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“A Beautiful Future for Central Europe:” Hungary’s Regional Policy in the Period 2010–2013¹

Dariusz Kałan

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has, from the beginning of his tenure, made public declarations of his deep engagement with cooperation in the region, and outlined very ambitious visions about its future. The idea to make 2013, the year of Hungary’s presidencies of the Visegrad Group and the Central European Initiative, a Central European year, is a part of the policy of special attachment to regional matters too. However, there is a visible gap between politicians’ rhetoric and their activity. This is especially true regarding Hungary’s dialogue with Romania and Slovakia, which, due to many historical, social and psychological obstacles, has always been most challenging for leaders in Budapest. Orbán’s government, though, by taking steps to culturally and politically unify Hungarians from the Carpathian Basin, promoting historically ambiguous persons and inviting revisionists such as Erika Steinbach to parliament, not only fails to engender a good atmosphere in the region, but also proves how lively among the country’s governing elite are both resentments from the past and temptations to use them to achieve temporary political goals.

A Great Vision: Central Europe as the New Heart of the Continent?

When, almost 80 years ago, Polish journalist Konrad Wrzos asked Hungary’s head of state regent Miklós Horthy, what the country’s policy in the region was, the response was: “Our geographic position is of the kind that, without us, nothing in the Carpathian Basin, neither from the political nor economic point of view, can be done.”² Today, although the geopolitical situation of both Hungary and the region have improved unequivocally, the current leadership of the country could actually say the same. But in his speeches and interviews, Viktor Orbán has not only emphasised the need for Hungary’s involvement in Central European (CE) matters, but has also shaped quite courageous visions about the region’s future. At the 2011 European Economic Congress in Katowice, he noted that CE would, in 20 years, be the most

¹ This analysis was prepared in Budapest and supported by the Balassi Institute programme. Basic sources of information were personal interviews with decision-makers, diplomats, experts and journalists from all below-mentioned countries, Hungarian and international media, and statistical data.

² K. Wrzos, *Wulkany Europy: Austria – Węgry – Bałkany*, Towarzystwo Wydawnicze Rój, Warszawa, 1936, p. 65.

competitive part of Europe.³ Why is this so? The concept of a “beautiful future for CE” is based on at least three pillars.

Central Europe is awaiting a beautiful future. If all needed reforms are carried out, in the coming years a broad and strong space of development will be established, here, between the Baltic and the Adriatic.

Viktor Orbán, 7 May 2012, Zagreb

Firstly, like George Friedman, author of the futuristic essay “The Next 100 Years,” Orbán seems to believe that the rise of the region will be a simple consequence of both the collapse of the existing centres of global political and economic life and the corrosion of the system of international institutions.. He has stressed regularly that the gradual decline of the West can be seen as a result of unlimited consumption, lack of respect for work, and willingness to incur debts, the “sins” that Hungary under his premiership have successfully avoided. However, it is not only the economic crisis, but also a shift from Europe’s historical and spiritual heritage, that reportedly contributes to changes in global geopolitics.

Secondly, according to Orbán, the vision of a strong CE is justified by its own economic potential. A few months ago, during a lecture at the University of Helsinki, he noted optimistically that, according to experts, CE could become the growth engine of the continent, and that if CE countries had been able to become members of the EU at the beginning of the 1990s, the union would have been in a much stronger position to face the challenges of the crisis. It is interesting that, in his view, this jump is not necessarily connected to recent economic measures taken by individual governments, but rather to general and more historically-rooted “skills and attitudes” of Central Europeans and their natural work productivity.

And thirdly, there is among the Hungarian political elite a steady belief that CE will be able to establish a kind of “special partnership” with non-European countries from the East, which, while searching for an opportunity to invest in the EU, will choose the region as their gateway. The Orbán government has made enhanced Asian ties a cornerstone of its foreign policy and its diplomatic efforts have concentrated increasingly on reinforcing the country’s contacts with a large part of the continent, from Northeast Asia through Central Asia and Transcaucasia, to the Persian Gulf. The main aim was, however, to attract China. Significantly, while welcoming the Chinese prime minister in Budapest in June 2011, Orbán praised not only his country, but the economic abilities of the whole region from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic, comprising more than 100 million people.

