



Change and Contradiction: Hungary's Foreign Policy Across its 2011 and 2024 European Council Presidencies

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Abstract

This study traces the significant alterations in Hungary's national identity and strategic culture between its 2011 and 2024 presidencies of the Council of the European Union, highlighting how these shifts have reshaped the country's foreign policy orientation and behaviour in the international system. Situated against the backdrop of Hungary's unique historical experiences—including the long shadow of Trianon, decades of communist rule, and the post-1991 imperative of Europeanization—the paper seeks to clarify how Hungary moved from a firmly Westward-leaning, Euro-Atlantic trajectory toward a more sovereignty-centred and identity-driven approach to diplomacy. The objective is to examine how these internal reconfigurations have informed Hungary's contemporary foreign policy choices and the tensions they have produced within the EU. Methodologically, the study employs qualitative content analysis of core documents such as the Fundamental Law (2011) and Hungary's post-presidency foreign policy programme, complemented by discourse analysis of speeches made by key decision makers, most notably Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. This mixed qualitative approach enables the systemic identification of recurring narratives and identity markers visibly shaping Hungarian foreign policy. The findings suggest that Hungary's recent foreign policy conduct reflects not episodic populist opportunism but rather a coherent recalibration of strategic culture shaped by longstanding grievances, post-communist identity

reconstruction, and a recognition of shifting global power realities. This recalibration is evident through policies such as the Eastern Opening, strategic neutrality in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, the securitization of migration and Hungary’s selective veto usage within EU and NATO frameworks. The study concludes that Hungary’s evolving foreign policy posture provides valuable insight into how identity, populism, and geopolitics intersect to redefine the external behaviour of small states within a transforming European and global order

Keywords: Strategic Culture, Security Policy, Hungary, National Policy

In the second half of 2024 Hungary, a small landlocked country located in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), took over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union as the third part of the “Presidency Trio”, after Spain and Belgium, allowing it the opportunity to become the centre of European Union politics and policy-making (Harb et al., 2024). Even before 2024 Hungary had become an increasingly infamous actor in Central European and European politics at large, often tied to its hawkish foreign policy stances towards the European Union (EU), aversion to liberal democracy, and friendly interactions with states seen as threats to European cohesion and security. This was not always the case, as at one point Hungary stood as a beacon of European liberalism, with a national identity and strategic culture rooted in being European.

This paper looks to be a somewhat longitudinal study that follows the conversion in Hungary’s foreign policy between its first term in the EU council presidency that took place in 2011 and its recent term that concluded in December of 2024 through the outlining of alterations in Hungary’s national identity and connected strategic culture. In doing so the paper utilizes a methodology mix of (i) qualitative content analysis, serving to identify major themes from text and materials relevant to Hungarian foreign policy like the 2011 Hungarian Constitution (a.k.a. the Fundamental Law) and foreign policy documents, as well as (ii) discourse/sentiment analysis for speeches made by key foreign policy personnel, mainly Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban.

The study’s novelty and significance are found in its approach to the modifications of Hungarian foreign policy, not in relation to its implications on Hungarian-EU relations but as a structured, integrated mesh of policy cognisant of a distinct internal and regional history, the sustained salience of the foreign policy imperatives of previous

governments and recalibrations in the global economic and political pecking order. The paper not only contributes to a richer understanding of Hungary’s contemporary position within the EU but also offers theoretical and empirical insight into how small states renegotiate their identities and strategic roles amid geopolitical uncertainty.

1. Theoretical Foundations of Strategic Culture and National Identity

Before handling the central argument, the paper is concerned it is prudent to establish a conceptual benchmark for the two terms pivotal to the study. The first to be unpacked here is strategic culture, which in this study refers to a method of foreign analysis in understanding the behaviour of states and international bodies, typically in security and defence affairs, but can be applied to general foreign policy actions (Meyer, 2004). It is broadly understood as referring to the social values, ideology, narratives, shared beliefs, experiences, attitudes, norms and patterned behaviour that shape a nation’s collective identity, evaluate its interests and influence its understanding of the methods available to best achieve its “destiny” in the international system (Tellis, 2016:5; Kuznar et al., 2023; Zandee & Kruijver, 2019). It also assists in the framing of issues, policy and policy expectations, giving contextual meaning, decision making and justification for decisions made (Kuznar et al., 2023; Mi, 2022; Hadfield, 2005). Inside the European Union some strategic cultures are easily discernible; France’s, for instance, is on it being a nuclear power with the integrated potential of force. Germany, on the other hand, prefers an approach that is shy on the use of violence, due to its troubled history (Kuznar et al, 2023).

National identity, the second pivotal term, is in need of slightly more expansive elucidation, considering the gravity the concept has accrued overtime based on its nature and impact. On the latter, national identity has been cited as ‘pivotal’ to

the potential futures of modern states, with a weak national identity holding the possibility to introduce state disintegration and societal fragmentation, which either stands to be a major obstacle to development or, at worst, internal instability leading to state failure (Fukuyama, 2021; Kowert, 2000). In contrast, strong national identities are attributed to a factor in the successful modernisation of China, Japan and South Korea, which were able to springboard off the already present sense of common national purpose and singular sense of internal identity to rapidly develop in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Fukuyama, 2021:21). With regards to its nature, Parekh (1995) articulated that in the earlier literature the term 'national identity' elicited the following four most common understandings; (i) to refer to what makes a nation distinct and distinguishable from others, (ii) pointing to what the organized community understands itself to be, (iii) enquiring into the organising principles, fundamental tendencies, dispositions and characteristic ways of thought it has and (iv) equating it with deeply cherished values, goals and commitments used to ascertain what the community stands for and what political projects define it – which, when pursued on an international level, can be considered the state's national interests (Weldes, 1996). For this paper national identity is conceptualised as the distinct identity of a territorially organized community or polity defined by a history that is passively inherited while simultaneously being redefined via project(s) carried out by each generation in response to the prevalent needs and circumstances, allowing it to be altered within limits, as informed by Parekh (1994; 1995).

