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Hungary's current policy towards the European Union

Natalia Kowerek[1]

ABSTRACT

This article examines the inconsistency in Hungary's foreign policy regarding its EU membership. While benefiting from EU opportunities, the Hungarian government counter new policies like the EU Migration Pact. It analyzes Hungary's historical background, focusing on Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party, and explores themes of national identity and Hungarian conviction of greatness despite its size. The article also looks at Hungary's political isolation from the West, its support for illiberal democracy, and the status of Hungarian minorities abroad. Additionally, it discusses Hungary's support for EU expansion to the Western Balkans and the strategic motivations for this attitude. Ultimately, it illustrates Hungary's shift from a model EU candidate to a nation with growing inaccuracies towards the Union's core values, highlighting internal EU conflicts.

Introduction

The contemporary political landscape of Hungary, particularly its distance from the liberal-democratic values advocated by the European Union, is deeply rooted in the historical and cultural identity of the nation. As J. Zielonka points out, Central Europe has often adopted a model of "peripheral modernization"—integrating Western institutions while simultaneously preserving cultural distinctiveness[2]. This text tries to demonstrate that the current political orientation of Budapest is not merely a contemporary phenomenon, but rather a continuation of a lengthy intellectual and ideological process that traces back to the disintegration of the traditional social order in Central Europe.

By analyzing selected examples from the literature, I focused to illustrate how historical trauma, nostalgia for a lost order, and an ambiguous relationship with Western Europe have shaped and continue to shape Hungarian political consciousness. The reflections found in literature mirror the complex identity mechanisms that, as noted by Rogers Brubaker, play a crucial role in shaping national discourses and historical politics[3].

The essay highlights the continuity of certain patterns of thought, redefining Hungary's position within the European system of values and institutions. In particular, the ideological concept of "illiberal democracy," promoted by Viktor Orbán, finds parallels in past narratives concerning the threat to cultural integrity and the necessity of "defending civilization"[4].

[1] University of Opole; natalia.kowerek@gazeta.pl

[2] Zielonka, J. (2018) *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[3] Brubaker, R. (1996) *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[4] Bozóki, A. and Hegedűs, D. (2018) *„An externally constrained hybrid regime: Hungary in the European Union”*, *Democratization*, 25(7), pp. 1173–1189.

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The contemporary politics of Hungary, particularly its Eurosceptic and identity-related aspects, is neither a novel phenomenon nor solely tied to the current political context. Its roots extend much deeper – to the cultural and historical self-identification of Hungary as a state that balances between the East and the West, between local distinctiveness and belonging to the European civilizational sphere. The legacy of the Habsburg era, the trauma of territorial loss following the Treaty of Trianon, and the disintegration of the social order of traditional elites have shaped a unique Hungarian political and social sensitivity that has, to some extent, endured into modern times[5].

In „Confessions of a Bourgeois" by Sándor Márai, one can find a deeply rooted diagnosis of the existential and cultural condition of the Hungarian elite at the dawn of the 20th century, which – despite the passage of time – exhibits a significant correspondence with the attitudes present in contemporary Hungarian politics. The narrator, a representative of the decreasing patrician class, recounts the story of the disintegration of a world founded on conservative hierarchy, national pride, and a clearly defined social order. In this regard, Márai's no[6].

In his work, Sándor Márai identifies a crucial paradox of Hungarian national identity, characterized by a persistent sense of alienation within the European context. The author emphasizes the historically shaped perception of Hungary as a peripheral country that has never fully identified with the West[7]. This perspective serves as a significant interpretative tool for understanding the current skeptical stance of Hungarian authorities towards European integration processes, which is corroborated by contemporary political analyses[8].

Marai, in his analysis, pays particular attention to the mechanisms of national identity defense, pointing to historical experiences of confrontation with various forms of external domination as a factor shaping the Hungarian mentality[9]. Today, we observe clear references to this tradition in the political discourse of Fidesz, especially in the context of disputes regarding the rule of law[10]. The ambivalence characteristic of Hungarian politics towards the West—expressed in the simultaneous desire for acceptance and distrust to its policy [11].

The present Hungarian approach towards the European Union embodies a dichotomy characterized by two contrasting positions. On one side, there exists a pronounced

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[5] Szczerek, Z. (2019) *Via Carpatia*, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne.