Indeed, the vision itself seems to be both attractive and comprehensive. However, Orbán focuses mostly on the economic and geopolitical capacity of CE, but one should expect that Hungary, striving under his leadership to become “a strong driver in the region,” would also become an example of a responsible dialogue creator on bilateral matters. There are specific countries, such as the Czech Republic and Poland, with whom contacts have been always cordial, and they remain so under Orbán. But, when it comes to the more complicated relationships with states where the question of a Hungarian minority or historical resentments are still active, the current government in Budapest is not always able to separate its strategic from temporary political goals. A mixture of tactical mistakes, the dominance of ideology over pragmatism, the need to maintain tensions for domestic purposes, and the domination of the national “hawks” rather than “doves” in Orbán’s closest circle (See Annex 3) contribute to the fact that Hungary sometimes heats the atmosphere in the region, rather than laying the foundations for compromise.

Viktor vs Victor: Tug of War with Romania

Looking at the relationship with Romania, one could easily detect the general attitude of Orbán’s Hungary towards neighbouring states. Using his own strong position in the country, but also drawing on the lessons of a socialist government for which the failure to maintain good relations with Slovakia in 2007–2010 was due largely to emotional and personal misunderstandings, Budapest directed its efforts to build ties based

³ Speeches and interviews are available in Hungarian and English at www.miniszterelnok.hu and www.kormany.hu.

on good individual contacts between the leaders. In Romania, this “personal diplomacy” was all the more justified by a long-term friendship between Orbán and a powerful centre-right president Traian Băsescu, and the fact that these leaders’ parties, Fidesz in Hungary and the Democratic Liberal Party (PDL) in Romania, belonged to the same group in the European Parliament. That is why Fidesz politicians did not hesitate to back Băsescu, even in his domestic disputes, engaging themselves in the issue to such an extent that, during the 2012 presidential dismissal referendum, they urged Hungarians living in Romania not to vote.

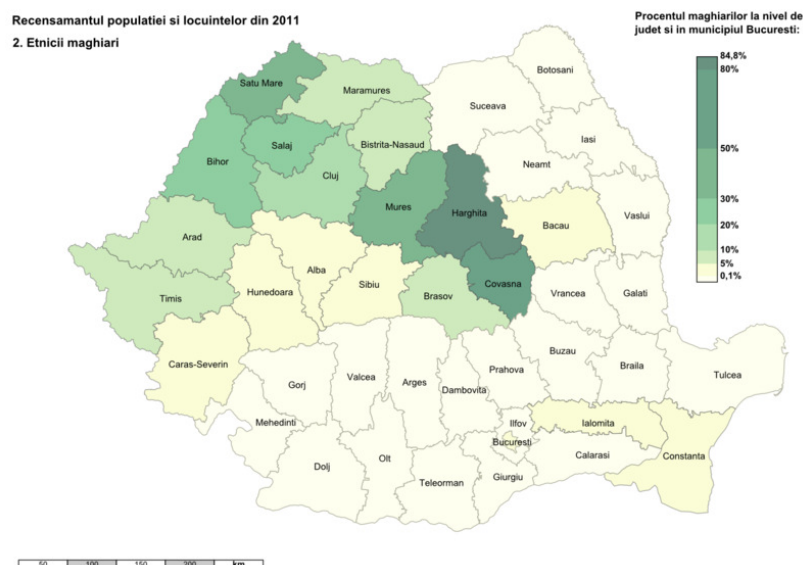
An inevitable success of “personal diplomacy” was to relieve tensions between the countries and improve atmosphere, which in the past was hardly as good as at that time. The main focus was on common strategic initiatives concerning energy security, such as the Romanian–Hungarian gas interconnector and joint efforts to push the AGRI project (gas transport from Azerbaijan via Georgia and the Black Sea to Romania and Hungary). Politicians concentrated also on cooperation at EU level, since both Hungary and Romania had similar positions on the enlargement of the Schengen Area, the implementation of the European Union Strategy for the Danube Region, and negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014–2020. It is therefore not surprising that temptation to formalise the relationship emerged: it was Orbán’s idea to set up a kind of Hungarian–Polish–Romanian alliance, which he discussed during his very first foreign visit, to Warsaw, in June 2010. Polish diplomats gave this concept a rather cold welcome, afraid not only that such an alliance could become an unwanted alternative to the Visegrad Group, but also that the Hungarian–Romanian friendship was in fact built on too weak foundations. And they were right.

