



Hungary and the Organization of Turkic States: A Symbiotic Realism?

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Abstract

As an observer state at the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), Hungary actively engages with the Turkic world. The OTS is an integration initiative based on the common cultural and historical heritage and comprises Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan as full member states. The Hungary-OTS relations have identity (cultural), (geo)political and economic components. Yet the relations are made further colorful by the fact that Hungary is a full member of the European Union, which is a community of shared democratic values, while the OTS is framed as a community of common heritage and cultural values. On top of that, two overarching hostile states – Russia and Ukraine – have also voiced their desire to join the OTS as observer members. In such an intricate context, Budapest's engagement with the OTS is not perceived unambiguously as some in Hungary, Turkic nations, and beyond wonder what Hungary is doing in the OTS.

This paper seeks to address that question through the framework of the theory of symbiotic realism. In researching the topic, a particular focus is made on which type of symbiotic relations characterize the engagement between Hungary and the OTS – mutualism, commensalism, parasitism, and competition. Also, the perspective of Hungary on the OTS is juxtaposed to that of the OTS nations on Hungary. The paper argues that Hungary and OTS member states act based on pragmatism and their relations correspond to the mutualism type of symbiotic relations.

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Introduction

As the students of international relations know, anarchy, power politics, egoistic and self-interested human nature, and sovereign states as principal and rational, unitary actors in international relations with the primary goal of being its own security and survival are the basic tenets in the realist theory. In contrast, the theory of symbiotic realism expands this framing and adds new dimensions. It provides a more complex account of human nature and takes into serious consideration the “instant connectivity and interdependence” coexisting with the persistent global anarchy: “Four interlocking elements shape the global system: the *neurobiological substrates of human nature* (providing a more complex account of human nature), the persistence of *global anarchy*, which today coexists with conditions of *instant connectivity and interdependence*”¹.

A major distinction between symbiotic realism the classical realism is that the former recognizes and emphasizes the possibility of overcoming the zero-sum assumption of the latter. Namely, while the zero-sum implies one party’s gain as another party’s loss, Symbiotic Realism stresses the absolute gain approach in which both parties can gain. Thus, the multi-sum assumption emerges as an alternative to the zero-sum. The multi-sum approach allows for non-conflictual competition in the global arena and contemporary international relations that take a turn towards a multi-polar world order.

The nature of relations between Hungary and the OTS is a curious question from the perspective of the symbiotic realism. There are various types of symbiotic relations described as commensalism, mutualism, parasitism, and competition. Under the commensalism, one party benefits from the relations and interactions, and the other party remains unaffected; under mutualism, both parties benefit; under parasitism, one party benefits, and the other is harmed; and under competition, neither party benefits.

This paper argues that the relations between Hungary and the Organization of Turkic states correspond to the mutualism. Namely, both Hungary and the OTS including its member states benefit from their relations and interactions. In making the case for this argument, the paper will have a particular focus and accent on Hungary’s approach to the connectivity. And the connectivity is, under the symbiotic realism, one of the four elements shaping the global system alongside with human nature, global anarchy, and interdependence. Furthermore, human nature is also relevant aspect in this topic due to historic, cultural and identity links between the Hungarian and Turkic peoples, and the fact that the Organization of Turkic States is an identity-based organization. And the Symbiotic Realism registers the role of emotions and related emotionality of the individuals and states and the narrative of identity². Yet it acknowledges that emotional vulnerabilities are shared by all parties and that these can be orchestrated for good or for ill.

¹Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan. *Symbiotic Realism: A Theory of International Relations in an Instant and an Interdependent World*. Lit Verlag 2008

²Nayef R. F. Al-Rodhan. *Symbiotic Realism and just power*. openDemocracy. 28.04.2015



The official documents including founding documents as well as the statements made by the political leaders of the member states and observer states, and press materials are the sources of analysis for this paper. On top of that, several interviews with Hungarian experts have been conducted for that purpose.

The paper is broken down into the following parts: Abstract; Introduction; Overview of the Organization of Turkic States & the idea of Hunno-Turkic unity; Hungary's framing of connectivity; How the engagement with the OTS fit into the broader Hungarian strategy? From like-minded partners to mutualism; Conclusion.

The *Introduction* briefly outlines the conceptual approach based on the theory of Symbiotic Realism in researching the topic. The *Overview of the Organization of Turkic States & the idea of Hunno-Turkic unity* provides basic background on the formation of the Organization of Turkic States and the historic idea underpinning the Turkic unity that is contemporarily manifested through the OTS. *Hungary's framing of connectivity* explores the logic, context, and fundamentals of the broader Hungarian foreign policy strategy, in which the OTS direction represents a pillar. *How the engagement with the OTS fits into the broader Hungarian strategy?* highlights four main points that are essential to grasping Budapest's attraction to the OTS and vice-versa, and parallels in their strategic thinking. The *From like-minded partners to mutualism* looks into whether/how Hungary and OTS nations succeed in converting or transforming their relations as like-minded partners based on the reciprocal attraction and shared commonalities and similarities into the relations that are mutually beneficial. In doing so, practical, specific cases of cooperation and partnership from politics, diplomacy, and foreign policy to economy and trade to energy, transit, and infrastructural connectivity, to culture, sport, and education are referred to. And then, based on the analysis of the practical cases and the manifestation of cooperation, the perspectives, challenges, and obstacles are discussed. Finally, the Conclusion wraps up the paper briefly.

The Organization of Turkic States & Hunno-Turkic ties

The Organization of Turkic States was formed through upgrading of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (The Cooperation Council) to the organization and related renaming at the Eighth Summit of the former in Istanbul, Turkey on November 12, 2021. The Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States had been established through the Nakhchivan Agreement on the establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States signed by the leaders of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey as the founding members in Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan October 3, 2009. The Nakhchivan Agreement is the founding document of the Cooperation Council. Accordingly, the founding and other documents such as the official declarations of the Cooperation Council became those of the Organization of the Turkic States.