Critical about this malleability is that it *can* be founded around liberal-democratic political values and shared experiences that act as connective tendons facilitating the thriving of diverse communities; however, it does not necessarily have to be, as long as there is the shared belief in the legitimacy of that country's political system (Fukuyama, 2021; Fukuyama, 2022). An additional comment on the national identity is that feelings of belonging hold relative value that only make 'real sense only when contrasted with the feelings that nation members collectively hold towards other nations' (Triandafyllidou, 1998) as it is 'connected to a specific country's national image and its world

view, helping to distinguish a state's friends from its enemies' (Kowert, 2000; Greenfeld & Eastwood, 2009).

2. Hungary in Historical Perspective: An Abridged Political Trajectory

It would be troublesome and admittedly reductionist to attempt to identify Hungary's strategic culture outside of its arguably unique historical experiences. If one unfamiliar with Magyarország (the Hungarian name for Hungary) were to come across a Hungarian and spark a conversation about the country's past, outside comments on the homeliness of gulyás or distinctive 'beaches' would almost immediately be made aware of the country's eventful and in no way dull history that by no small margin has made up a significant amount of the Hungarian identity and, by extension, impacted the formation of its strategic culture. The following section spotlights three key moments in Hungary's history central to its contemporary politics and attached foreign policy, these being the Treaty of Trianon, its post-communist pivot away towards a Europeanized democracy and the 2010 electoral victory of *Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*, more commonly known as FIDESZ.

2.1 Historical Hungary and The Treaty of Trianon

From 1526, when the mediaeval Kingdom of Hungary fell under the Ottoman occupation after losing the Battle of Mohacs, it was then governed by the Habsburgs after the Ottomans were expelled by an International Christian Army. In 1867 the Austro-Hungarian Empire came into existence and remained a regional power, only gaining independence at the end of the First World War, following persistent failed attempts by Hungarians at restoring independence, which came at a heavy cost (Jeszenszky, 2007:44). This cost was the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, during which Hungary, not a subject of international law at the start of the war, had been identified as the losing party of World War I and consequently suffered. This suffering came from the significant loss of territories to what was then the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (more commonly called Yugoslavia), Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Romania as well as the populations within them (Sadecki, 2020; Pop, 2019). In fact, following the treaty, the dismembered Hungary retained only one-third

of its original territory and had seen over three million Hungarians transferred to neighbouring states as the result of redrawn borders, putting Hungary in the unique position of being one of the few European countries ‘surrounded by its own ethnic group’ (Sadecki, 2020; White, 1992; Rapcsák, 1994:74). Then World War II saw Hungary become an “unwilling and unreliable ally” to Hitler’s Germany, which led to German occupation in 1944 to prevent Hungary’s defection to the Allies, a year later it came under Soviet occupation and later a “captive nation” under communist control following its deliverance from the Nazis by the Red Army that lasted into 1991, when communist rule was contested by mass uprisings and people’s revolutions (Jeszenszky, 2007:44-45; Kocsis & Karácsonyi, 2022).

This legacy of territorial disintegration and externally imposed borders fundamentally shaped Hungary’s current strategic culture, especially its emphasis on sovereignty, minority protection, and opposition to external restraint. Hungarian foreign policy has stressed national autonomy and bilateral leverage over multilateral conformity since 2010, which can be explained by the continued use of Trianon as a political and cultural reference point. Since a significant amount of Hungary’s current policy changes are closely related to a past characterised by limited sovereignty and externally imposed national and foreign policy identities, it is crucial to comprehend this historical foundation of Hungarian identity and its early foreign policy orientations. These experiences serve as the foundation for the goal of forging a stronger sense of national identity and exercising more control over the direction of Hungary’s current foreign policy.

2.2 Democratization, Europeanization, and the Post-1991 Transformation

As part of a spate of elections that installed liberal democracies across Central Eastern Europe between 1989-1991, Hungary’s 1990 general election saw the emergence of a new democratic government with great popular legitimacy. This legitimacy was required for the successful implementation of socio-economic and political changes to break the ‘long-suffering nation’ free of the Soviet imprint left on it by the decades of communist rule (Batt, 1990:7; Tökés, 1996; Gebethner, 1977).

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The foreign policy objectives of the first freely elected government of Jozsef Antall were simple. To initiate a geopolitical reorientation guided by the need to restore Hungary’s sovereignty, replace Eastern connections with Western relations and develop trust with Western democracies, all of which basically meant the Europeanization of Hungarian foreign policy (Jeszenszky, 2007; Kiss & Zahoran, 2007; Tarrosy & Voros, 2014). Europeanization is defined as being concerned with “a transformation in the way in which national foreign policies are constructed, in the ways in which professional roles are defined and pursued and in the consequent internalisation of norms and expectations arising from a complex system of collective European policymaking” (Tonra, 2000:299). This is coupled with transforming and harmonizing national and foreign policy to match the requirements for EU membership and developing policies that affect or contribute to the development of a European foreign policy that is common (Hettyey, 2020:3). Becoming European remained the core domestic and foreign policy priority of government from 1991 and, albeit at alternating intensities, meant

conforming to the European political community and its comprising values to prove Hungary's ability to be a viable member of the EU and not a weak point in a 'rather unstable region' (Kiss & Zahorán, 2007).