It soon became clear that Budapest had made a mistake, not only in basing the country’s strategy almost purely on contacts with Băsescu and his political environment, but also in publically reprimanding the Romanian opposition to the president. When the latter unexpectedly came to power in May 2012, Hungary was automatically drawn into domestic competition between Băsescu and Victor Ponta, the new prime minister at the head of the broad socialist-national-liberal coalition. A stormy dispute between them included the issue of relations with their western neighbour, and above all the position of the strong Hungarian minority (around 1.2 million, 6.5% of Romania’s population), which once again became a hot political issue.⁴ When power was in the hands of the conservatives and their coalition partner, the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR), Romania’s policy did indeed lean towards compromise; Bucharest not only accepted that the Hungarian minority in Romania could be granted Hungarian citizenship, but also did not oppose the organisation of Fidesz annual meetings in the Romanian city of Băile Tuşnad, where the party’s leaders gave speeches which could, by some, be perceived as provocative.⁵

⁴ The most spectacular clash between Hungary and Romania on minorities—the so-called “the war of the flag”—took place in February 2013. The Székelys, an autochthonous Hungarian-speaking minority, which in the two districts of Transylvania accounts for 80% of the local population and fights for its autonomy, displayed a Székelys flag at the Budafok city hall in Covasna. The Romanian side argued that this was illegal, since the Hungarian flag, not the Székelys flag, was registered as the official symbol of the minority. This was firmly rebuffed by Zsolt Németh, State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and by the Hungarian ambassador in Bucharest, Oszkár Fűzes. The latter was in return threatened with expulsion from the country by the Romanian government.

⁵ Since 1990, Fidesz has been organising the summer course called Bálványos Free University in Băile Tuşnad, a small town in the Romanian Harghita County, where 94% of the population are Székelys. Recently, during meetings with local Hungarians, politicians of the ruling party have been giving talks about Hungary’s national policy. For example, the 2010 session was held under the slogan of “the unification and strengthening of the Hungarian nation across borders.” The Romanian left-wing opposition often accused Fidesz of using these sessions for spreading nationalism and racism.

Hungarians in Romania, 2011



Source: Wikipedia, based on the national census in Romania from 2011.

After the change of government in Bucharest, the Hungarian–Romanian conflict reignited spectacularly. According to Budapest, Ponta decided to modify the former strategy towards minorities, either by directly targeting their rights or by pushing for domestic transformations that could be detrimental to them. It is true that the exchange of accusations with Hungary offered an opportunity to distract attention from the domestic political crisis in Romania, but Budapest was not interested in extinguishing the conflict either. For Hungarian politicians, such a resolution would require the withdrawal from the previous policy of dividing the Romanian political scene into good and bad sheriffs.⁶ They had no intention of doing so, and that is why they started to heat the atmosphere in order to use the dispute to achieve temporary political goals in their country, just as Ponta was doing. And the more Ponta tried to distinguish himself from Băseșcu’s policy, the more the Hungarian government supported autonomist tendencies among the Székelys autochthonous Hungarian-speaking minority (around 49% of Hungarians in Romania), quite unrealistically believing that parliament, unstable as it was, but still dominated by the social-national-liberals, would agree on that during the current tenure.

It is thus hard to escape the impression that the current erosion of the Hungarian–Romanian partnership is rather about the individual ambitions of politicians (from both sides), and that minority rights are used as an instrument rather than the main goal. After all, the Romanian case showed how risky and treacherous the concept of “personal diplomacy” may be, for its success is equally dependent on the leader’s strength, contacts and sensitivity, and on the domestic situation in the foreign country. It can always take an unexpected turn, and those whom one once defined explicitly as enemies may someday become partners in dialogue. The last three years of the Hungary–Romania relationship could be compared to a pendulum or, more precisely, a tug of war competition: Orbán’s “personal diplomacy” bore fruit only as long as Băseșcu had the final say in the country’s decision-making. However, when Ponta appeared, Budapest’s involvement was used against him and the relations between the two became much worse than they would have been if Hungarian leaders had kept at more of a distance from domestic developments in Romania.

⁶ Orbán expressed it more ambiguously: “patriots” vs “internationalists,” speech of 28 July 2012, Băile Tușnad.

The Calm before the Storm? A Two-Track Policy towards Slovakia

Compared to the quite turbulent cooperation with Romania, Hungary's current relationship with its northern neighbour, Slovakia, appears at first glance to be much easier. Here, the method of "personal diplomacy" has been implemented too. It runs unexpectedly smoothly, given that single parties with overwhelming parliamentary majorities are in power in both countries (Fidesz in Hungary and the left-wing SMER-Social Democracy, since April 2012, in Slovakia), and that these parties are headed by ideologically opposite leaders who each have a tendency towards populist gestures regarding nationhood.