[6] Márai, S. (2014) *Wyznania patrycjusza*, trans. T. Olszański, Warszawa: Czytelnik.

[7] Ibidem.

[8] Batory, A, (2008) *The Politics of EU Accession Ideology, Party Strategy and the European Question in Hungary* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, pp. 630-632

[9] Márai, S. (2014)

[10] Bánkuti, M., Halmai, G. and Scheppele, K.L. (2012) *"Hungary's Illiberal Turn: Disabling the Constitution"*, *Journal of Democracy*, 23(3), pp. 138-146. DOI: 10.1353/jod.2012.0054.

[11] Göncz, B., Lengyel, Gy. (2021) *Europhile Public vs Eurosceptic Governing Elite in Hungary? I*ntereconomics. Review of European Economic Policy, Volume 56, Number 2, [online] Available at https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2021/number/2/article/europhile-public-vs-eurosceptic-governing-elite-in-hungary.html

Euroscepticism that manifests in the exclusion from various European Union initiatives, while on the other side, Prime Minister Viktor Orban and his administration actively engage in EU actions that they perceive as beneficial. A an apt illustration of this engagement is Hungary's support for the security of the Balkans as these nations seek EU membership. This support is largely motivated by Hungary's strategic interests, particularly in relation to countries that share similar political frameworks, which have emerged in response to the evolving directives of the Union. However, the solutions proposed by Orban's government often present an alternative approach, reflecting a commitment to national interests[12]. It is crucial to acknowledge that Hungary, like Poland under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), emphasizes the importance of safeguarding national rights and interests within the context of EU membership. Both the Orban and Kaczyński administrations prioritized the autonomy of their nations' decision-making processes, striving to maintain independence from the overarching policies and decisions of the European Union[13].

From the onset of their independence, the Hungarians have pursued a policy focused on fostering connections and patriotism among the ethnic minorities of Hungarians residing beyond the borders of the Magyar State, which has become one of their primary objectives. "If *there is any specific national priority that has been well represented by Hungary, it is certainly the issue of national minorities."*[14] This issue gained prominence much earlier, particularly in 1920, following the conclusion of World War I, when the Hungarians entered a peace treaty that directly contributed to the dilemma. As a result of this treaty, the nation lost two-thirds of its territory, leading to approximately 5 million Hungarians being situated outside the country's borders, according to official statistics. This profoundly tragic event for the Hungarians is currently utilized as a narrative to legitimize the actions of the current Fidesz government.

In "Via Carpatia," Ziemowit Szczerek illustrates how the trauma stemming from this treaty continues to play a crucial role in shaping the national identity and geopolitical vision of the state[15]. The Hungary depicted in the book is a nation living in the shadow of a lost empire, torn between nostalgia and skepticism towards the Western values promoted by the European Union. Szczerek consistently emphasizes that Viktor Orbán's government draws upon national resentment and the fear of losing sovereignty. The political narrative of Fidesz, presented in the book with a bitterly ironic distance, is based on portraying Hungary as a besieged fortress, under attack from the liberal West on one side and threatened by "foreign" immigration on the other. This political strategy fits into a broader project of "illiberal democracy," promoted by Orbán as an alternative to the prevailing values of pluralism, equality, and the rule of law in the European Union. It can be posited that for Hungarian government there is an ongoing commitment to support and reconcile with its compatriots and it is precisely due to these past disappointments and the lingering bitterness present in the hearts of the Hungarian community caused by this 1920 treaty. The discourse surrounding minorities and the Hungarian perspective on this matter is significant within the broader context of its contemporary policy

[12] Huszka, B. (2017) *„Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy”*, ELTE Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of European Studies of ELTE U., Budapest, Hungary.

[13] Szczerek, Z. (2019) *Via Carpatia*, Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne.

[14] Huszka.B (2017) pp. 598

[15] Szczerek, Z. (2019)

towards the European Union, as one of the key tenets in this regard is the advocacy for the Union's expansion to incorporate the Western Balkan nations, where these minorities reside[16].

Another significant element of this discussion is the notion that the expansion of the European Union may positively influence trade development and enhance the overall stability of the Hungarian region. Furthermore, Orban posits that nations sharing similar political ideologies and perspectives will endorse Hungary's illiberal stance[17]. A key issue that brought Hungary together with the Balkan nations and even Poland was their collective opposition to the migration pact during the so-called migration crisis. However, the factors that unified Hungary with the Balkan countries have increasingly created a rift between them and the Union. Contrary to common assumptions, Hungarians possess minimal influence over the formulation of European Union policy; nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that their actions and similar initiatives do capture attention, thereby elevating their visibility and importance.

