

# BAKU DIALOGUES

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# A Model for Connectivity

## Hungary's Strong Bond with the Turkic World

*Balázs Orbán*

For more than one thousand years, Hungary has existed in the heart of Europe, drawing from our rich history and unique geographic location. Sovereignty has emerged as a cornerstone of our national strategy, influenced by our past and our geography. While we align ourselves with the West, we also cherish our Eastern heritage. Taking a pragmatic approach, we strive to build meaningful connections and engage with the non-Western world. Balancing our Western ties with our Eastern roots, Hungary seeks to foster productive relationships and promote connectivity across diverse global landscapes.

In the early 1990s, Central Europe experienced significant regime changes as countries liberated themselves from four decades

of communist rule and reclaimed their independence. However, in Hungary and other Central European states, the political elite failed to fully leverage this newfound sovereignty. While the aspiration to reintegrate Hungary into the Western cultural, economic, and political sphere was well-founded—as our country had a century-long history of belonging to the West—the emphasis on this objective led to a neglect of our relationships with the non-Western world. This oversight occurred despite clear and indisputable indications that the non-Western world was quickly catching up with the West.

Subsequent governments, driven by political loyalty to the West, overlooked the vast potential Hungary possessed in terms of economic

and cultural relations with the non-Western world—particularly through pragmatic diplomacy. However, a significant shift occurred after the landslide victory in 2010, when the Viktor Orbán government took charge and decided to change course. Since then, connectivity has become the central guiding principle of our foreign policy and our foreign economic

policy, emphasizing the importance of forging meaningful connections, diversifying trade, forging value chains, establishing diplomatic relations with multiple regions, all the while also preserving our national sovereignty in the process.

Our collaboration with the Turkic world is a clear demonstration of our ability to implement our strategy. A decade ago, Hungary initiated our Eastern Opening Policy, which has become a key component of our connectivity strategy, with a special focus on Turkic countries. Over the past ten years, we have witnessed tangible outcomes: the trade volume between Hungary and the Turkic states has doubled, and we have

developed extensive cooperation in higher education and the defense industry. Additionally, the Turkic states—particularly Türkiye and

Azerbaijan—have played a crucial role in ensuring Hungary's energy security. What truly sets apart our collaboration with the Turkic countries is the cultural affinity and the mutual sentiment that accompanies it. This is evident from Hungary's

unique status as the only Western country with observer status in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).

We find ourselves in a challenging period marked by major geopolitical and geo-economic transformations due to ongoing conflicts. There is a growing probability of a multipolar world emerging, divided into blocs similar to the situation that characterized the Cold War era. Nevertheless, we firmly believe that despite all these challenges, our common perspective on sovereignty and global connectivity will not only help us navigate these challenges but also deepen the bond between Hungary and the Turkic states in the future.

*Hungary will remain committed to its balanced multi-vectoral foreign policy. In the age of risks, we have to diversify, and both the OTS and its member states provide great opportunities for cooperation.*

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## The Hungarian Connection

Our rich Eastern, and particularly Turkic, heritage has not only captivated the scientific community but also influenced our political landscape. Exploring and understanding our Turkic cultural roots served as a significant reference point for shaping our self-image and identity, especially during the prolonged periods of Habsburg and Soviet rule, which intentionally distorted our Hungarian identity. As disillusionment grew among Hungarians during the transition to liberal democracy, our Turkic heritage provided a source of inspiration and momentum, prompting political communities to actively engage with it.

Little known to the outside world, there is a serious debate raging in Hungary about the origins of our nation. Two prominent schools of thought have emerged. One asserts that Hungarians belong to the Finno-Ugric grouping of nations, sharing deep connections with Finns, Estonians, and small Uralic communities in present-day Russia; the other emphasizes that the Hungarians are

more connected to the Turkic people culturally and even linguistically, having migrated from the Central Asian steppes to the Carpathian Basin during the Migration Period. Although Hungarian historians fiercely debate our origins, one undeniable fact remains: Hungarian tribes have had extensive interactions with Turkic tribes and nations for the past two millennia, leading to significant cultural and historical connections with the Turkic world.

The rise of the Turkic school gained momentum in the 1910s, presenting an alternative to Habsburg rule by emphasizing the non-Western aspect of Hungarian identity. The establishment of the Hungarian Asiatic Society in 1910 aimed to deepen understanding of Asian nations and leverage this knowledge to advance Hungarian foreign policy and the nation's economic interests. Renowned figures of the time, including geographer Jenő Cholnoky, explorer Ármin

Vámbéry, and future prime ministers Pál Teleki and Mihály Károlyi, were members of the Society. Teleki, a prominent geographer, authored the inaugural article of the Society's journal,

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Túrán, proclaiming, "To the East, Hungarians!" The Society organized and funded numerous expeditions to the Caspian Sea, the Aral Lake, and the Caucasus Mountains, amassing valuable ethnographic materials and firsthand knowledge from these regions. The Society also tried to increase Hungarian exports to the Ottoman Empire and invited students to Hungary from the whole Turkic world.