Orbán and Robert Fico have met at least six times at a bilateral level during the past year, including the joint opening of the new bridge in the border city of Komárom, watching football games together in Bratislava, and sharing ideas for tackling the crisis, at the Hungarian–Slovak Economic Forum, during which Orbán generously praised "a talented and successful neighbour" for a good economic performance. The country's presidents also became involved in strengthening diplomatic ties, which resulted in Ivan Gašparovič's visit to Budapest in February 2013; this fact would have been wholly unremarkable, had it not been the first visit of the Slovak head of state to Hungary in nine years.⁷ The rhetoric has thus changed visibly, especially in comparison to the 2007–2010 period, when Hungarian–Slovak relations were known as a "cold war."

However, it is hard to escape the impression that, despite this personal intimacy at the highest political level, problems between Hungary and Slovakia remain unsolved. They are, again, concentrated on the question of the Hungarian diaspora, in this case living in the border areas of the southern part of Slovakia (around 460.000, 8.5% of the country's population). In spite of the fact that there exists a quite well-developed general legislation for minorities, their day to day lives are limited by two harsh laws. One restricts the use of Hungarian language in Slovakia, and the second bars Slovak citizens from adopting dual nationality; both laws were passed during the first Fico government, in 2009 and 2010 respectively.⁸ Moreover, there is still an emotional historical dispute about the post-Second World War Beneš Decrees, which for Hungary resulted in compulsory expulsions of some of its citizens from the territory of the former Czechoslovakia.⁹ Unlike in Romania, though, the situation of minorities in Slovakia has not been prioritised by the government in Budapest to such an extent that it could have a negative influence on diplomatic relations between the two nations.

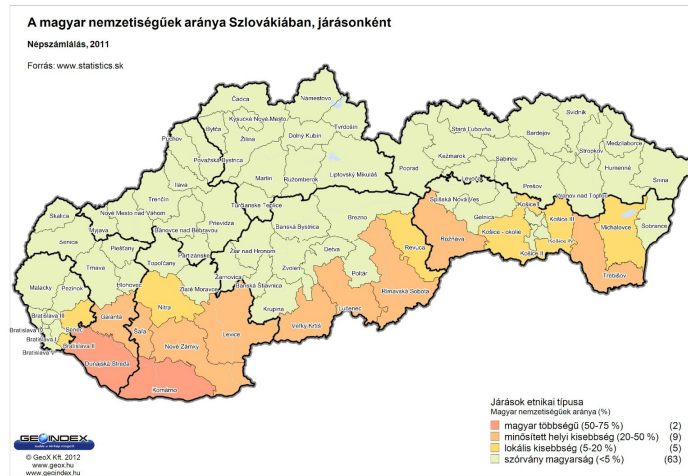
Surprisingly, Hungary actually has more reasons to be firm towards Slovakia, rather than towards Romania, as the situation of the minorities in the latter is better, despite the lack of autonomy. Hungary's more conciliatory attitude towards Bratislava is a significant difference here. In Slovakia, there are far fewer Hungarians, and they are not as well organised as those in Romania. Also, Fico's domination on the Slovak political scene and the lack of a strong centre-right partner for Orbán, as well as Bratislava's efforts to build an image as a trouble-free EU Member State, contribute to the current two-track policy of "small realism." The voices raised about the common strategic goals, such as the Hungarian-Slovak interconnector planned to be built in 2015 and modernisation of the Adria oil pipeline are strident; talk about problems is quiet.

⁷ Compared to Romania, where there have not yet been any official meetings between either the prime ministers, Orbán and Ponta, or the presidents, Áder and Băsescu. Neither have any Hungarian–Romanian governmental sessions been held during Fidesz's term in power, while in July 2013, Budapest hosted such a session between the Hungarian and Slovak governments.

⁸ The 2010 Slovakian citizenship law that means any Slovak who acquires another country's citizenship will be stripped of their Slovak citizenship was a response to Hungary's law, which made it easier for ethnic Hungarians living outside Hungary to acquire Hungarian citizenship (this was later softened somewhat by the Radičová government). In 2012, at the Fico–Orbán meeting in Warsaw, the Slovak prime minister promised that his government would modify this amendment. Currently it is under review by the Constitutional Court. As for the 2009 modification of the language law, which issued penalties for not using Slovak even in the territories dominated by minorities, despite similar declarations, no steps have yet been undertaken to change these paragraphs.

