FIDESZ government in 2010. In the 1990s and 2000s, Hungary's main foreign policy goal was its EU and NATO integration. However, when FIDESZ came to power in 2010, Prime Minister Orbán began to propagate the diversification of Hungary's foreign relations towards the East due to the heavy reliance on the EU partners in trade relations. At that time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs referred to it as Global Opening (Külügyminisztérium, 2011), while the FIDESZ government articulated it as Eastern Opening (Miniszterelnökség, 2011). The Global Opening propagated, among others, cultural, security, humanitarian and international development, but the Eastern Opening has been a primarily economics relations oriented strategy. The 2012 strategy on the national economy officially coined the term Eastern Opening, underpinning the government's narrative that the strategy had an economic focus (Miniszterelnökség, 2012).

This was the period when Türkiye, under the rule of the AKP since 2002, was on the path of rapid economic growth. Türkiye's GDP rose between 2002 and 2008 from \$240 billion to \$770 billion and between 2009 and 2013 from \$649 billion to \$957 billion (World Bank, 2021b). This economic growth contributed to Türkiye's ability to open towards the world in foreign policy. For instance, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, TİKA) had only 12 Program Coordination Offices, but in 2021 they implemented projects in 150 countries with 62 offices (TİKA 2021). Another example is the expansion of Türkiye's diplomatic network.

When the AKP came to power in 2002, Türkiye had 163 diplomatic missions abroad, which increased to 248 by 2021 (Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2021: 57). Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has cooperated more with businesspeople since the early 2000s, and Türkiye's exports increased from \$60 billion in 2002 to \$227 billion in 2013 and to \$350 billion in 2022 (World Bank, 2021a).

2013 was a watershed moment in Türkiye-Hungary relations. Due to Türkiye's economic boom and expansive foreign policy, Ankara became a regional power, which Budapest engaged to diversify its economic relations. For Türkiye, pursuing good relationships with EU member Hungary has been beneficial in generating support for its EU membership aspirations (Hóvári, 2023: 16). As a result of Hungary's Eastern Opening and Türkiye's emergence as a "trading state" (Kirişci, 2009), the relationship between Ankara and Budapest was elevated to the level of Strategic Cooperation in 2013. At the visit of Erdoğan to Budapest in February, the decision to establish the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council was made, and the parties agreed to set \$5 billion in trade volume as the target to reach by 2015. In addition, Türkiye indicated its aim to restore Ottoman cultural heritage in Hungary (Miniszterelnökség, 2013a). At Orbán's December visit to Ankara, this Council held its first meeting, and Türkiye introduced visa liberalization for Hungary (Miniszterelnökség, 2013b).

The Elevation of the Türkiye-Hungary Relationship to Political Priority

In 2015, Orbán elevated the political relationship informally to an even higher level. In 2015, the achieved trade volume was at \$2.75 billion (KSH, 2024),³⁹ which was far behind the \$5 billion target set two years before, and even in 2023, it was only at \$4.3 billion (Magyarország Kormánya, 2024a). Despite this underperformance in economic terms, the political relations became deeper. When Orbán discussed his foreign policy thinking in front of his Ambassadors in 2015, he pointed at three capitals to pay attention to: Berlin, Moscow

39 €2.5 billion according to the source, which is at the average 1.11 USD to 1 EUR exchange rate in 2015 equals to \$2.75 billion.

and Ankara (Miniszterelnökség, 2015). Notably, Orbán expressed in front of Turkish businesspeople in 2017 that money is important, but it matters more to have friends. Moreover, he promised that if other EU countries want to issue anti-Türkiye statements, Hungary will not join them (444, 2017). In 2018, Orbán repeated this on the national radio (Miniszterelnöki Kabinetiroda, 2018) and at a meeting with Erdoğan (Index, 2018).