During the 1930s and 1940s, as well as under communist rule, political discourse in Hungary was constrained by ideology. It was only with the regime change in the late 1980s that this discourse began to regain its vitality. Following our re-emergence as a free nation in 1989, interest in the Turkic connection resurfaced. Ethnographers—who had played a significant role in opposition movements during the 1980s—were among the first to explore this connection. Subsequently, historians embarked on archeological and ethnographical expeditions to the southern slopes of the Ural Mountains in Kazakhstan. Their research yielded substantial evidence supporting the

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Turkic-oriented scholarly group of Hungarian history, shedding light on the origins of the Hungarian nation. In the 2010s, the field of archaeogenetics further reinforced these findings, revealing

that Turkic people have a more significant presence in the Hungarian nation's cultural and tribal mix than previously understood.

## History Meets the Present

Together with our ongoing struggle for self-definition and a growing awareness of our historical ties to the Turkic nations, Hungary's foreign policy interests have also been directed towards fostering connections with Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent economic and social challenges faced by both Hungary and the Turkic states, resources were limited, impeding meaningful engagement at that time. As we gradually recovered and regained stability, our focus shifted towards exploring and strengthening our connections and relationships to their fullest potential. We aimed to broaden our

horizons and embraced the opportunities for collaboration and cooperation from Tashkent to Tokyo.

Hungary has successfully integrated into the Western world, becoming a member of NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. Our close partnerships with Western countries have attracted significant foreign direct investment and fostered robust foreign trade. However, the 2008 economic crisis reminded us of the importance of not relying solely on one source. In 2010, as the newly-elected Hungarian government sought solutions to address the economic challenges inherited from the previous administration's mismanagement, we recognized the need to expand our trade and investment horizons beyond those offered by our fellow EU member states. Diversifying our portfolio became a priority in our pursuit of economic stability and growth.

Following the economic crisis, Hungary swiftly formulated its new foreign policy priorities. In 2013, the Eastern Opening Policy was introduced, signaling a renewed focus on our Eastern partners, spanning from Azerbaijan to China and Japan. Some have criticized this policy, suggesting that Hungary aims to distance itself from the West and its progressive values. However, our approach was

driven by pragmatism. With 80 percent of our trade and foreign direct investment stemming from the West, the vulnerabilities exposed by the 2008 crisis necessitated diversification as a matter of urgency and comprehensiveness. The financial crisis highlighted Hungary's imbalanced international economic dependencies, leaving the country susceptible to shocks. To enhance resilience, managing these interdependencies became crucial, ensuring that the benefits outweighed the drawbacks. Hungary's Eastern Opening Policy has emerged as a key component in this process of dependency management.

Furthermore, it has become evident that the global economic center of gravity is shifting towards the East, with Central and Eastern Asia expected to experience greater growth than the Western world in the coming years. Hungary recognizes the significance of participating in these processes to accelerate its own economic development. In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, Hungary took measures to diversify its economy and reduce reliance on a few key trading partners. The country has actively sought foreign investment, particularly from Asian countries, and has prioritized strengthening economic ties with countries located in that part of the world.

In addition to deepening economic connections with China, Hungary has placed importance on fostering relationships with the Turkic states. Recognizing the shared cultural and historical heritage between Hungary and those nations, the government has focused on enhancing economic and diplomatic cooperation. Alongside economic diversification, Hungary has also aimed to strengthen its cultural and political ties with other parts of Asia. This includes promoting Hungarian culture and language in the region and establishing partnerships with Asian universities and research institutions.

By pursuing these strategies, Hungary seeks to position itself as a pivotal hub for trade, investment, and innovation between Asia and Europe. The country acknowledges the need to effectively manage interdependencies and diversify its economy for enhanced resilience against crises. Through active engagement with the dynamic Asian economies, Hungary aims to secure long-term economic growth and prosperity.

Hungary was not the only EU member state to recognize the importance of strengthening ties with Asian countries. All EU member states were actively seeking to enhance their relations with Asian

countries, with varying degrees of success. For example, China has become Germany's largest trading partner. However, what distinguished Hungary was its specific focus on the Turkic countries. While Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia were not at the forefront of attention for the main Western countries in the early 2010s, Hungary's historical and cultural connections to those nations, along with the knowledge it had acquired over the past decades, led it to recognize the potential benefits and competitive advantages of engaging with the Turkic states. Hungary saw the opportunity to tap into niche areas where it could leverage its strengths and establish fruitful partnerships.