⁹ The Beneš Decrees are touched upon by both Fidesz politicians and Hungarian ethnic leaders from Slovakia, who demand an apology to Hungarian Slovaks in the same way that Slovakia apologised to Carpathian Germans in 1990, and sometimes even full financial contribution for expulsions (Fidesz mayor of Komárom, April 2013). However, in October 2012, Fico clearly cut off debate on this subject, saying that the Beneš Decrees "cannot be changed."

Hungarians in Slovakia, 2011



Source: Wikipedia, based on the national census in Slovakia from 2011.

With Romania it is, indeed, the exact opposite, despite an even stronger treaty relationship.¹⁰ However, this does not mean that the position will not someday be reversed. Hungarian leaders do not hide their attachment to a national historical policy, which in their opinion aims at the consolidation of the Hungarian people, but which for the external observer may appear problematic, especially if it is carried out by taking actions to politically and economically unify Hungarians from the Carpathian Basin,¹¹ promoting historically ambiguous persons (such as Horthy and less well-known but equally controversial right wing writers József Nyirő or Cécile Tormay) or inviting revisionists such as Erika Steinbach to parliament.¹² When certain specific signals from Slovakia are also taken into consideration, it seems to be quite likely that the current amicable relationship between Budapest and Bratislava will not last long, especially as parliamentary elections in both countries get closer (in 2014 in Hungary and 2016 in Slovakia).¹³

We did not establish our independent state in the first place for minorities, although we do respect them, but mainly for the Slovak state-forming nation.

Robert Fico, 26 February 2013, Martin

¹⁰ Since November 2002, Hungary has been a “strategic partner” of Romania. There is however no “strategic partnership” between Hungary and Slovakia.

¹¹ A good example of economic consolidation is the “Wekerle Plan,” a project announced by the government in September 2012, which is defined as “a document of Hungary’s economic strategy for the whole region” (this was passed without of the opinions of neighbouring countries being asked).

¹² Steinbach, German conservative president of the Federation of Expellees, was in Budapest in March 2013 along with other German politicians, at the invitation of Kövér, who was also initiator of parliament’s commemoration of the Germans expelled from Hungary during the Second World War. A few days later, in a speech at the annual meeting of Expellees in Berlin, Steinbach praised Hungary as the model of historical policy, and also commented on the recent developments in the country, defending the changes made by Fidesz.

¹³ In Hungary, concerns were caused by the Fico speech from February 2013. The second potential “bomb,” revealed by the Slovak media, was a plan for new administrative reform, which would divide the country into three big regions, ipso facto completely blurring the minorities’ influences. However, this remains as yet a project undiscussed by parliament.

A Smart Continuation: Hungary and the Western Balkans

The third country with a significant Hungarian minority—a crucial element contributing to Hungary's policy in the region—is Serbia (around 250,000, 3.5% of the country's population, but 13% of the Vojvodina province). This case, though, is incomparable to those of Romania and Slovakia for at least three reasons. First of all, in December 2009, Hungarians in Vojvodina were granted full cultural and political autonomy. Secondly, unlike in Romania and Slovakia, Budapest has no problems with supporting the biggest and the most popular political representation of Hungarians in Serbia.¹⁴ Thirdly, and most fundamentally, Serbia is not yet an EU Member State. For Hungary, all of these factors mean that its position in potential bilateral disputes is much stronger, and thus the country has many more cards to play than Serbia. The most decisive of these is of course the threat to veto a decision in favour of Serbia's EU membership.¹⁵

However, it is not only minority rights that has for many years been a source of tension between Hungary and Serbia, but their difficult Second World War history too.¹⁶ Thanks to the efforts of Belgrade and Budapest during the past decade, much has been done in order to build a constructive dialogue on controversial issues, but when in May 2012 the nationalist Tomislav Nikolić won the presidential elections in Serbia, concerns were raised that these achievements may have been in vain. In practice, though, Nikolić was much more pragmatic than one could expect from the evidence of his election campaign. Paradoxically, it was a vocal Nikolić who, along with his Hungarian counterpart János Áder, agreed in November 2012 to meet again in Vojvodina and apologise in the name of their nations for atrocities committed during the Second World War, precedent step unprecedented in modern Hungarian–Serbian relations. Despite some doubts, the Áder–Nikolić historical reconciliation took place in the late June, first in Belgrade and then in the Vojvodinian village of Čurug. At the same time, the Serbian parliament passed a special resolution condemning acts against the Hungarian civilian population in the mid-1940s, while Áder has apologised for the crimes committed by Hungarians against Serbs.