Hungary became an observer state at the Cooperation Council in 2018 and Uzbekistan joined it as a full member in 2019. As of 2024, the member states of the Organization of the Turkic States are Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Uzbekistan while Hungary, Turkmenistan (2021), and the Turkish



Republic of Northern Cyprus (2022) are the observers. The Economic Cooperation Organization was granted an observer status in 2023.

Several summits of Turkic states had been held from 1992 to 2010 before the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States was formed. Then-president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev proposed to create the Turkic Council in 2006. Historically, the idea of uniting the Turkic peoples goes back to the early 20th century when founding fathers of Turkic nationalism such as Ismayil bey Qasprinski, Ali bey Huseynzade, Ziya Goyalp, Ahmed bey Agaoglu, and others promoted the idea of the Turkic unity³. Noteworthy, each of them saw Europeanization as important to the Turkic progress and development but diverged with regard to how they saw Europeanization. Specifically, the lines between Europeanization and modernization were blurry. Most illustratively, Ziya Goyalp and Ahmed bey Agaoglu's views diverged, if not collided. Goyalp advocated adopting the European civilization while keeping the Turkish culture as it is. This view is expressed in his famous formulation of the Turkish identity as "Turkish culture, European civilization, and Islamic faith". In contrast, Agaoglu argued that European culture and civilization can't be separated. Just duplicating European institutions without adopting European culture is ineffective, according to him. Therefore, Agaoglu strongly advocated for full Europeanization including the adoption of both European culture and civilization⁴. By European culture, he meant European values in particular. Eventually, Ataturk's government went with Goyalp's line – European-style institutions such as the government, parliament, and judiciary were formally established. However the broader European-style environment, in which those institutions were to function, was missing.

In "The Clash of Civilizations", Samuel Huntington depicted Turkey as "the most obvious and prototypical torn country" between the Islamic and western civilizations⁵. Indeed, not just Turkey but also other Turkic nations in particular Azerbaijan have been torn between the Islamic world and Europe. Azerbaijan's national tricolor epitomizes that as the blue, red and green colors symbolize Turkic, European and Islamic dimensions of its identity. Kazakhstan's lobbying for a European dimension of its identity while it is an established central Asia nation is another illustration.

Furthermore, Huntington suggested that "the end of the Soviet Union gives Turkey the opportunity to become the leader of a revived Turkic civilization involving seven countries from the borders of Greece to those of China"⁶. Since 1990s, Turkey has made some efforts towards the leadership of the Turkic world. But Ankara's pivot to the Turkic world is rather due to the EU's turning down Turkey's EU membership bid. If Turkey was to join the EU, it wouldn't be so interested in the OTS. Yet the post-soviet Turkic republics themselves have moved in the direction of Turkic solidarity, if not unity. As time went on, the direction was reshaped from the formation of the Turkish leadership to a common Turkic endeavor. Yet the active engagement of Hungary with the Turkic nations through the Organization of Turkic States adds a new, distinct dimension. And this is natural and understandable in lieu of the

³Rahim Rahimov. The Geopolitics of Sacralization: Turkey's Reversion of the Hagia Sofia. *Israel Journal of International Affairs*. Vol. 15, No.2 pp.273-87, 2021

⁴ Ahmet Ağaoğlu. *Üç medeniyet*. Milli Eğitim Basımevi. Ankara 1972

⁵Samuel Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Simon & Schuster. USA. 1996

⁶Ibid



related Hungarian intellectual tradition on the one hand, and on the other hand, its representation of a European dimension that has been important to Turkic thinking. The Hungarian intellectual origins of Turanism, go even further back to earlier period than that of Turkic unity or Pan-Turkism. Hungarian thinkers have made a unique contribution to the rise of Turanism thought. Jenő Zichy, Arminyn Vambery, Janos Arany are just a few to name.

Hungary's framing of connectivity

Hungary launched the Eastern Opening policy in 2010s in order to effectively reposition itself into a new reality connected with global economic gravity shifting from the west to the east. Hungary has traditionally acted as a backyard for the Western European, in particular German economy⁷. This has produced a significant impact on the economic development through Foreign Direct Investments, creation of jobs, etc. But the current Hungarian government led by Prime Minister Victor Orbán, which is in power since 2010, has developed a bigger ambition for the country. The aim is to go beyond simply being a backyard or supplier of the western European and German economies. The EU aid and Hungary's profile as a backyard of the Western European economies have allowed it to turn from low-income to middle-income country. Although the Hungarian economy has performed well and the country is by far better-off since joining the European Union, it still ranks among the poorest among the EU member states⁸. Budapest argues it is high time to upgrade to high-income country. A clear manifestation of this vision is formulated by the government as stating that Hungary doesn't want to remain a middle-income economy, it strives to escape the middle-income trap and turn into a regional middle power. All these require changing the economic model⁹. This is a big challenge. To practically implement that vision, Hungary needs a strategy. And that is the essence of the Eastern Opening policy. Nevertheless, as a member state of the European Union, Hungary's vision inevitably collides with that of Brussels and other western partners and allies in particular the USA. This collision carries risks.

One important dimension of Hungary's strategy is about the connectivity. Budapest's framing of connectivity is distinct and diverges from that of Brussels. In the EU's approach, connectivity means a physical infrastructure including transport, transit and telecommunications connections. In contrast, Budapest's framing goes beyond the physical infrastructure and encapsulates other dimensions and areas. Specifically, Hungary's approach can be framed as political connectivity. Illustratively, the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, the main Budapest-based state think-tank, formulates the connectivity as follows: "A country that isolates itself from the world, or allows others to isolate it, cannot flourish at all. Therefore, Hungary wants to be open in as many directions as possible, following

⁷Note: for a historic background on Hungary's trade relations with Germany see: Zille Csenge Potsay. The Historical Background of the Hungarian Economy - From the Declaration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy to the Regime Change. The Danube Institute. Budapest, Hungary. September, 2024.