### *Rediscovery*

In the meantime, the Turkic states got back on their feet again, and in doing so began to organize themselves institutionally: the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States (as the Turkic Council was formally called) was established in 2009 through the Nakhchivan Agreement. The name changed to the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in 2021 during the Istanbul Summit. As Turkic cooperation began to take on a more concrete shape, it became logical for the Hungarian government to

look more closely at this nascent organization, and to take the necessary measures to build bridges with it. This eventually led to Hungary's inclusion in the Turkic Council in 2018 as an observer, a status we have retained ever since.

Lot of ink and bytes have been spilled to characterize the OTS as an attempt to reshape world order, promote minilateralism, project Ankara's more active foreign policy deeper past its eastern frontier, or to make use of cross-civilizational cleavages in the Huntingtonian manner to carve up Central Asia into different spheres of influence. However, the geopolitical dimension is not the main driving force of Hungary's involvement in the OTS.

The first reason we are engaging with the OTS is rooted in our history, culture, and strategic thinking. As noted above, Hungarians are defining ourselves through the virtues of patriotism, and our Turkic heritage is an integral part of that endeavor. Regardless of whether we are pro-Western or not, every Hungarian knows that our Easternness is a significant part of our national character and national inheritance, and therefore is one of the cornerstones of Hungarian national identity. This makes Hungary a bridge between East and West: the Turkic

world, from where we come, and the West, to which we belong. Our journey has been long, tiresome, and sometimes bloody, but Turkic persistence and the will to fight have kept us going even during the hard times.

Second, the Hungarian strategy of engaging with the OTS is based on the idea of connectivity. The concept of connectivity originates in the field of research on complex networks, and from there it has transitioned into the realm of political and public policy research. In terms of international relations, the best way to manage complex interdependencies is by using a connectivity-based strategy that involves building as many and as deep relationships as possible with different parts of the world. Increasing the number of connections not only enhances the significance of a state in international relations but also provides a driving force for the economy and increases a country's resilience and crisis resistance.

Beyond these general benefits, certain features of Hungary are particularly suitable for exploiting the opportunities inherent in connectivity. On the one hand, the country is located along civilizational fault lines, having good connections with actors from both the Western and non-Western worlds, which

makes it easy to play a mediating or pivoting role. On the other hand, numerous east-west trade routes pass through Hungary, making it possible for the country to become one of the regional distribution hubs for this trade. Hungary takes inspiration from those scholars that have identified earlier Azerbaijani efforts to position itself as a "key-stone state" in its part of the world, and Budapest might consider one day to become such a country later on in the Central and Eastern European region.

We believe in ever closer ties with all countries around the world, not only in business and politics, but also in culture, education, research, and people-to-people contacts. Whoever is willing to engage in cooperation based on mutual respect and mutual interests is Hungary's natural partner, and we have found excellent and reliable partners in the OTS member states. With a twist of irony and history, other European countries have also now recognized this, after the northern overland route to China was blocked by the decision to impose sanctions

on Russia after it attacked Ukraine in February 2022; but Hungary's interest is not based on selfishness and greed. Not only did we start to invest in this relationship before it became trendy to do so, but we offered to serve the interest of the OTS as a whole by providing direct access to the European Union, and we also volunteered to establish and sponsor the first OTS Permanent Representation in the EU, which is currently headquartered in Budapest and hosts diplomats from all the OTS Member States.

Apart from economic cooperation, trade, and investment, which has doubled in the last decade, the cultural dimension of our engagement with the OTS is equally important. Hungarians cherish their Turkic origins, and scientific and educational cooperation has been booming in the past few years. Hungary is offering hundreds of fully funded Stipendium Hungaricum scholarships for university students from Turkic states to pursue full degree studies at Hungarian universities. Efforts are also being made to increase the number of

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Hungarian students studying in the OTS region. Special research centers in the field of agriculture are being established with OTS member states, and further projects are being discussed to solve the pressing problems of drought, desertification, and sustainable crop production in the Central Asian countries. We believe that, at the end of the day, these small differences do count and can really make a difference.

### Looking Ahead

Hungary will remain committed to its balanced multi-vectoral foreign policy. In the age of risks, we have to diversify, and both the OTS and its member states provide great opportunities for cooperation. Our participation in the OTS enables us to strengthen our national identity, enhances scientific and cultural cooperation with the Turkic States, and helps us to rediscover our roots. Our observer status in the OTS enables Hungary to act as a bridge between the OTS and the EU, thereby directly contributing to connectivity between Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe.