The Serbian parliament strongly condemns the acts committed against the Hungarian civilian population in Vojvodina during the 1944/45 period, when members of the national minority in Serbia were being killed, denied their freedom and other rights, on ethnic grounds and in the absence of any court or administrative decisions.

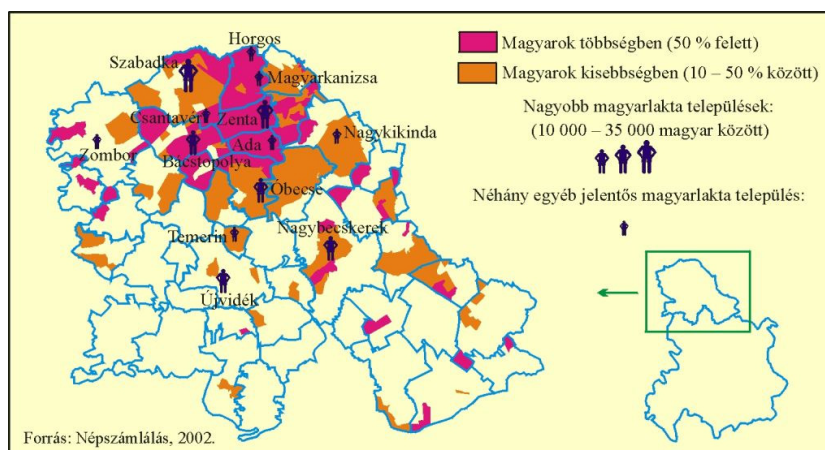
Declaration of the Serbian Parliament, 21 July 2013

¹⁴ In Slovakia and Romania, there are two Hungarian parties: Most–Híd and the Democratic Union of Hungarians (UDMR), but neither of them has support from Fidesz, which finds them to be an element of the local mainstream rather than a true representative of ethnic interests. Hence, the Orbán government has aimed to increase the political weight of smaller movements, which are both more loyal to Budapest and stronger opponents of the policies of their home countries. This strategy, though, failed, as the Party of the Hungarian Coalition (MKP) from Slovakia, nor the Orbán-backed Romanian Hungarian People's Party in Transylvania, and the Kóvér-backed Hungarian People's Party (MPP) all failed to reach the threshold in the 2012 parliamentary elections in Slovakia and Romania.

¹⁵ This was the case of the restitution law, which was passed by the Serbian parliament in September 2011. The law sought to return properties, nationalised by the Communists in the years 1945–1968, to previous owners. However, the original regulations excluded Hungarian citizens, who during the Second World War served in the forces of occupied Serbia. Budapest requested that the law be amended, and threatened to withdraw its support for Belgrade's plans to integrate with the EU. Serbia modified the contested paragraphs.

¹⁶ D. Kałan, "Polityka Węgier wobec Bałkanów Zachodnich," *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, nr 4, 2011, pp. 55–68.

Hungarians in Vojvodina, 2002



On the map the areas where Hungarians represent more than 50% of the population are shown in pink, and between 10–50% in orange.

Source: Hungarian Human Right Foundation, www.hhrf.org.

It seems therefore that Serbia has begun to consider its northern neighbour as too important to ignore, now realising that Hungary may be in a position to help the country join the EU, just as it did with Croatia. The Orbán government was clear from the very beginning of its tenure that it wanted to continue the efforts of previous cabinets to make enhanced ties with Croatia a strategic goal of the country's foreign policy. Hence, during Hungary's Presidency of the Council of the EU (January–June 2011), Budapest successfully closed accession negotiations with Zagreb, and then the Hungarian parliament ratified the treaty, becoming the second in the EU to do so. In comparing Croatia to Serbia, it should be noticed that there are significant differences that facilitate the Hungarian–Croatian talks. These include the lack of serious historical resentments, Croatia's very small Hungarian minority, better people-to-people and economic contacts, and longer and more successful traditions of cooperation. Equally important are the advanced energy dialogue, manifested in the form of a common gas interconnector (opened in August 2011), and the Hungarian company MOL's expansion in Croatia.