⁸The Equilibrium Institute. How can we become wealthier? Policy Proposal No.2., 2021.

⁹Miklós Kis. Hungary changes economic model. Heinrich Böll Stiftung. 28.08.2024.

the practice of connectivity rather than bloc formation—whether it comes to the economy, trade or culture”¹⁰.

Balázs Orbán, a Hungarian scholar and political director of the Prime Minister portrays connectivity as Hungary’s globalization strategy under the current circumstances or the post-neoliberal order. He argues that Hungary “should strive to maintain connections with as many other countries and market players from all over the world as possible. These connections should not be purely economic, but can also include trade, infrastructural ties, investment, and knowledge transfer, as well as public diplomacy”¹¹.

The bloc formations are well in the making in the world now and related collisions are ongoing. The USA-China rivalry and related formation of the BRICS as an alternative to the Western bloc is developing. And the EU cannot remain outside this kind of rivalries and related tensions hence ramifications for Hungary as a member state. “Budapest doesn’t want to take sides in such confrontations whether between Washington and Beijing or Brussels and Beijing or between Russia and West. Instead, it is eager to pursue economic relations with all sides”¹². As a member of the EU, Hungary needs to take more sovereign decisions to proceed with its strategy. And this is a main source of risks and tensions between Brussels and Budapest. It is in this context that the Hungarian government accentuates the importance of national sovereignty and emphasizes that in order to strengthen the EU power, member states should be granted more sovereignty. And the sovereignty is also of paramount importance to what recently Prime Minister Victor Orbán has termed “economic neutrality”. As the Prime Minister himself acknowledged it is a “tougher nut to crack” and “more difficult matter” than others to define what the “economic neutrality” is¹³. A clue to the Hungarian definition of the term comes from the phrase of “non-ideological economic policy” used by the Prime Minister. Sovereign decision with whom to do business and the precedence of the most profitability in doing the business are key to understanding what Budapest means by the economic neutrality. “For Budapest, connectivity means that business partners should not be selected through an ideologically driven process, but all mutually beneficial economic opportunities should be realized, thereby maintaining economic neutrality”¹⁴.

Sovereignty, profitability, ideological neutrality and ambition to benefit as a connecting point in the fragmented world are the key words for grasping the Hungarian strategy. And of course all these entails increased role for the state. Critics depicted the Hungarian vision as “magical realism”¹⁵. However, as this paper argues, it is, at least when it comes to the Organization of Turkic States, in line with the symbiotic realism.

¹⁰The Hungarian Institute of International Affairs official website

¹¹Balázs Orbán. Connectivity: A Hungarian globalization strategy. European Council on Foreign Relations. 06.03.2023

¹²Péter Goreczky. Interview with the author. Budapest, 04.11.2024

¹³Viktor Orbán. European Competitiveness, Hungarian Economic Neutrality. Lecture at the National University of Public Service conference. Budapest 25.09.2024

¹⁴Lili Zemplényi. Hungary and the Turkic World — On a Thriving Relationship. Hungarian Conservative. 18.11.2024

¹⁵Mészáros R. Tamás. Orbán promises to make Hungary a ‘regional middle power’ – and keeps us guessing about the hows. Telex.hu. 10.01.2023



Finally, one distinct aspect of the economic neutrality is the government's association of it with the family policy, culture and identity. The Hungarian economic neutrality policy sees the family as the fundamental element of the economy and Budapest is known for upholding traditional family values. Budapest attributes the desire for stronger sovereignty to Hungarians' "survival instinct"¹⁶. Namely, economic neutrality also means cultural neutrality. That is to say, Hungary is set to protect its own traditional values alongside with pursuing the strategy of connectivity and the policy of economic neutrality. The OTS is an effective partner for strengthening Hungary's cultural connectivity while maintaining its own identity.

On August 20 each year, Hungarians celebrate St. Stephen's Day as the State Foundation Day of Hungary since more than one thousand years. This day celebrates Hungary's complete Christianization and Europeanization and becoming part of the European Christian community through the creation of the Hungarian state. In this light, European Christian Hungary's close engagement and association with the Turkic world institutionalized through the Organization of Turkic States invoke a natural curiosity. One explanation is that Hungary wants to balance its European Christian identity with eastern roots and common Hunno-Turkic heritage. Indeed, the "Christian bulwark and Turanism, not only coexist within the political sphere but also have been intertwined within the Hungarian mindset for centuries... More recently, they have contributed to Hungary's self-image as a bridgehead linking East and West"¹⁷. Furthermore, Budapest sees and uses Hungary's such profile combining the European Christian identity with the Eastern roots to symbolize and reinforce its historic role of bridging between the west and the east, and make the case for its framing of the connectivity from the contemporary perspective¹⁸.

There is a mutual attraction between Hungary and OTS countries, which is manifested in various ways. For example, Kazakhstan wants to establish itself as a middle power and its place in the world through a multi-vector policy. And that multi-vector policy well resonates with Budapest's vision. So there is a reciprocity resembling a kind of supply and demand relationship between Hungary and OTS nations. On top of that, there is a moral or common heritage bond. As Viktor Orbán put it, one thousand years ago Hungarians were converted to the Christianity. However, the Hungarian identity remains grounded on the common Hun-Turkic heritage. And in particular, Hungarians are linked to Gipchak branch of Turks, who are the inhabitants of Central Asia currently including especially Kazakhs.