The elevation of Türkiye from an important economic partner to a political priority can be explained by the changing relationship of both countries to their Western partners. The above gestures came at a crucial time for Erdoğan. In 2016, a group of army officers attempted to topple his government, after which the government cracked down on Türkiye's bureaucracy. Due to the ensuing human rights violations and the rule of law deficiencies, the EU froze enlargement negotiations with Türkiye in 2018 (Council of the EU, 2018: 13). For Hungary, keeping Türkiye close became a political priority, too, after the 2015 migration crisis, when millions of primarily Syrian and Afghani refugees came to the EU via Türkiye. While Hungary became critical of uncontrolled migration, Türkiye made a deal with the EU in 2016 to hold up migrants in exchange for financial assistance from Brussels to take care of them (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020). Thus, while Türkiye needs Hungary's at least rhetorical support in the EU, Hungary is trying to keep Ankara close to the EU because it keeps migrants outside the EU.

The political priority to keep Türkiye close goes beyond rhetorical statements and became institutionalized with Hungary's observing membership in the Turkic Council - later renamed to OTS - in 2018. The Council was established in 2009, and its members are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, and Uzbekistan. It includes Hungary, Northern Cyprus, and Turkmenistan as observers (Baranyi, 2022). Because of its size and economic weight, Türkiye dominates the organization, whose main secretariat is in Istanbul. On the one hand, the OTS provides Hungary with new markets and an opportunity to diversify its reliance on Russia regarding energy resources. Substantial gas source diversification away from Russia has not happened yet in Hungary (Reuters, 2023b). However, due to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the South Caucasus and Central Asia appreciated as potential natural gas sources. Hence, in the long run,

there are tangible benefits to reap from Hungary's observing membership. On the other hand, by 2018, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán became isolated in the EU due to debates about the situation of rule of law in Hungary and Orbán's critical stance on migration. Under these circumstances, Western EU leaders seldom meet him apart from the European Council in Brussels (Hernández & Closa, 2024). However, the yearly and extraordinary summits of the OTS provide a good opportunity for Orbán to offset his isolation. Thus, the OTS has become a useful forum for demonstrating to himself and his electorate that Hungary is not isolated.

From Türkiye's perspective, having Hungary in the OTS is beneficial because Ankara is trying to legitimize the organization in the eyes of the EU and its member states. The opening of the OTS office in Budapest in 2019 was a milestone in this regard as it is the only such office in the EU (OTS, 2024). The office has diplomats working as project officers from all member states, and it is led by a Hungarian diplomat. The Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade covers all its expenses, including the staff and its buildings (Magyar Narancs, 2021). It is expected that the Budapest office can facilitate advocacy for OTS member states in the EU (Baranyi, 2022: 134).

Cooperation in the EU and NATO

Although Türkiye is not an EU member, it is a candidate country, and it has had a Customs Union with the organization since 1995. Since the implementation of the 2016 EU-Türkiye statement regulating the migration of third nationals from Türkiye to the EU (European Council, 2016), Ankara and Brussels have a transactional link beyond the institutionalized connection (Bashirov & Yilmaz, 2020). It is transactional because of the business-like conduct of the agreement: Türkiye' promised to halt migration, in exchange for which it receives financial assistance, and it was promised visa liberalization too.⁴⁰

40 The agreement on 18 March 2016 included that Türkiye's visa liberalization with the EU would be accelerated if it met the benchmarks (European Council, 2016). However, the 15 July coup attempt and the ensuing human rights and rule of law violations changed EU-Türkiye relations, and this part of the agreement was never fulfilled.

The agreement lacks the values-based approach of EU enlargement, and due to its non-institutionalized nature, it is fragile. Nevertheless, Hungary's incumbent is interested in keeping migrants outside the EU for domestic political reasons, therefore, it supports Türkiye's attempts to facilitate the maintenance of the deal.