Emphasis placed on European integration was facilitated through the supporting of pan-European collective security and joining the European Community to reinforce the cordial ties formed with the capitalist West in the 1980s when Hungary joined the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Rapcsák, 1994; Jeszenszky, 2007). It is generally agreed that the 'Holy Trinity' of first post-soviet Hungarian government strategic foreign policy objectives were the (i) joining of Euro-Atlantic Organizations, namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (joined in 1999) which at the time was the pressing policy point considering the immediate security threat the still Soviet Union posed as well as the European Commission and European Union (joined in 2004), (ii) a constructive relationship with its neighbours (five of them being new states, three of which were formerly communist) through promoting economic and political cooperation of the region and lastly (iii) defence of the interests of Hungarian minorities abroad (Boros & Bondor, 2002; Balogh, 1998; Kiss & Zahoran, 2007). The "damaging long-term side effect of Trianon on the national psyche of Hungary meant that the post-1920 generations becoming obsessed with schemes for the creation of international conditions that could make possible the reversal of Trianon would go on to dictate the primary focus of foreign policies for years to come" (Dreisziger, 2003: 33). As part of demonstrating its willingness to 'move back to Europe', the development of relations with Russia and the broader 'East' was set aside, but not stopped, as cordial relations slowly grew after the dissolution of Soviet Russia (Tarrosy and Voros, 2014). The establishment of the Visegrad Group in 1991 stood as an example of Hungary's neighbourhood policy and an ideal balance between 'exclusive Eastern reliance', with Eastern European states relying on each other, and the disillusionment with the notion of the West protecting Central Eastern Europe from Soviet aggression, two traditional orientations that history had proven ineffective' (Jeszenszky, 2007:49).

In addition to establishing expectations of reciprocity and protection that later influenced Hungary's disenchantment with EU governance, this phase of Euro-Atlantic integration solidified a strategic culture focused on institutional conformance and multilateralism. A crucial point of reference for comprehending the post-2010 recalibration of Hungarian strategic culture is the perceived limits of Europeanization.

2.3 FIDESZ and the Consolidation of a New Political Order

It is crucial to include the 2010 pivotal landslide victory of the coalition of moderate right-wing conservative, nationalist Hungarian Civic Union (FIDESZ) and the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) and the far-right or even 'neo-fascist' Movement for a Better Hungary (Jobbik) and the geopolitical realities that enabled it. Two years before FIDESZ's victory was the crisis of the liberal world order, comprised of the 2008 global financial crisis that struck a Hungary already struggling through slowed economic growth, the result of major austerity measures introduced by the previous Socialist government between 2006-08 (Hajdú, 2016). For many internationalists, Hungary's 'U-turn' away from Europeanization and liberal democratization towards illiberalism and Euroscepticism was also caused by asymmetric EU development in its structural cohesion. This is in reference to efforts by the EU to reduce economic, social and territorial development disparities between all member states and across the region, between 2007 and 2014 (Vegh, 2015:72). As a member of Europe's right, FIDESZ is an ethno-nationalist party with 'Christianity and Christian values, protecting/supporting Hungarian minorities outside the country and the placing of Hungarian interests over European ones' (Ilokova & Andrey, 2020: 328) as the themes that sit central to its narrative and policies. In line with the foreign policy approach of other (CEE) right-wing parties, FIDESZ places importance on "national sovereignty that directly influences their foreign policy position", being highly critical of membership in international organizations especially if this membership entails ceding sovereignty (Vegh, 2021:5).

The consolidation of power by FIDESZ did not introduce new historical narratives, but rather it re-activated and rearranged preexisting ones,

embedding them into a coherent strategic culture centred on sovereignty, cultural survival, and pragmatic autonomy. This signalled a change in foreign policy from one that sought integration to one that prioritised strategic adaptability both inside and outside of the EU.

3. The Evolution of Hungarian Strategic Culture in Foreign Policy

This section sees the application of the discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis previously outlined in the methodology section. Explicitly, discourse analysis reviews the recurring themes and identities in Hungary's core legal and strategic texts while discourse analysis unpacks how political leaders narratively define the interests, limitations and overall role of Hungary within its specific European context. The aim is not a descriptive summary but the systematic identification of dominant frames that structure Hungarian foreign policy behaviour.

In identifying the role of Hungary's strategic culture in foreign policy between EU presidencies a good place to start is April of 2011. In symbolizing a 'new political cycle' FIDESZ looked to signal the end of its post-communist transformation and, in turn, redefine national interest, by moving away from its 1989 constitution that was based on the 1949 'communist constitution that was the basis of tyrannical rule' (Fundamental Law, 2011:3) through adopting a new constitution in 2011 called the 'Fundamental Law' (Benedek, 2015). In addition to curtailing the review power of the Constitutional Court, and the majority needed to pass laws, this new constitution redefined "the totality of people living under Hungarian laws" as members of the ethnic Hungarian nation, defining it as a cultural community bound together by a fabric that is "intellectual and spiritual" (Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011:2; Hajdú, 2016:151-152). This redefined national identity is one of the constitution's major themes, revealed through the content analysis. Other key themes include increased independence and sovereignty, Hungary as a pillar of Christianity in Europe, the state's role in preserving historical accuracy, accountability and progress, and Hungary's place in the international order.