Hungary, when it became a full member of the European Union in 2004, was regarded as the best prepared among all the countries joining the EU for this task. Furthermore, alongside Hungary, Slovakia and Slovenia also joined the Union, followed by Romania in 2007. In this manner, step by step, Hungary's political plan was being realized, as they saw within the structures of the Union an opportunity to improve the living conditions of the Hungarian minority in these countries. This was particularly significant considering the past issues of persecution faced by compatriots under the Romanian government led by Nicolae Ceaușescu[18].

Hungary’s journey towards EU membership is frequently depicted as a triumph of democracy; however, underlying this narrative is a concerning contradiction. As Margit Bessenyey Williams points out, paradoxically, the EU is disseminating its ‘democratic deficit’[19]. The process of Hungary’s integration into the EU has bolstered the power of the executive branch, sidelining parliament, with minimal influence reaching the legislative body[20]. Despite the existence of formal democratic institutions in Hungary, it is often the case that the parliament does not exert control over the government, but rather the reverse[21].

The EU’s stipulations for swift legal harmonization have also engendered a troubling scenario: candidate nations are compelled, prior to accession, to implement EU legislation that neither they nor their national parliaments have had any say in[22]. The public’s comprehension of this process has significantly delayed the negotiations conducted by elites, resulting in what Williams describes as a fundamental paradox. Europeanization is the most critical political issue but remains the least addressed[23]. How Hungary’s democratic evolution has been both facilitated and obstructed by its aspirations for EU membership and the implications this holds for the future of parliamentary democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. This dual role raises

[16] Ibidem pp. 88–93

[17] Huszka, B. (2017) pp.591-593

[18] Żołądź, J. (2009) pp. 220-221

[19] Williams, M.B. (2016) *„Exporting the Democratic Deficit: Hungary's Experience with EU Integration”*, *Journal of European Integration*, 38(1), pp.29. DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2001.11655915.

[20] Ibidem, pp. 31.

[21] Ibidem, pp. 30

[22] Ibidem, pp. 32

[23] Ibidem, pp.30

critical questions about the coherence of EU values and the effectiveness of its institutional safeguards.[24]

From the perspective of the European Union, Hungary's membership currently has a significantly negative impact in terms of public relations. This is primarily due to the requirement that countries aspiring to join must demonstrate a high level of democracy within their state. Furthermore, a free-market economy must be in place, along with adherence to EU values such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of minorities[25].

Conclusion

The current political situation in Hungary, in relation to the European Union, is rather complex and problematic. It is not possible to fully address this issue in such a brief article; however, I have tried to highlight the trajectory Hungary is following and to outline how its political environment has been shaped and transformed over the years.

As a European nation, Hungary stands out from others in the Union due to its rich historical background, its unique language, and the ethnic heritage of its tribal origins. This distinctiveness brings both advantages and disadvantages to its domestic and international policies. As noted by Ziemowit Szczerek in his writings, Hungary is a stunning country characterized by extremes, possessing a complicated political scene that, despite its clear challenges, does not face significant opposition from its citizens. Even in the early pages of Sándor Márai's novel Confessions of a Patrician, a portrayal of Hungary and its people begin to take shape. In Hungary, one can witness stark contrasts, where politics permeate every aspect of life, becoming increasingly undemocratic and less free, while the populace continues to enjoy tranquil, idyllic lives, especially in rural regions.

The subject of Hungary, particularly in contemporary times, is exceptionally captivating, mainly because, despite being initially overlooked, its impact on the European Union's structures has garnered it numerous allies. Hungary's political strategies are meticulously devised to secure advantages and exert influence. The nation maintains a position of strategic neutrality, refraining from aligning with either the EU or Russia amid ongoing tensions. Hungary exemplifies how even a small country can disrupt the perceived stability within the European Union. In the foreseeable future, we can undoubtedly anticipate a multitude of changes and upheavals within the EU framework.

[24] Ibidem, pp.31

[25] European Union (2012) *Traktat o Unii Europejskiej*, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/pl/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012M002 (Accessed: 09.06.2025).

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