A major manifestation of Hungary's support towards Türkiye in the EU was in 2019. In this year, Türkiye launched an offensive into north-Eastern Syria code-named "Operation Peace Spring". According to the Turkish government's official narrative, the operation was supposed to create a safe zone for some of the 3.6 million refugees living in Türkiye (AlJazeera, 2019). While the EU wanted to warn Türkiye of the invasion, Hungary vetoed the text (Spiegel, 2019). Hungary's Prime Minister Orbán argued that if Türkiye wants to establish a safe zone for refugees in Syria, it has to be supported; otherwise, they would come to Europe (TRT, 2019).

Beyond the EU, there is an alignment of policy action in NATO, too, at specific policy files. One instance where the shared interests became apparent was when both Ankara and Budapest postponed Sweden's accession to the military alliance. Türkiye's demands were clear from the beginning: at first, Ankara asked Sweden to tighten its laws on terrorist organizations so that some individuals and groups deemed terrorists by Türkiye could be extradited (Reuters, 2023a). After Sweden fulfilled most of the conditions, President Erdoğan demanded the US to modernize Türkiye's F-16 fleet and to deliver new fighter jets to its army (AlJazeera, 2023). After long negotiations, the US agreed to these demands as Türkiye ratified Sweden's accession in January 2024.

However, Hungary's opposition to NATO enlargement was less clear. Péter Szijjártó first suggested it was Sweden's criticism of Hungary's rule of law situation that made Budapest hesitant (Portfolio, 2023b), then he shared that Hungary is aligning its position with Sweden (Portfolio, 2023a). To pacify criticism, in December 2023, Hungary's Foreign Minister promised that Budapest would not be the last to ratify (Reuters, 2023c).

However, after Türkiye ratified Sweden's NATO accession in January 2024, Hungary waited another month and argued again that Sweden disrespected Budapest with its criticism of the rule of law in Hungary. In the end, Sweden's Prime Minister visited Hungary in

February. The Hungarian government presented this as a victory, especially because the parties announced the purchase of four fighter jets from Sweden to complement the 14-strong fleet of the Hungarian Armed Forces (Magyarország Kormánya, 2024b). It is difficult to know the Hungarian government's motives and whether they were worth it, considering the loss of trust among NATO allies due to the lengthy process.

Nevertheless, the fact that Hungary remained the last country to ratify despite its promises indicates that Türkiye, the other country postponing the process, did not coordinate closely with Budapest. Thus, although data scarcity limits drawing firm conclusions, the circumstances suggest that Türkiye did not notify Budapest on time before it ratified Sweden's accession in January 2024. This indicated the limits of transactional cooperation between parties of unequal power status in foreign policy. While Hungary is supporting Türkiye on multiple fronts, it seems like Ankara left behind Budapest in this case. Although this has not affected bilateral relations based on publicly available sources, it may be a sign that Ankara does not treat Budapest at the same eye level or that Türkiye does not trust Hungary enough to share sensitive information.

Conclusions

This paper argued that Türkiye-Hungary relations reached an unprecedented high level between 2013 and 2024 because Budapest and Ankara are aligned on specific policy themes that occasionally challenge the Western alliance system. This was made possible by Türkiye emerging into an authoritarian middle power with the economic means to expand its diplomatic presence and by Hungary being a member of the EU. Since the mid-2010s, the EU and the US have harshly criticized Prime Minister Orbán and President Erdoğan for their countries' rule of law situation. This strained Türkiye's and Hungary's relationship with Brussels and Washington DC. Despite the differences in value-based foreign policy themes, such as the Israel-Hamas war, where the two parties are on opposing sides, these anti-Western sentiments bring the parties together on specific policy themes.