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the standard 'God bless nationality' commonplace in constitutions internationally. The Fundamental Law includes a National Avowal, or the "National Profession of Faith" (Könczöl & Kevevári, 2020: 167), which reaffirms it as a Christian country proud of its Christian heritage founded in "being made a part of Christian Europe one thousand years ago" (second verse of the National Avowal) but also recognizing "the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood" (sixth verse of the National Avowal, Fundamental Law of Hungary, 2011:2). Scholars (Scott, 2023) confirm the 2011 constitution as constituting a clean separation from pre-Fidesz (as the ruling party) Hungary. Terming it as 'temporal othering' and articulating it as speaking to the sense of national narcissism, a desire for recognition of exceptionalism and a new European agenda made possible by FIDESZ 2010 victory that has enabled Hungary to follow its own political destiny and realize its role as a great culture-building and state-organization nation within the context of European cooperation (Scott, 2023).

In view of the paper's subject matter, one may ask if the constitution, if at all, makes any explicit mention of policies or frameworks that have some sway on its foreign policy. It does, a commendation of its comprehensiveness. According to the document, these are Euro-Atlantic orientation, the protection of Hungarian ethnic minorities and devotion to regional politics (Benedek, 2015; Fundamental Law, 2011).

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The second material required in charting out Hungary's strategic culture comes after Hungary's first European Union Presidency Term that ran until June of that year. The context of Hungary's presidential assumption was the Eurozone crisis, enlargement fatigue of the EU neighbourhood and the uncertainty of the future. Hungary came in with the conviction that following the crisis, only deepened cooperation between member states focusing on the needs of European citizens can make the EU successful, reflected in its slogan for that term, "Strong Europe with a Human Touch" (Vida, 2011; Vizi, 2011). At the top of the Hungarian presidency was the adoption of legislative proposals aimed at reinforcing EU economic governance, the introduction of the European Semester and the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), expanding the EU neighbourhood by concluding on Croatian accession negotiations as well as 'paving the way' for Bulgarian and Romanian Schengen membership and the adoption of a new European Strategy that deals with the integration of Roma minorities, and launching the Danube Strategy (Vida, 2011). The Danube Strategy was a macro regional project and a Roma-centered strategy that, based on the recognition of the growing population of Roma in the EU, especially in Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, suggested coordinated action between member states to solve the pressing issues faced by the Roma people (Balázs, 2011).

Immediately after completion of its term in June 2011, the Hungarian government launched what Jenne (2021) classified as a type of ethno-populist foreign policy revisionism aimed at 'fundamentally reconfiguring' its position in the international system typical of populist governments. In a summary document creatively titled "Hungarian Foreign Policy after the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union", the world was introduced to a Hungary that "intends to conduct a value-based foreign policy" with foreign policy goals derived from "the most important sources of Hungary's values", namely the United Nations Charter, the North Atlantic Treaty, the Treaty on the European Union and the (new) Hungarian Constitution (which is the Fundamental Law)", (Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011:4). A value-based foreign policy, pointed out by the document, means that "Hungary should not inherently limit her relations with countries that do

not fully respect, or interpret differently, the values [it] adheres to. It does, however, mean that even in pursuing those relations Hungary's interests are determined on the basis of its values, and it will choose the most effective means – including the forms of interactions – to realise its value-based interests" (Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011:3. Brackets added). Given that "the harmonisation of Hungarian interest and values is always being based on the rational analyses of the relevant circumstances and on the conclusions drawn from them" (Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011), the question is how best to advance the country's "value-based" interests. Values here *can* be understood to mean Hungarian values, but based on the trends of Hungarian foreign policy and diplomatic action, in addition to the explicit mentioning of them in the document, values should be understood as European/Trans-Atlantic values. It is also in this text that Hungary commits to the continuation of priorities pursued during its first Council of the EU presidency as well as its foundational foreign policy priorities, like its regional policy and Euro-Atlantic orientation. This, in retrospect, is unsurprising when taking into account that when it comes to the issue of neighbourhood integration into EU structures, Hungarian governments have generally been keen, as this improves bilateral relations with surrounding states that aid in dealing with 'serious issues that are likely to remain burdensome', most notably the situation of Hungarian minorities in surrounding countries (Vita, 2011:130). Pivotaly, it is with this document that Hungary's 'Global Opening' is introduced. This is a foreign policy position determined by the "global realignment of international power relations as a result of changes in the economic performance of individual countries or a group of countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011) that stresses the importance of the post-Soviet space, Asia, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan African regions, North Africa, and Latin America as key regions (Greilinger, 2023). Before this Prime Minister Gyurcsyán (2004-2009) argued for the rethinking of Hungarian relations with global power and to construct, reconstruct and reinforce relations with the US, Russia, Asia and South-East Asia (Poti, 2006:73).

In discussing the evolution in Hungarian strategic culture and national identity between pre and

post 2010 Hungary, it should be noted that both share the same sources, these being the history of occupation, particularly as a Soviet satellite, and the dual traumas of Trianon (territorial dismemberment and population separation), but have differences in terms of their immediate geopolitical and security realities.