How the engagement with the OTS fits into the broader Hungarian strategy?

Based on the above brief outline of the logic, context and fundamentals of the Hungarian foreign policy strategy, Budapest's ambition is to play a connecting role in the emerging multi-polar world order instead of remaining restricted into the boundaries of the EU. To achieve that ambition,

¹⁶Viktor Orbán. European Competitiveness, Hungarian Economic Neutrality. Lecture at the National University of Public Service conference. Budapest 25.09.2024

¹⁷Kanat Makhanov. Understanding The Overlap of Hungary's "Eastern Opening" and Cooperation of Turkic States. Eurasian Research Institute, Akhmet Yassawi University, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 2024

¹⁸See Balázs Orbán. A model for connectivity: Hungary's strong bond with the Turkic world. Baku Dialogues, Volume 6, No.4, Summer 2023



Budapest's strategy is based on broader connectivity, which encapsulates political dimension too. As a member state of the EU, Hungary to be able to get this connectivity strategy through it will have to maximize its sovereign decisions. This context is relevant to grasping the essence of Hungary's perspective on the engagement with the Organization of Turkic States. Therefore, there is a need to look into how the engagement with the OTS fits into the broader Hungarian strategy. In that regard, for points must be highlighted:

First, the Organization of Turkic States is, per se, a manifestation of the political connectivity. While all the member states are Turkic nations, geopolitically they pursue different orientations. Turkey is a long-term, major NATO state with a decades-long EU candidacy status. Azerbaijan, which is allied with Turkey under the motto of "one nation, two states" pursues non-alignment and what official Baku calls as "independent foreign policy". Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are both members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union. Uzbekistan also refrains from joining a bloc. That is to say, countries belonging to different geopolitical and economic blocs get connected through the Organization of Turkic States. Yet by doing so, they also seek to (counter-)balance Russian and Chinese presence.

Second, upholding the national sovereignty is the priority to each of the Turkic states. One main reason for them to come together through the OTS is that they all consider the national sovereignty as vital, and therefore, the membership in the identity-based OTS is one way of maintaining their sovereignty more effectively irrespective of whatever bloc they belong to or not. Furthermore, the Organization of Turkic States also has an ambition, albeit not very explicit, to become a center of power in the emerging multi-polar world order. And the underpinning factor for them to shape their own center of power is not the pooling together their sovereignties, in the contrary, to preserve their individual sovereignty through such a joint, identity-based power centre.

Third, the OTS is an emerging institutionalized bloc of Turkic nations and Budapest strives to emancipate itself from limitations of the EU and to connect with other blocs too. And the OTS is a beneficial partner as individual member states possess vast natural resources from oil and gas to uranium. They are also a market for Hungarian exports.

Fourth, it is the OTS nations that make up the most important and longest segment of the Middle Corridor, in which Budapest has practiced a vested interest. The Middle Corridor connects Europe to Asia including in particular China via Turkic nations of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan across the Caspian Sea through multi-modal means of transportation. The war in Ukraine highlighted the importance of reliable transit routes between Europe and China. Connectivity with China is of paramount importance to the vision of Budapest that is determined to choose cooperation with China and others not conflict or conflictual competition in the emerging multi-polar world.

Thus, apart from the OTS's profile as a representation of the political connectivity and the profiles of their member states as strong proponents of the national sovereignty, Budapest is attracted to it for two other and even more important reasons: the OTS as a political-economic bloc and its members states as transit countries of the Middle Corridor between Europe and China/Asia are perfectly relevant to Hungary's global outlook.

From like-minded partners to mutualism

The four points listed above represent a strong illustration to the commonalities and similarities in the strategic thinking of Hungary and the Turkic states. Broader connectivity, sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, traditional and family values, and non-ideological policy and non-conflictual competition are the main considerations that find a strong resonance between them. All these justify viewing them as like-minded fellows or partners. However, a major question is whether/how they practically benefit from those factors, commonalities, and related interactions or symbiotic relations. In the below, specific, practical examples and cases are provided to illustrate the mutually beneficial character of relations and interactions in various spheres.

Politics, foreign policy and diplomacy

The Hungarian-OTS relations are vividly manifested in the political, foreign policy and diplomacy spheres. In particular, the high politics is burgeoning between the leaders of Hungary and Turkic states. The OTS representation office operates in Budapest and plays important role in the coordination of activities. It has various sections and representatives from each member state. The high-level political ties carry significant implications for other areas, in particular, developing economic relations. “Political cooperation is an important pillar of Hungarian-OTS relations. Especially high politics is developing vigorously. These high-level talks will contribute to further deepen bilateral and multilateral relations and strengthen economic ties, for which we already see many examples between Hungary and the OTS member states”¹⁹, explains Dávid Biró, the Project Coordinator of the Representation Office of the Organization of Turkic States in Hungary.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán attends almost all summits of the OTS, whether formal or informal. In July, 2024, following Budapest’s assumption of the EU presidency, he attended the informal summit of the OTS in the town of Shusha in Azerbaijan. This visit was highly symbolic and important to Azerbaijan. Shusha was liberated from the Armenian control on November 8, 2020 during the 44-day Second Karabakh War between the two nations. The 8th November was officially declared in Azerbaijan as the Victory Day. Shusha has been historically and contemporarily, symbolically and strategically most important area in Karabakh and broader Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict zone. As an EU leader, the Hungarian PM’s visit to Shusha was much appreciated by Baku, which seeks to achieve full international recognition and acceptance of the outcomes of the 2020 war in which Azerbaijan gained a victory. Hungary is the first EU nation, whose leader has paid a trip to Shusha and liberated territories of Azerbaijan. The leaders of Turkic countries including Turkish President Erdogan have visited the region. And yet back in 2013 well before the 2020 war, Shusha and the Hungarian town of Gyöngyös became twin towns in a symbolic gesture.