It is no coincidence that Hungarian leaders, while drawing their visions of a strong CE, always mention the Adriatic Sea too. Realistically speaking, the Western Balkans is the only direction for external activity where Budapest may truly have really something to say in the EU forum. The Orbán government is here pragmatic; paradoxically, the cabinet which prefers to describe its policy as a break with the legacy of its predecessors, has in the Western Balkans chosen a non-revolutionary smart continuation and has so far got it right. This is true not only in terms of the policy of "historical reconciliation" with Serbia or of maintaining strategic dialogue with Croatia, but also regarding enhancing political and economic ties with other countries from the region, Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia.

Conclusions

1. Orbán is, apart from József Antall (the first democratically-elected prime minister of Hungary after the fall of Communism) the only head of the Hungarian government since 1989 who has rhetorically attached so much importance to CE and its future development. Although appreciating the vigour and ambition of his vision, two things must be said. Firstly, apart from geopolitical reasoning, there is a more pragmatic reason behind Orbán's special attachment to the region, and this is the fact that, in the long-running dispute between Hungary and the EU, Central European governments either defended Budapest or took neutral positions. Secondly, the success of the project of a "beautiful future for CE" is rather dependent on each country's economic performance and general conjuncture, rather than politicians' prophecies, not to mention the fact that the latter may be seen as contradictory to Hungary's actual policy, which is not

always directed towards reinforcing unity and building regional compromise. Budapest thus raises a question about its real motivation, namely, if whether Orbán's vision is not in reality aimed at increasing Hungarian influence in those neighbouring countries in which the Hungarian minorities are substantial.

2. Fidesz has, since at least the mid-1990s, paid special attention to the treatment of Hungarians living abroad, consequently demanding "reunification of Hungarians in the Carpathian Basin across the borders."¹⁷ This approach towards the Hungarian communities has already become not only part of identity of this party, but also an important element of its current political agenda, contributing to the so-called "national policy." In the period 2010–2013, important steps have been undertaken, such as simplification of the procedure of receiving Hungarian citizenship, voting rights for minorities, or the addition of a paragraph to the new constitution in 2011, on "supporting their efforts to preserve their Hungarian identity." Having said that, one needs to admit that the results of this policy cannot be fully satisfying, as it has turned out to be simply insufficient in improving the position of minorities in local circumstances (Slovakia) and has even caused a serious diplomatic clash (Romania). What also has to be highlighted is that the last three years have proved how the question of minorities is used to achieve temporary goals in domestic politics by both Hungary and its neighbouring countries, which need to maintain a certain level of mistrust of one another in order to manage strong resentments and popular negative moods.

3. With regards to the Hungarian–Romanian relationship, Budapest made three tactical mistakes, resulting—together with Bucharest's intransigent position—in the current turbulent dialogue with the Ponta government.

- The first mistake was that, believing in the stability of the conservative coalition and the incontestable position of a centre-right president Băsescu, Hungary decided to build contacts with its eastern neighbour almost purely on "personal diplomacy" between the leaders, ignoring and sometimes even openly criticising the left-wing opposition. This quite naturally raised concerns about Hungary interfering in the domestic policy of Romania, and negatively influenced relations between the two countries when the left came to power.
- Budapest also tended to ignore the Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, the minorities' strongest political representation, which between 1996–2008 and 2009–2012 was a member or supporter of every Romanian coalition. Instead, Fidesz leaders became engaged in assisting smaller groups organised around more radical activist movements, which failed to receive any significant attention from Romania's Hungarian society.
- Thirdly, in the government's strategy towards the Hungarian minority, the commitment to the Székelys demands (including territorial autonomy) is clearly noticeable. However, Székelys are only half of the whole Hungarian community in Romania, and thus subordinating the country's policy to their expectations seems to be questionable not only from the point of view of the diplomatic dialogue with Bucharest, but also because this could be seen by other Romanian Hungarians as divisive.

4. The current relations with Slovakia may serve as an example of a much more cool-headed policy. While appreciating the efforts of Hungarian leaders in successfully rebuilding the atmosphere between the two neighbours after the turbulent period of 2007–2010, two conclusions should be emphasised.