From 1991-2010 Hungarian strategic culture had been shaped by the need for Europeanization, democratization and Euro-Atlantic integration (Benedek, 2015) as a means of detaching themselves from the Soviet sphere of influence. Connected to this was the accessing of the political, economic and military mechanisms of security entrenched needed to deter Soviet expansion that Hungary lacked due to it being relatively limited by being small and landlocked with “no real economic or military power” (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021: 693; Szalai 2017). After 2010, or more accurately 2011, profound changes in international and regional socio-economic stability called for the revisitation of Hungary’s national and foreign strategic aims and policy. Hungarian strategic culture, inferred from the adoption of the Fundamental Law and its post-EU presidency foreign policy document, migrated towards a position that sees Hungary as a distinct Christian European nation (a theme that is salient in its stance on migration) attempting to overcome its (Soviet/Trianon) past and ensure its ethnic and socio-economic survival as part of a weakening geopolitical arrangement (the liberal EU). Key to this is pursuing and adopting values that centre Hungarian interests first, even if these values clash with the values of the states around it. It is critical to highlight that while its foreign policy goals often contradict its existence within the EU, Hungary is aware that its interests are better pursued when advanced within the (stable and predictable) framework of liberal democratic multinational organizations (Talas & Csiki, 2013, parenthesis added). As such, Hungary’s ‘breaking away’ from EU norms and values combined with its ‘actively attempting to relieve itself of possible or perceived restraints imposed by European foreign policy’, more easily understood as ‘de-Europeanization’ (Hettyey, 2020:3), has been explained as the result of it being a small state with an enlarged identity. All of which is exhibited by reaffirming it being in control of its own affairs with it as the sole ‘master of its fate’, holding unlimited autonomy, free to

select its international positions and partners, and the need for psychological self-determination to compensate for the long period of domination in its history (Hettyey, 2022; Szalai, 2017). Schmidt & Glied (2024:249-250) highlight that, based on the government narrative, Hungary’s national strategic interest foreign policy looks to “establish mutually beneficial relationships with all great powers, respecting each other’s sovereignty”.

The analysis that follows draws on qualitative content analysis of constitutional and strategic documents, alongside discourse analysis of key political speeches. The emphasis is on identifying recurrent narratives, identity markers, and justificatory frames that shape Hungary’s foreign policy behaviour rather than treating these texts descriptively.

4. The Eastern Opening: Strategic Pragmatism or Geopolitical Trojan Horse?

In seeing the impact of Hungary’s strategic culture and altered national interest, we can look at “one of the most important foreign policy strategies since the political regime change” (Tarrosy & Voros, 2014:141), Keleti Nyitás (Eastern Opening). The policy was introduced in 2011 and justified by Prime Minister Orbán as a mainly economic international strategy that aims to reduce Hungarian economic dependence on the declining West and does so by “pointing towards broader geoeconomic trends and global reorientation to the East” (Greilinger, 2023:1). International relations experts (Tarrosy & Voros, 2014:145) argue the Eastern opening to be “not as much a coherent policy rather than a collection of gestures and activities towards Eastern states able to either invest in Hungary or finance its debt”. It must be remembered that within the realm of international issues and public policy, defining something is the key to persuasion, or as explained by David Zarefsky in Bostdorff & Goldzweig “to choose a definition is to plead a cause” (1994:518). By this, however, Hungary’s self-articulated aim of increased trade with Eastern partners is relatively disingenuous, as trade had not been the only focus of the policy.

The real relevance of Hungary’s foreign policy change was best explained by Prime Minister Orbán, who in his articulation of the need to

step away from ideology-driven foreign policy traditionally carried out, maintained that while Hungary would remain a steadfast member of the Western system of alliance, rejected the notion that Hungary needed to be putting Western values at the core of every foreign policy decision. Instead, Orbán argued that Hungary should relate to non-Western states on the basis of either culture, political institutions or democracy and not which states were the most liberal democracies, as Hungary now followed a foreign policy phase concerned with realizing its own economic interests (Vegh, 2015:51-52). Discursively, it can be noted that these speeches present foreign policy choice as a matter of civilizational survival and strategic autonomy instead of ideological alignments normative for the EU, thus positioning Hungary as historically constrained but strategically adaptive.

For advocates of the liberal international order, it may remain peculiar that Hungary has actively selected to engage non-democratic or illiberal regimes under its Eastern opening framework, despite its being in the stronghold of economic liberalism. It has reached out to various non-liberal states, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, China, Russia, Turkey and Azerbaijan, even going as far as to call Azerbaijan a model state and brotherly nation during an official visit by President İlham Aliyev to Budapest for strategic partnership in 2014 and at a United Nations Special Programme for the Economic of Central Asia summit held in Baku in 2023, respectively.¹ Here is a good time to note that Azerbaijan currently sits in the bottom 25% across all Global State of Democracy categories (representation, rights, rule of law and participation) and routinely classified as a consolidated authoritarian regime by Freedom

House. However, it may be argued that much of this peculiarity is misplaced due to the policy encouraging diversification of Hungarian trade and investment relations in acknowledgement of the current situation in the global economy, where a bulk of global investments flow out from the East (Moldicz, 2024).

A second reasoning for the change in its strategic culture is in relation to Hungary's difficult past. This is visible in a statement by Prime Minister Orbán, who, following talks with President Xi on the anniversary of diplomatic relations between Hungary and China, said, "The 20th century was a shameful one...in which Hungarians suffered extremely heavy losses of historic proportions. The concept driving Hungarians is that we want to win the 21st century, not lose it. And to win we need (strong) partners" (Orban, May 2024, brackets added). Evident here is the view that the Eastern opening in some form furnishes the state with the chance to secure a victory able to erase from its slate the heavy records of defeat. For some academics, values-based foreign policy gained an air of pragmatism, expressed by the need for a foreign policy where both transatlantic and eastern relations are important and where geopolitical interests, including peace, energy, security and trade objectives, are as important as Hungarian national interest (Shmidt, 2024:115).