In this context, the EU sought to distance itself from the Hungarian PM’s visit to Shusha. The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, stated that “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s participation at the informal summit of the Organization of Turkic States in Shusha on 5-6 July

¹⁹ Dávid Biró. Interview with the author. 21.11.2024.



took place, exclusively, in the framework of the bilateral relations between Hungary and this organization” and “Hungary has not received any mandate from the EU Council to advance the relations with the Organisation of Turkic States”²⁰.

Furthermore, the involvement of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus as an observer state in the OTS was another, but more important, cause for the EU High Representative’s reaction as saying “The European Union rejects the attempts by the Organization of Turkic States to legitimize the Turkish Cypriot secessionist entity, the so-called, internationally not recognized, ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’, as an observer in the Organization of Turkic States”. It further added: “The EU has made it repeatedly clear, including at highest political level, that the EU recognizes only the Republic of Cyprus as a subject of international law, in accordance with the respective UN Security Council Resolutions”²¹. It is Turkey that pushes for the international recognition of Northern Cyprus and its involvement as an observer at the OTS provides the opportunity for international political socialization for the Northern Cypriot leadership. Moreover, the representation office of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus operates in Budapest since 2014. The Cyprus issue causes tensions between Budapest and Brussels.

Reportedly, Hungary blocked the joint statement of EU 27 that had been drafted to condemn Azerbaijan for conducting an operation on September 19, 2023 to clear the Karabakh from Armenian armed groups. As a result of the operation, Azerbaijan fully established its sovereignty all over its internationally recognized territories.

In turn, the leaders of the Turkic nations also practice a political support and solidarity towards Hungary. Illustratively, the Turkic leaders including those of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan attended the opening ceremony of the World Athletics Championships in August, 2023. The Hungarian PM described them as “political friends”²². The topic of the discussion at the sidelines of the event went far beyond the sports and athletics. In particular, natural gas supplies were on the focus.

OTS supports the proposal of Hungary to convene a joint Heads of States Summit of the Organization of Turkic States and Visegrád Group (V4) during its rotational V4 presidency in Budapest. However, this proposal is pending implementation. There is a chance for that to happen as Budapest will host the informal OTS summit in 2025.

And finally one more curious point is related to the expressed desire of Ukraine and Russia to join the OTS as an observer member. They refer to their Turkic-speaking populations to make the case for their bid. But the problem is, the largest Turkic peoples in Ukraine have been in Crimea. And now Crime is under the de-facto Russian control. Moreover, Russia has other significant Turkic regions such as Tatarstan. The OTS has refrained from commenting or reacting on the intentions of Ukraine and Russia

²⁰European Union External Action Service. The Diplomatic Service of the European Union. OTS: Statement by the High Representative on the participation of Prime Minister Orbán at the informal summit of the Organisation of Turkic States. 06.07.2024

²¹ Ibid

²²Euronews. Hungarian leader says his country will invite its "friends", but leaders from the EU and NATO are missing from the event's guest list. 19.08.2023

most probably due to its desire to avoid any embroilment in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. This case highlights the rising political importance of the OTS.

Energy, Trade & Economy

Hungarian oil and gas company MOL operates in Kazakhstani energy sector. It holds a share of 25% in the Rozhkovskoye field, which is operated by Ural Oil and Gas. Kazakhstan's KazMunayGas holds a share of 50% and the FIOC of China a share of 22.5%. The production of gas has already started²³. Furthermore, Kazakhstan is rich in uranium resources. The October 6th, 2024 Kazakhstani referendum paved the way for nuclear power development in the country. Hungarian companies could cooperate in various aspects of the nuclear power development. Yet the electricity to be produced through the nuclear power could be exported from Kazakhstan to Hungary and Europe through the proposed trans-Caspian electricity cable. There is an intention to build an Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-Azerbaijan trans-Caspian electricity cable to connect to the Black Sea submarine electricity cable project. The leaders of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Hungary and Romania have signed an agreement on the construction of the Black Sea submarine cable to transmit green electricity from Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Europe via the Black Sea.

Azerbaijani natural gas supplies have already reached Hungary. Budapest has also received natural gas shipments from Türkiye. Budapest also makes efforts to secure natural gas supplies from Central Asia including in particular Turkmenistan. But this is practically much more challenging due to absence of a trans-Caspian pipeline to bring the gas from Central Asia to Azerbaijan for further delivery to Europe. Gas supplies from Turkic states will help Budapest to diversify sources of supply. Incidentally, Budapest has reached an agreement to acquire a 5% share in the Shahdeniz gas field in Azerbaijan²⁴. Hungarian state-owned energy conglomerate MVM is the buyer of the 5% stake in Shahdeniz. This is the MVM's biggest-ever investment, yet financed through the company's own resources, according to Hungarian energy minister Csaba Lantos²⁵.

Hungary's MOL currently has a 9.57% stake in the project to develop the Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli oil block and an 8.9% stake in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project. Moreover, MOL has signed a memorandum of understanding with Azerbaijan's state oil firm SOCAR on exploration and production at the onshore Shamakhi-Gobustan oil and gas field²⁶.

Hungary is also interested in the financial sector in the Turkic nations. Its leading lender - the OTP Bank acquired 79.6% of the shares in the Ipoteka bank in Uzbekistan in 2023. OTP intends to expand its portfolio in the OTS nations. Specifically, it explores potential of investment in the Azerbaijani and Kazakhstani bank sectors²⁷.