- Comparing Slovakia with Romania, it may be noticed that Budapest simply has fewer instruments available for increasing its impact on its northern neighbour. The minority in Slovakia is smaller and less well-organised, the country's political stability formed around the left-wing leader Fico is greater, the centre-right Băsescu-like potential partners for Orbán are too weak, and local parties supported by Fidesz are equally marginalised. Apart from that, having an already harsh dialogue with Romania, Budapest wanted to avoid "a two-front war." These are thus the main reasons why Hungary evaluated its position quite realistically and chose a strategy of not increasing tensions.

¹⁷ E. Oltay, *Fidesz and the Reinvention of the Hungarian Center-Right*, Századvég Kiadó, Budapest, 2013, pp. 134–137.

- The latter, indeed, brought certain benefits for Hungary (such as improving its international image), but in general, maintaining the status quo seems to be more advantageous for Bratislava than for Budapest. The situation for Orbán's government is, indeed, very troublesome. On the one hand, it is quite unlikely that, bearing in mind the Slovak leader's recent declarations, the current soft policy will improve the position of Hungarians in Slovakia; on the other hand, sharpening the strategy will not only result in regress of the prospects of the minority still further but also will open "the second front" and disorganise Slovak–Hungarian cooperation in the EU and the Visegrad Group.

5. The paradox of Hungary's relations with Serbia is that there are still ethnic clashes on the social level, while the political elites have engaged successfully in discussing topics both from the difficult past and on the future of pragmatic cooperation (this is exactly to the opposite of the situation with Romania). Contacts with the second biggest country in that region, Croatia, should in turn be seen as a model for good and generally trouble-free dialogue between the two neighbours. The Orbán government, which has in many spheres declared a radical break with the policy of its predecessors, has quite seamlessly continued the efforts of previous cabinets to bring the Western Balkans closer to Hungary. The main reasons for this are that there is less importance attached to the most inflammatory question of Hungarian minorities in this area, Hungary's will to improve both unexploited economic opportunities and its position in the EU, and above all the awareness of Hungary's political predominance in the dialogue with these countries which are not EU Member States.

Annex I: The Value of Trade between Hungary and CE countries, €

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
ALB	33.5 mln	55.7 mln	49.9 mln	56.6 mln	51.1 mln	47.0 mln
BOS	343.8 mln	435.8 mln	273.7 mln	316.4 mln	323.3 mln	344.9 mln
CRO	1,129 mln	1,195 mln	969.0 mln	1,018 mln	1,348 mln	1,539 mln
CZE	4,232 mln	4,782 mln	3,546 mln	4,231 mln	5,095 mln	5,430 mln
KOS	-	-	22.0 mln	24.9 mln	29.8 mln	30.3 mln
MAC	97.4 mln	115.1 mln	101.3 mln	100.3 mln	103.8 mln	123.4 mln
MON	89.0 mln	43.9 mln	38.3 mln	55.5 mln	77.2 mln	90.7 mln
POL	4,703 mln	4,865 mln	4,153 mln	5,606 mln	5,998 mln	6,275 mln
SLO	4,181 mln	5,098 mln	4,918 mln	6,021 mln	8,049 mln	8,454 mln
ROM	3,821 mln	4,590 mln	4,107 mln	5,106 mln	6,704 mln	6,639 mln
SER	880.1 mln	1,073 mln	843.6 mln	1,031 mln	1,340 mln	1,535 mln
GER	31,894 mln	32,046 mln	26,922 mln	30,977 mln	34,572 mln	36,757 mln

Source: Author's calculations based on data from the Hungarian Statistical Office (KSH).







Annex 2: Hungarian Population in Neighbouring Countries

	circa 1991	circa 2001	circa 2011	%, 2011
AUS*	6,763	6,641	no data yet	≈0.1
CRO	22,355	16,595	14,048	0.3
ROM	1,624,959	1,447,544	1,237,746	6.5
SER	345,376	293,299	251,136	3.5
SVK	567,296	520,528	458,467	8.5
SVN	8,000	6,243	no data yet	≈0.3
UKR	163,111	156,600	no data yet	≈0.3

*only from the Burgenland area

Source: The Countries' Population Censuses (Statistical Offices).

Annex 3: Leading national “hawks” and “doves” around Orbán

HAWKS			DOVES		
	László Kövér	Speaker of the National Assembly, co-founder of Fidesz		János Martonyi	Minister of Foreign Affairs
	Zsolt Németh	State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, co-founder of Fidesz		János Áder	President of Hungary, co-founder of Fidesz
	Zsolt Semjén	Deputy Prime Minister			Most diplomats