The belief in the need to prevent the reemergence of Cold War policies and culture in modern international relations (Orbán, 2021) is an additional explanation for the shifts in Hungary's strategic culture. Visibly articulated in the reviewed documents is the prioritization of the interests, security and stability of Hungary, reflected in the country's trend of anti-Euro Atlantic behaviour seen in its vetoing joint EU resolutions deemed harmful to its new, and much needed, Eastern allies (Visnovitz & Jenne, 2021). For instance, it vetoed high-level NATO-Ukraine joint military exercises and meetings as well as blocking EU statements on human rights violations or criticisms of China, like the security law in Hong Kong (Chalmers & Emmott, 2021), and explicitly recognizing Beijing's One China policy (Szunomar & Peragovics, 2024) which is an ideological justification for Beijing's claims to Taiwan as a Chinese territory.

1 Azerbaijan, Global State of Democracy Initiative. Ideational Idea. <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/country/azerbaijan>. Date Accessed: 03/07/2025

Azerbaijan, Freedom House Democracy Index. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan> Date Accessed: 03/07/2025

Speech by Viktor Orbán at a summit of the United Nations Special Programme for the economies of Central Asia (SPECA). <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-viktor-orban-at-a-summit-of-the-united-nations-special-programme-for-the-economies-of-central-asia-speca>: Date Accessed: 28/11/2025

5. Strategic Culture and the Recalibration toward Strategic Neutrality

Having reviewed Hungary's strategic culture, it is of some use to attempt to point out how this strategic culture guides Hungary's long-standing neutrality in some of the conflicts taking place around the CEE region. Hungarian neutrality should not be confused with a lack of interest in international affairs and the happenings of its neighbourhood. As a refresher, the strategic culture spoken of here is one of a nation attempting to survive, thrive and navigate shifting geopolitical realities that necessitate strategic neutrality, preventing it from taking sides based solely on geopolitical ideologies, especially if doing so holds the potential to harm Hungary's socio-economic stability and security in any way or limits the interests of Hungarians from being catapulted forward.

Ukraine stands as an extremely relevant case study of Hungary's strategic culture manifested through foreign policy sovereignty, prioritization of interests, security and defence of Hungarian minorities abroad. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it would be seen that Prime Minister Orbán's Hungary would agree not to block any EU sanctions "as long as they do not cross the red line... endangering Hungary's energy security and thus its economy" (Orbán, 2022). This is, partially, the result of Hungary being heavily reliant on Russia for its energy security, with energy dependence ranging between 56.2 % and 53.7% from 2020 and 2021 respectively, a number that spikes to 90% if including the import of nuclear fuel required for the Paks nuclear plant (Csernus, 2023). The protection of Hungarian energy stability has been a constant thread in its foreign policy decisions, not only leveraging its veto ability to attain exemptions from the ban of Russian oil products, thus making it one of the few EU member states still consumers of Russian gas but also deepening energy cooperation with another 'unfriendly' state, like Azerbaijan that have enabled it to become an energy producing country "even without oil and gas fields", as said by Péter Szijjártó, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, (Csernus, 2023; Morvai, 2025; Weiner, 2024; Daily Hungary News, 2025) all of which is in line with the pursuit of an energy policy Prime Minister Orbán stressed was mandatory for the 'strengthening and safeguard the country's sovereignty' (Feledy,

2015).² From an analysed discourse perspective, Hungary's neutrality is articulated as responsible proactive statecraft guided by economic survival and historical experience and not as passivity.

Beyond this, as a continued neutrality, Budapest barred the use of Hungary as a transit country for weapons headed to Ukraine, promising to keep Hungary out of 'NATO's War Effort' (Scheppele, 2022) and would "repeatedly insist on watering down both joint sanctions against Russia and a common approach towards Ukraine" (Muller & Slominski, 2024:122).

Even as early as Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, in breaking away from the common EU position, Hungary adopted a 'Russia-friendly policy', not only continuing economic relations with Russia but also voicing concerns over the rationale of EU-imposed sanctions on Russia (Gyarmati, 2015). When questioned over the stance of the Hungarian government towards Russia in Ukraine, Orbán affirmed the EU narrative of the primary interest being Ukraine's Sovereignty (Orbán, 2014) while simultaneously cementing the centrality of Hungarians in foreign policy choices around the matter, reportedly having said "the important issue for us in this whole conflict is the safety of Hungarians... living in Hungary and... living in Transcarpathia" (Feledy, 2015:75).³ Home to a sizable Hungarian population, Ukraine additionally offers a glimpse into how Hungary's use of its diaspora as a foreign policy tool is tied to its strategic culture. Prime Minister Orbán is also reported to have said "Ukraine can be neither stable nor democratic if it does not give its minorities, including Hungarians, their due. That is, dual citizenship, collective

2 Speech given by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán after swearing his prime ministerial oath (2022). Date Accessed: 02/07/25. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-given-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-after-swearing-his-prime-ministerial-oath>

Engagement between the Hungarian and Azeri governments joint economic commission in Budapest. Date Accessed: 30/11/2025/ <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungary-azerbaijan-deal-energy>.

3 Website of the Hungarian Government. (2014) 'Hungary committed to Ukraine's Sovereignty' <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/news/hungary-committed-to-ukraine-s-sovereignty> Date Accessed: 01/07/25

rights and autonomy” (Gyarmati, 2015:22). Hungary’s foreign policy decision-makers place priority on bilateral relations even in cases where these relations undermine EU unity, such as the instance where Hungary chose to obstruct the EU’s joint statement on the International Court of Arbitration’s South China Sea ruling and a common EU statement on China’s Hong Kong security law (Hettyey, 2020:9; Greilinger, 2023).