There is also progress in cooperation in the aviation and tourism sector. In particular, Hungary's low-cost airline Wizzair is active in Azerbaijan and Turkey. Yet the negotiations are underway to launch or

²³The Astana Times. Large Rozhkovskoye Gas Condensate Field Starts Operation in Western Kazakhstan. 22.12.2023

²⁴Reuters. Hungary to buy 5% stake in Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz gas field. 05.06.2024

²⁵About Hungary. FM: Hungary and Azerbaijan sign historic gas field agreement. 06.06.2024

²⁶Interfax. Azerbaijan's SOCAR, Hungary's MOL sign memorandum on Shamakhi-Gobustan field. 23.09.2024

²⁷Ipoteka Bank. Next transaction completed. 25.12.2023

re-launch Wizzair flights between Budapest and Astana. On the one hand, these flights are helpful for boosting people-to-people contacts and contributing to the tourism sector. On the other hand, it is also significant for maintaining trade and economic ties. Cargo flights are also frequent between Hungary and Turkic countries in particular via Baku.

Hungarian Eximbank opened in 2019 a credit line for Member States of the Turkic Council. That was for businesses from Hungary and Turkic states to draw on the credit together: 195m euros for Hungarian-Turkish, 80m euros for Kazakh-Hungarian, 80m euros for Hungarian-Uzbek, 80m euros for Hungarian-Azerbaijani, and 27m euros for Hungarian-Kyrgyz business cooperation.

The OTS signed an agreement in 2023 to set up the Turkic Investment Fund based in Istanbul, Turkey. It is the first joint financial institution to serve the economic integration in the Turkic world. The main aim of the Fund is the development of economic and commercial relations among Turkic nations through joint projects. The Fund has officially started its operation in 2024 with the initial capital being \$500m. And Hungary has also joined the Turkic Investment Fund and contributed \$100m to it.

Moreover, the Hungarian-Kyrgyz Development Fund has been set up with the charter capital of \$16m in 2021 to finance various projects including a hydropower plant, horse-breeding farm and other farming initiatives in Kyrgyzstan. Hungarian agricultural and food companies are present in Kyrgyzstan. But still the Hungarian-Kyrgyz trade is tiny being just \$12m. Furthermore, Kyrgyz guest workers are allowed to work in Hungary.

Cooperation in the agricultural field is also vivid between Hungary and the Turkic states. The OTS's food security centre operates in Kazakhstan. The OTS's Draught Prevention Institute -operates in Budapest. Moreover, Hungarian pharmaceutical firms are also present in Turkic countries.

A few small or medium businesses are also present albeit in an absolutely limited way. For example, Vibracom – a noise protection company operates in Baku, Azerbaijan. Also the Hungarian brand Hell is popular in the Azerbaijani beverages market. And there is an intention to set up a Hell factory in Azerbaijan. However, there is only a few small and medium businesses involved in economic activities between Hungary and OTS nations.

Transit & infrastructural connectivity

The Middle Corridor is one of the cornerstones of Hungarian perspective on the OTS for serious economic interests and related smoother access to China and Asia. "Hungary is interested in partnering up with Turkic countries to create logistics hubs along route of the Middle Corridor"²⁸. Incidentally, very recently, Kazakhstan's national railway company KTZ signed a memorandum of understanding on November 21 in Budapest during President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's state visit to develop a joint intermodal freight terminal with Hungarian and Chinese companies in Budapest. The terminal will contribute to container traffic between China and Europe.

²⁸László Vasa. Interview with the author. Budapest, 13.11.2024



The Zangezur corridor proposed and promoted by Baku also could fall within the scope of Budapest's interests. However, the issue is sensitive and therefore, Hungary seeks to keep neutral on, if not distance itself from, the Zangezur corridor proposal. The main reason is, Budapest has just started to normalize relations with Yerevan. The bilateral ties are still quite fragile, and Hungary doesn't want to distance Armenia, which has not consented to the Zangezur project proposal. Nonetheless, the project concerns Hungarian interests for two main reasons. First, it is purportedly to be the second leg of the Middle Corridor hence strengthening and diversifying the connectivity through the Middle Corridor. Second, in case Baku and Yerevan reach a consensus on the Zangezur corridor issue, it would contribute to Armenian-Azerbaijani normalization and shaping more reliable, more predictable and more convenient environment in the region, which is desirable for Hungary.

Culture, education & sports

The Hungarian government provides hundreds of scholarships for Turkic students. Kazakhstan has recently started granting scholarships to Hungarian students. Currently 5 to 10 Hungarians students study in Kazakhstani universities. Academic cooperation is conducted in particular in the field of Turkology. The OTS has established a Turkic Academy in Kazakhstan. One main aim of the Academy is to revitalise Hungarian turkology field. Hungary has possessed an experience and research in the field of Turkology. The Academy strives to preserve and build on that Turkology basis and pass it to future generations.

The Turkic Culture and Heritage Foundation specializes in studying, supporting, preserving and promoting common Turkic culture and heritage. The World Nomad Games is held by Turkic countries. It contributes to preserving common cultural heritage on the one hand, and promoting sports on the other. The nomadic games also well resonates with the Turkic and Hungarian peoples' self-perception as horse-warriors.