Hungary's participation in the OTS also facilitates the strengthening of inter-civilizational

awareness and the expansion of related cultural and scientific cooperation; ensures our country's role as a bridge between the Turkic world and the EU through the implementation of Hungary's connectivity strategy; helps to execute our Eastern Opening Policy; contributes to the strengthening of the Hungarian economy; and increases Hungary's overall room for maneuver. Importantly, all of this is in line with the OTS's Turkic World Vision 2040 initiative. In this context, it is of particular importance that the benefits for Hungary in being a part of the OTS are complementary to, and reinforce, our bilateral relations with each of its member states.

Both academic scholarship and policy discourse concerning the Turkic world in general and the OTS in particular is primarily focused on two main aspects: the geopolitical one, which highlights the growing influence of Türkiye and other Turkic countries, and the economic one, which explores the benefits of cooperation among its members. Although Hungary both acknowledges and embraces the significance of these two aspects, a crucial third one also holds particular importance for us: the role of the OTS in fostering connections, bridging gaps, and enhancing mobility.

The OTS serves as a vital civilizational and diplomatic bridge, connecting the Turkic civilization with other important civilizations, such as the Western, Chinese, Indian, and Russian civilizations. Taken as a whole, the Turkic civilization generally conducts itself in a cooperative manner towards other civilizational centers and states, contributing to global balance and stability—not to mention the further enhancement of understanding and mutual respect between Islam and Christianity.

This civilizational perspective complements and advances existing approaches that were previously dominated by economic, national, class, racial, and colonial perspectives. Scholars like Niall Ferguson and Amitav Acharya have made significant contributions to this multidisciplinary field of study, particularly in deepening our understanding of the dynamics of our emerging multicivilizational and multipolar world order. By embracing this broader perspective, we stand to gain valuable insights into the complexities of global affairs and the role of civilizations in shaping international relations.

The Hungarian strategy regarding the OTS rests on two key principles: endorsing the organization's role as a bridge within the international system and promoting the partnership between the OTS and the EU. Our objective is to enhance and reinforce global and bilateral connectivity. To achieve these strategic goals, practical measures must be taken, such as actively participating in OTS initiatives and fostering economic, cultural, scientific, and interpersonal relations with all its member states and partners.

This also requires for us to re-emphasize the role of geography, which means taking seriously the fact that both its importance and impact continues to shape the economic fortunes of any country. In this regard, as noted above, the Hungarian strategy is clearly fo-

cused on connectivity: trading and working together with all countries, who are willing to accept us and trade with us on equitable terms. But the foundation of trade is logistics and infrastructure, and the war in Ukraine once

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again highlights the fragility of global transport and value chains, which has in turn hindered trade and investment between Europe and the world's up-and-coming economic center, Asia.

In this regard, all the OTS member states are playing crucial roles. With the northern overland route between China and Europe all but officially closed for reasons discussed above, trade and goods will have to find a new way across the Eurasian landmass. Even a cursory look at the map tells us that the Turkic states are all lined up along the new (or, rather, the very old) Silk Road (I assume this is one reason this journal's subtitle contains the phrase "Silk Road region"). Utilizing this opportunity might also propel Hungary to a position it envisages for itself in the future: to serve as a logistics and trade hub for Central, and later on, all of Europe. But to unlock this potential, we need partners, and the OTS member states are already valuable and reliable ones in what could turn out to be a generational undertaking.

The Middle Corridor, which is gaining importance on a daily basis, will offer a new opportunity for the entire European continent. But years of mistrust and unfounded criticism that different leaders from the EU and its member states have been voicing against some of the most successful South Caucasus and Central Asian states are obviously not helpful—particularly since it is manifestly in the interest of the European Union to build new connections with those countries—and with the "Silk Road region" as a whole.

Hungary's special position, the network we have built, and the excellent cooperation we have with both the OTS and its member states

can help the EU to overcome these issues. The Middle Corridor will be crucial for the future economic development of Europe, and we are willing and able to contribute to the development of this project. Different Hungarian companies are looking at how we can better connect the South Caucasus and Central Asia to the EU via air routes, and Hungary is a vocal proponent of fully

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unlocking the potential of overland road and rail connections, too. Our strategic cooperation with Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan will enable us to play a leading role in the re-establishment of the Silk Road, to the benefit of all the countries along the way.

But at the end of the day, our commitment to fair international cooperation, non-interference into the domestic affairs of UN member states, our genuine belief in connectivity, as well as our respectful attitude towards our partners will allow us to further enhance our relationship with the OTS and its

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member states. We do not only talk about connectivity: we put our money where our mouth is. From providing university scholarships to founding state-of-the-art research centers, from engaging the OTS member states at the highest political levels to down-to-earth people to people contacts, Hungary is ready and willing to further contribute to the development of the OTS, which we consider to be one of the most promising international organizations of our time. We will remain the Westernmost Eastern nation in the future as well, and our fellow Turkic nations will be able to count on our support. **BD**

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