6. Christianity as Foreign Policy: Constructing the Narrative of “Bastion Hungary”

Although not often considered foreign policy, immigration policy serves as one of the better policies to engage with concerning Hungary’s strategic culture as it concerns the intersection between its domestic issues (of ethnic population sizes) and foreign policy (tied to migration agreements).

As one of the EU’s frontline states, Hungary was at the ‘heart’ of the 2015 refugee crisis due to its special position as the southernmost Schengen and EU Dublin State within the Western Balkan route, that makes it a corridor between Austria and Serbia in Southeast Europe.⁴ This location, merged with its expansive interstate transportation system, made Hungary attractive as a transit country, with many migrants hoping to reach preferred Northern European destinations (Semerádová, 2023). Be that as it may, it is no exaggeration to say Hungary was among the hardest hit by earlier waves of asylum seekers. Hungarian authorities had recorded 174,135 asylum applications, roughly 1770 applicants per 100,000 people at the end of 2015 (Foldes, 2022; Connor, 2016), the highest of any EU member state according to a 2016 report by the Pew Research Centre with Syria (37%), Afghanistan (26%), Pakistan (8%) and Kosovo (14%) making the majority of applicants (Kiss, 2016). Startlingly high numbers aside, it needs to be emphasized that Hungary and other frontline countries (Greece, Italy, and Spain) mainly for entry and transit. Although in Hungary’s case a low number of migrants, 1.87% of

all types of migrants choosing to settle within its borders according to 2017 study by the European Parliament on the ingestion of refugees in Greece, Italy and Hungary (Borbély 2017). Attributed to this are the joining reasons of Hungary’s relatively low economic and industrial development, high mono-ethnicism and strong anti-migration policies that have created stringent limitations for any real integration support (Hartocollis, 2015; Semerádová, 2023; Borbély 2017).

In response to the refugee crisis, Hungary adopted a hardline stance on its immigration policies, actively preventing migrants from entry by erecting walls along the border zones between Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia and deploying security forces to guard them, drawing wide criticism, and placing it in direct violation of its international and European human rights obligations (Carrera et al, 2015; Amnesty International, 2015). Prior to the refugee crisis, Hungary did not have a stance on migration that contradicted the European Union. In light its recent changes Hungary’s strategic culture is featured here as a tactful blend of two narratives, these being a strict responsibility under the Schengen Agreement, arguing that doing so is carrying out its obligation in securing a “section of Europe’s common external borders”, in addition to protecting Hungarian citizens (and the Hungarian cultural identity) from the security threat created by mass migration (Orban, December, 2015; Orban, September, 2015, brackets added). When challenging the European Commission on mandatory migration and refugee quotas, Hungary argued that the acceptance of migrants required by the quota system “would change the Hungarian and European national, cultural and religious identity” (Bozóki&Ádám, 2016 in Ilikova & Tushev, 2020: 326; Daher, 2020), and that Hungary wanted to avoid the gradual change of Hungarian population and culture (Orban, September, 2015).

The narrative of ‘being a cultural and religious group under threat’ underpinning Hungarian strategic culture and foreign policy has been deployed in novel and interesting ways. As alluded to above, the harsh anti-migration policy choices are justified under Hungary’s moral obligation to act as guardian of both Hungarian and European historical (Christian) legacies, (Christian) values, (Christian) culture and defender against the dangers of ‘unnatural migration and possible

⁴ The Dublin system commits the EU state of first entry responsible for the examination of asylum applications, disproportionately placing more pressure on ‘entry countries’, typically the frontline, for asylum-seeker applications (Carrera, 2015), in high volume presents humanitarian and security emergencies.

emergence of parallel (Islamic) societies that may threaten 'Europe's identity, security, welfare and way of life' (Daher, 2020: 41; Rizova, 2019; Scott, 2018). This was further illustrated by Hungary's vetoing of the majority EU position on the against the indiscriminate use of Israeli missiles in the Israel's ongoing genocide in Palestine with Prime Minister Orbán stating that while, "most Western European countries have entered an era of a post-national and post-Christian concept of life... it cannot be ignored that (Hungarians) still live our lives according to Judeo-Christian values, a Judeo-Christian culture and concept of life" and thus it is "not possible to equate Israel with an organization on the EU sanctions list" (Orban, 2021. Parenthesis added). This incompatible equation stems from Israel being perceived as the protector of Judeo-Christianity in the Islamic Middle East and, by extension, an ally of Christian Hungary.⁵ In validating the 'strategy' behind 'strategic culture', the use of Christianity as an identity marker and foreign policy tool is malleable, as seen in dealings with Turkic states where Hungary's Christian image is mixed with Turanism to alter its image from a Christian wall to a Christian bridge linking East to West. This malleability is evident in Orbán's proclaiming Hungary as Christian Turkish lands and describing said Hungarians as people from the westernmost East (who) will never forget their Eastern relatives (Haas, 2023; Balogh, 2022).⁶

7. Revisions in National Security Doctrine: Hungary's Contemporary Strategic Vision

Until now the paper has elucidated the alterations in Hungary's national identity to better explain the linked evolution of its strategic culture and display how these changes have been articulated as necessary for the country's socio-economic security. However, it has not yet shown or evaluated

⁵ Hungary acted in accordance with the Treaties when it vetoed. (2021). Date Accessed: 02/07/2025. URL <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/hungary-acted-in-accordance-with-the-treaties-when-it-vetoed/>

⁶ The European Centre for Populism Studies defines Turanism or Eurasianist as a malleable geopolitical ideology that argues for the need for cooperation between ethnically, culturally or linguistically related people of Central Asian or Eurasian origins including the Finns, Japanese, Koreans, Sami, Samoeyes, Mongols, Manchus, Turks and Hungarians

how Hungary has applied the changes in national identity and strategic culture to its armed national security strategy to better match the various threats perceived as proliferating the world from 2011, the undertaking of its Fundamental Law.