Perspectives & Challenges

“Hungary, holding observer status, could play a pivotal role in the OTS's future”²⁹. To materialize that pivotal role and build more successful future, Hungary and OTS nations have a great deal of potential and ambitions. However, there are also significant challenges that mainly originate from the fact that they are part of different political-economic blocs and follow different geopolitical and economic orientations. Hungary is an EU and NATO member state. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union. Turkey is a long-term, major NATO member state with a longstanding EU candidacy status and has a Free Trade Agreement with the EU. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan follow non-aligned path and have self-imposed oblations to keep a space from the blocs, whether economic or military-political. Therefore, Hungary and individual OTS nations functions in different political, economic, legal, and technical regimes. This is the major source of challenges, if not obstacles, to furthering the cooperation more effectively and more practically. “Hungary, as an EU member state, adheres to strict

²⁹László Vasa et al. Connectivity in the Turkic way - a new cooperation format in the Multipolar world? 06.11.2024



regulatory frameworks, while Kazakhstan, as part the EAEU, follows its own standards and customs protocols. This divergence can lead to delays, increased costs, and logistical challenges in the trade of goods, particularly due to the absence of a free trade agreement between the EU and the EAEU. Customs duties, non-tariff barriers, and compliance with transit regulations further complicate economic exchanges³⁰. These also apply to Kyrgyzstan as a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. Trade between Hungary and Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan is not just about bilateral trade between the two nations. Actually, it is about the trade between the two unions – European Union and Eurasian Economic Union, in which Russia is not just a full member, but actually the leading state. This is particularly sensitive under the current circumstances as the EU has imposed sanctions against Russia. So, trading with Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan may mean trading with the Eurasian Economic Union, including Russia. This nuance further complicates the cooperation between Hungary and OTS nations.

Nonetheless, they strive to pursue cooperation that manifest itself in diverse fields and ways from politics, foreign policy and diplomacy to culture, education and sports, from transit and connectivity to energy, trade and economy. However, the relations between Hungary and OTS nations develop mainly through state-led initiatives and projects and at a macro-economic level and through big companies. The involvement of small and medium businesses remains absolutely limited, if at all, with the exception of the Turkish-Hungarian dimension. Not accidentally, the OTS nations make up just a 2% in Hungary's trade turnover. This is a major challenge that needs to be addressed!

Hungary's trade turnover with Turkic states has exceeded \$5bn in 2023 up by 20 percent from the past year. However, there is a great potential to raise this figure. And the Turkic Investment Fund is expected to contribute in that direction too. In this context, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán has voiced a hope that “companies from the OTS will invest in Hungary for economic development and growth in our countries”. In 2023, Hungary's GDP has made up over \$212bn whereas the combined figure for the OTS member states approaches \$1.9trillions. Of this, Turkey's GDP is almost 60%.

And that challenge must be addressed not only through state-led projects and big companies at macro-economic level, but also through small and medium enterprises at micro- and mid-levels and in organic ways. Of course, the state-led, macro-level big projects are of paramount importance especially at the initial stages to lay foundations. And also states play an important role in helping the international expansion of “international champions” be it an airlines, energy, construction or another company³¹. The foundations for the effective relations between Hungary and the OTS have been laid. So, now it is time to build on those foundations. And for sustainable, continuous, and organic economic growth, there is no substitute for small and medium businesses. Indeed, it is needle to say that micro, small and medium enterprises act as the “blood vessels” and “backbone” for economic growth and development.

So are the people-to-people contacts while political socialization and elite-to-elite contacts are on the rise. Specifically, Hungarian businesses are not very familiar with the local culture popular and business culture in the Turkic nations especially in Central Asia. Likewise, Turkic countries are not very familiar

³⁰Madina Igibayeva. Interview with the author. Budapest, 24.11.2024

³¹ The Equilibrium Institute. How can we become wealthier? Policy Proposal No.2., 2021.



with the Hungarian culture. Only exception here is Turkey³². Moreover, “geographical distance, stereotypical perceptions, and the divergence of political and economic orientations within the OTS are also barriers to deepening the cooperation”³³. All these especially represent a barrier or discouragement to advancing business ties between small and medium firms and at a microeconomic level between Hungary and Turkic countries. Through the cultural and business dimensions of the OTS framework, various initiatives and projects are implemented to fill the gap in that regard. Seemingly, more is yet needed to be done to achieve a tangible outcome. In particular, OTS nations and Hungary need to develop and exercise proper soft power to promote nation-brands and popular images.

Another barrier is the lack of unified or harmonized regulations including taxes, tariffs and fees in the OTS space. This is also a discouraging factor from the perspective of Hungarian businesses. Incidentally, in order to raise the attractiveness of the Middle Corridor and related transit routes through the OTS countries, there is an obvious need to harmonize procedures and tariffs. The OTS is not a single market or a customs union. To address challenges arising from that, they utterly need to unify transit procedures and tariffs, and ensure a seamless transit. And also in order to go beyond remaining a transit country and gain more added value of being a transit country, legislative and regulatory harmonization is a must.

Making a more added value from the Middle Corridor, Budapest is interested in creating logistical hubs along the route. In this regard, the Zangezur Corridor proposed and promoted by Baku would also serve an additional opportunity to raise the infrastructural connectivity to more regions. By the way, there are frequent cargo flights between Hungary and Azerbaijan or via Baku that epitomize the logistical potential. And the Baku Alyat International Port provides good opportunities for trans-Caspian transits. The vision of the Hungarian government led by PM Viktor Orbán is much outward-looking. Budapest stimulates the Hungarian businesses to invest abroad and bring home the profits. And also Budapest invites Turkic businesses to invest in Hungary. There are important takeaways from the case of Hungary for Turkic nations.

Hungary is also interested in participation in infrastructural development projects in Turkic countries. Incidentally, a Hungarian company develops a village in Azerbaijan’s liberated territories. This kind of involvements of Hungarian companies even though through state-sponsored projects is a good opportunity to build business ties, familiarize with local working cultures and expand and create business opportunities.

³²Note: Turkey is the exception because Hungary and Turkey have maintained official relations as two independent state for over 100 years; they have a shared historical ties and continuous interactions; both are long-term NATO allies, and yet they are connected through Turkey’s free trade agreement and customs union agreement with the EU. Also economically, politically and otherwise Turkey is by far more powerful than the rest of the Turkic nations.