Cooperation on topics sensitive to the Western alliance, such as migration and NATO enlargement, is apparent in Türkiye-Hungary relations. On the one hand, Hungary speaks up against criticism of Türkiye in the EU because Ankara has halted migration since 2016. On the other hand, Hungary received observing membership in the OTS. Nevertheless, collaboration between the parties cannot always be caught in the act, as demonstrated by the postponement of Sweden's NATO accession. While both Türkiye and Hungary lengthened the process, it was for a long time not clear whether they cooperated or not. Despite its promises, Hungary became the last to ratify. Precisely because of the lack of institutionalization, the different behavior of the parties during this process indicated that the trust between them was lower than it would be in a values-based alliance. Thus, transactional cooperation and confrontation with NATO and the EU may support short-term regime interests as they can boost domestic popularity. Nevertheless, it can ruin the reputation of Hungary in NATO. Since transactional agreements are fragile and sometimes mere expectations that the partner (i.e. Türkiye) will align its policies with the respective country's (Hungary) promises, they are easy to ignore, leaving either party in a difficult position.

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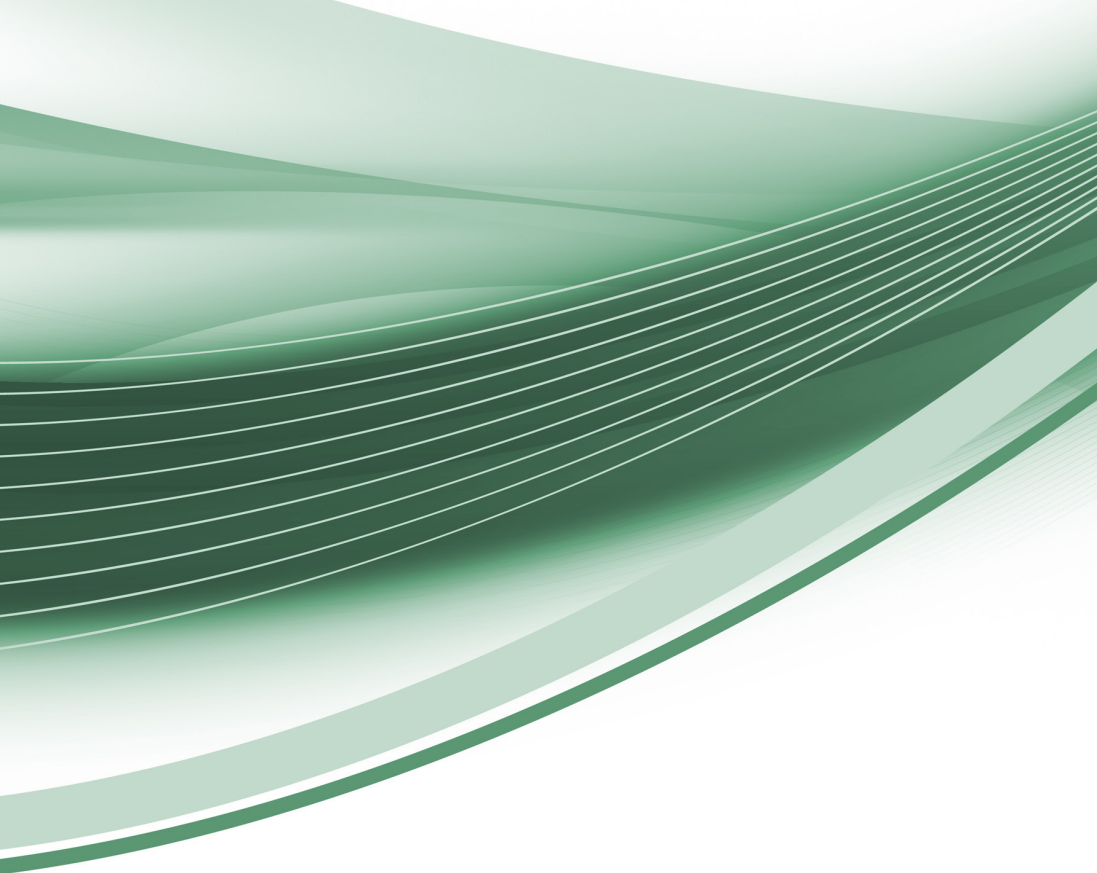
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