In 2021 the Hungarian government published the country's new National Security Strategy (NSS) titled "A Secure Hungary in a Volatile World" in the April release of Magyar Közlöny, its government gazette, where the government redefined a national security reflecting the "profound changes in the global security environment since 2012" (the last publication of the NSS)" (Hungary National Security Strategy, 2021:1), mainly in Hungary's neighbourhood. The document reiterates the centrality of Hungary's sovereignty in its foreign policy, and importance of its history, traditions and "systems of values grounded in ...Christian heritages" to the "the survival of the Hungarian people" and their contribution to European diversity, going on to say "(Hungarians) respect different cultures but insist on (their) own Hungarian identity at all times" (Hungary National Security Strategy, 2021:1, brackets added). The document additionally highlights the presence of new security 'risks' for Hungary, the most interesting for this paper are mass illegal migration and/or the settlement of foreign populations in Hungary, unwanted armed attacks, restrictions to Hungary's national sovereignty, supply crises caused by the interruption of energy imports and a reemergence of the international economic crisis and the purpose of national interests towards the top of National Security Strategy (Varga, 2021; Csicsmann, 2020; National Security Strategy, 2021).

8. Hungary's 2024 Council of Europe Presidency: Stated Priorities and Strategic Intent

In the second half of 2024 Hungary once more sat the helm of the Council of the European Union, this time under the slogan "Make Europe Great Again (MEGA)", not openly reflecting inspiration from a fellow renowned right-wing populist in North America, but reflecting the perception of a Europe that is a shadow of its former self, no longer a cultural pioneer, economic pillar and geopolitical powerhouse.

There is a sense of continuation from the priority areas seen in its first term of the presidency programme, with glimpses of what matters to Hungary and what it believes threatens the EU in line with the strategic culture developed and expanded between its previous term and this one. The core foci of its second term were the New European Competitions Deal, the reinforcement of European Defence Policy, neighbourhood enlargement that is consistent and merit-based, the stemming of illegal migration, addressing demographic challenges (which impacts competitiveness) and a farmer-oriented EU agricultural policy shaping the future of cohesion policy all of which fly relatively close to the priorities of the first. The only new addition is with regard to the Green New Deal farmer-oriented EU agricultural policy and addressing demographic challenges.

Conclusion

Between its 2011 and 2024 presidencies of the Council of the European Union Hungary, national identity and strategic culture have undergone extensive transformations that, while in many ways have thrust it forwards in terms of its agency and diplomatic capacities outside of Europe, have had contradictory bearing on its standing within the European Union. The above study has showcased development of the small, Central Eastern European Country that are central to understanding its recent behaviour on the international stage and the ways in which the state has constructed itself from its earlier position of having endured immense territorial loss instrumented by the Treaty of Trianon with a foundational post-Soviet foreign policy priority being to one desperately trying to break away from its Eastern ties through Europeanization and assimilation into the Euro-Atlantic alliance and its various organizations.

2011 was an eventful year for Hungarian domestic and foreign policy. Although 2010 is the year FIDESZ came into power, 2011 is the year Hungary's domestic and foreign policy priorities and strategic culture departed from those set out by the Antall government of 1991, all of which came into sight during its first term in the Presidency of

the Council of the European Union. Through the reviewal of Hungary's post-Fidesz constitution, also called the Fundamental Law, and its foreign policy programme after its EU presidency. These saw the adoption of a strategic culture that narrates Hungary to be an Eastern Christian country in Europe, violently persecuted by its past but doing what it can to ensure the survival of its ethnic people while weathering a rapidly changing geopolitical climate influenced by changes in the centres of economic and geostrategic power. By reviewing aspects of Hungarian foreign policy between 2011 and 2024, this paper has explained how this new strategic culture has informed a foreign policy that puts Hungary's national security first by relying on its sovereignty first as a diplomatic actor and a new post-Soviet identity of a Hungary refusing to be left behind or limited by its size or hampered by geographic location.

Across the documents analysed, content and discourse analysis reveal a consistent narrative structure that places sovereignty, historical grievances and cultural survivals as organizing priorities in Hungary's contemporary strategic culture.

The outcomes of this paper hold relevance for broader studies examining the relationship between populism, national identity, and foreign policy. By contextualizing Hungary's identity restructuring as more than a set of opportunistic moves by a populist government seeking legitimacy, the analysis demonstrates that these shifts represent a coherent transformation in strategic culture. This transformation is anchored in longstanding historical grievances, a necessary post-communist reconstruction of national identity, and an increasingly pragmatic worldview that recognises the declining centrality of the West in the global economic order. At the same time, the study illustrates the persistent influence of ethno-nationalism, anti-Islamic sentiment, and exclusive notions of Christianity in shaping state behaviour—particularly in the realm of migration policy—highlighting how identity-driven narratives continue to inform foreign policy choices in certain states

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