³³Sándor Seremet. Interview with the author. Budapest, 25.11.2024



Recommendations

The following are the policy recommendations for the OTS and Hungary to advance their relations more effectively and in more sustainable and organic ways:

- a) In consideration of the fact that there are fundamental limitations arising from the affiliations and/or alignment of Hungary and OTS nations with different political, economic and military blocs, standing and/or ad hoc technocratic mechanisms are needed to set up to address the related issues and challenges, and find solutions to compensate those limitations in other areas. It must be noted that the existing high-level formats and regular ministerial meetings are useful, but can't and shouldn't be a substitute for such mechanisms;
- b) In consideration of the fact that a significant part of issues are connected to the internal limitations of the OTS, member states of the OTS should do real efforts to achieve technical, legal, procedural, and legislative harmonization, wherever possible, in order to compensate the OTS's lack of a single market and customs zone. In particular, this is vividly and expressly needed in the sphere of transportation and transits in lieu of the Middle Corridor. It must be noted that what make Hungary an important partner is that it represents a single market and customs zone of the EU as a member state;
- c) In consideration of the active OTS-Hungary high political communications, elite-to elite socialization, and state-led macro-economic projects through big companies, there is an explicit need to pay a particular attention to and promote involvement of small and medium businesses one the one hand, and advancement of people-to-people contacts on the other hand. Hungary and the OTS lack strategic, long term approaches to promoting people-to-people contacts and advancing cooperation and partnership at small and medium businesses levels. Results from such approaches wouldn't come quickly but would be more sustainable and organic. A synergy of academic, expert and policy approaches must be sought in order to convert academic knowledge and specialist expertise into practical decisions and policies to achieve better, more sustainable and efficient practical outcomes.
- d) Hungary should bring in, encourage and promote the best practices from the EU to the OTS. Therefore, Hungary and the OTS need to seek ways to develop and improve working relations with the Hungary while seeking, by all means, to avoid any tensions with the EU, even if they consider that those tensions originate from the EU. Otherwise, intrigues and tensions would obstruct effectiveness of Hungary-OTS partnership and cooperation.
- e) Finally, academic exchange programs, cultural and scholarly projects must be developed while the existing ones must be kept up but obviously more fine-tuning, designing and restyling should be done. In this context, the EU practices could be a useful source to learn from. Just as an example, Hungary and the OTS can and should develop new projects or reformat the existing ones similar to projects like the Erasmus program, Jean Monnet projects, etc. As a

starting point, creation of, for instance, Hunno-Turkic Vambery³⁴ exchange program could be considered.

Conclusion

As it was discussed in the introduction, symbiotic relations are manifested in diverse ways such as commensalism, mutualism, parasitism, and competition. The theory of Symbiotic Realism “acknowledges the importance of symbiotic relationships in which both parties benefit from their willingness to interact cooperatively and compete in a non-conflictual way”. This is specifically about the mutualism type of symbiotic relations, in which both parties benefit from the interactions and relations. The areas of cooperation and interaction are cross-sectoral and the benefits are cross-sectoral too. Namely, one party benefits in one specific sector be it political, economic, diplomatic, etc., and the other party in a different sector.

There is a lot of opportunities and perspectives and a great potential to further the relations between Hungary and the OTS nations. However, there are also significant challenges to practical materialization of that potential. Therefore, greater success depends on the ability to effectively and jointly address those challenges. Yet there are broader limitations on Hungary’s and OTS nations’ ability to deliver. Those limitations arise from their obligations connected with their respective affiliations. Hungary’s obligations arising from the membership in the EU and Kazakhstan’s and Kyrgyzstan’s in the Eurasian Economic Union, and Azerbaijan’s and Turkmenistan’s rather-self imposed obligation to keep a space from either side are just cases in point. In that regard, Turkey is in more flexible position due the fact he is not fettered by a political-economic institutional affiliation one the one hand, and its profile as much larger power than partners through the OTS.

Apart from that, almost exclusively statist and state-led approaches are predominant in the relations. Therefore, there is an obvious room for involving other sectors and fostering an environment that’s conducive to people-to-people contacts and stimulate cooperation between small and medium businesses from Hungary and OTS nations. Budapest has constantly emphasized the need to develop people-to-people contacts as well as greater trade and economic components among the Turkic Council countries³⁵.

This, in particular, would be beneficial to OTS nations to escape from the trap of remaining restricted to resource-based economy and reliance on transits instead of making added value or higher added value from the opportunities arising from the East-West or North-South connectivity and related transits. Yet to achieve more substantial results and an organic economic growth, OTS nations must act with a close eye on harmonization, if not integration, among themselves, and boost the mutual

³⁴ Armin Vambery (1832-1913) is a historic personage, public figure, intellectual, traveler, and Turkologist of Hungarian origin. His profile makes him an absolutely unique personage to symbolize Hunno-Turkic ties.

³⁵Rahim Rahimov. Turkic Council, Non-Aligned Movement Summits Illuminate Azerbaijan’s Foreign Policy Strategy and Priorities. Eurasia Daily Monitor. Vol 16, Issue 151, Jamestown Foundation. Washington DC, USA.30.09.2019



benefits. In contrast, Budapest practices a prudent policy towards the OTS nations at all economic levels – including small and medium enterprises, and through diverse tools including allocation of loans. Incidentally, Hungary regards the OTS rather as a platform or an umbrella organization of the Turkic states on the one hand, and advances its relations with the Turkic nations individually on the other hand.

Budapest may bring and promote best experiences from the EU to the OTS space wherever appropriate. Academic exchange programs could be just example because if for no other reason than that may be beneficial also economically in mid to long term. Incidentally, the development and exercise of the soft power are much need on part of both the OTS nations and Hungary, and academic programs would be an effective starting point.

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