

**MURAT DEREGÖZÜ<sup>1</sup>**  
**HUNGARY & RUSSIA**  
**WHO REALLY WANTS WHAT?<sup>2</sup>**

*This article aims to evaluate the evolution of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's "Eastern Opening" initiative from economic level to political dimension in which brought Hungary and Russia closer. The research hypothesis is that gains out of this particular engagement are reciprocal and balanced? The author argues that Hungary's new policy serves both Hungarian and Russian interests and offers mutual benefits but there are risks involved for Hungary. The paper argues that with new rapprochement Hungary has created decent room for manoeuvre in the international system. Another official motive is Hungary's search for additional markets for its export-oriented economy. Given the limited size of Russian GDP and import capacity, it is debatable that closer political link to Russia will pay off economically for the Hungarian economy. Recent trade and political tensions between the West (of which Hungary is a part) and Russia (and China) increases the potential downside of Orbán's "Opening to the West".*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the last decade there has been a long chain of deals between Hungary (HU) and Russia, the very recent involving the International Investment Bank (IIB), formerly it was known as the legal successor of the COMECON (Council for Mutual Economic Assistance) as it, is moving its headquarters to Budapest after agreement being signed by Finance Minister Mihaly Varga and IIB chairman Nikolay Kosov [Marianna, Zoltan, 2019]. Previously, Hungary bought Mi-24 "Hind" helicopters from Russia. Four of them already were delivered to the Hungarian Air Force base at Kecskemét in 2018 [Dunai, 2018]. There were important business deals even before right-of-centre party Fidesz came to power in spring 2010: the Russian energy giant, Surgutneftegaz, bought 21.2 per cent of Mol's shares from Austrian's OMV at the end of March 2009; interestingly, the incoming Fidesz government bought back Surgutneftegaz's stake [Andras, Andras, 2018]. All mentioned deals can be characterized as sensitive, or at least, non-routine transactions involving policy considerations. Similar is the much disputed, Golden Visa Program under which nearly 20,000 permanent residence permits handed out by the Hungarian government to the residency bond investors and their family members, to countries particularly China and Russia, without very strict security surveillance [Blanka, 2018].

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The mentioned and other several deals differ in nature to the way the Hungarian-Russian economic transactions were conducted right after the political regime change in 1989/1990. The first democratically elected government of Prime Minister József Antall was known as an Atlanticist. József Antall addressed [1989] the second National Convention of Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) at the Budapest University of Economics, months before the first democratic multiparty election by saying "We want the rule of law to prevail; democracy should consist not only in mere words of the law, but it should be established in practice, and with all speed" – and made clear that Hungary's place will be in (Western) Europe in economic, legal, political and security terms. A few years later Hungary hosted a session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe that Antall [1992] said "It gives me pleasure to learn that the value of all that Hungary has recently achieved creating democracy and market economy, and in setting up a modern European framework institutions in general, is recognized in Europe". Under Antall vision Hungary left Warsaw Pact and he established the conditions for the country's eventual membership in the Western military and economic institutions. But this was not a policy solely by one particular party or coalition (right-of-centre, in the case of the MDF-led government but a platform generally shared in Hungarian politics. Various governments, left and right, (Socialists and Orbán 1) shared and maintained it [Hungarian Spectrum, 2018]. However, economic, political and military transition and reintegration of Hungary to institutions took a while; economically very fast, in term of institutions a bit slower (OECD 1996, NATO 1999, EU 2004, and Eurozone not yet). Antall's attitude to the new, emerging – and a bit chaotic – Russia was polite, reciprocal, and cautious.

Boris N. Yeltsin, the first elected president of the post-Soviet Russia, was pursuing a reformist policy and integration of the Russian Federation to EU's economic system was crucial to him. He was given strong support by Western governments who feared a return to communist rule but confused personality with a process [Steele, 2007]. Yeltsin stated that "Russia is part of Europe". However, when it comes to NATO, the narrative is slightly different than EU that President Boris N. Yeltsin, possibly was under pressure from his armed forces, has sent a letter to President Clinton opposing any expansion of NATO to include East European nations like Poland or the Czech Republic [Cohen, 1993]. Still, CEE countries became gradually but unquestionably part of the West – a reality Russia had to live with.

In 2000, Vladimir Putin was elected and initially, he pursued Yeltsin's vision that between 2000 and 2005 the Kremlin saw the United States and NATO as the principal threats to Russia's national interests and by contrast, EU was the acceptable face of the West [Foxall, 2018]. However, between 2006 and 2011 Putin had changed his policy. The Kremlin began to group the EU with the United States and NATO. After 2012 the gap among EU, NATO and Russia further increased. The Kremlin argued that to protect Russia's sovereignty, it had to intrude on that of its neighbouring countries [Foxall, 2018]. Now, according to Putin, Europe is part of Russia, in this respect, Russia has re-shuffled its cards to implement different policies in the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and make Russia once again a great power. Therefore, the CEE region plays a significant role in the foreign policy interests of the Russian Federation.

The CEE has been always perceived as a buffer zone and defensible natural frontiers by Russia towards its Western front. Important to note that is Russian attitude was and has been in stark contrast with those of the mentioned CEE nations and their governments – they felt to be part of Europe, meaning, in fact, the European Union. Russian foreign policy has been formed based

on three main pillars over the past decade that first, maintaining prestige and influence that their country has not enjoyed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, second, weakening NATO and its member states mainly Central-Eastern countries, third undermining the U.S. position in the world, from Europe to Asia through the Middle East to demolish unipolar system, USA's hegemony, in order to demonstrate Russia is a great power. However, it can be clearly seen that Russia's main strategic focus is on its immediate neighbourhood [Gyrgel, 2009]. Central Europe strategically has a significant role in Russian eyes due to its geographic location on the Eastern edges of NATO and the European Union.

There are various perceptions and political decisions from regional countries concerning the Russian Federation's interests. In this respect, the Hungarian case is unique. According to the present Hungarian government, Russia is not a threat either for the European Union or for NATO. This is the official line even after the events in Crimea and after other new aspects of conflicts erupted between the Western alliance and Putin's Russia. Not surprisingly, events such as PAKS II, enlargement of the nuclear power plant with new two reactors, led to criticism against Hungary's ties with Russia [Kreko, Gyori, 2017]. Furthermore, the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Peter Szijjártó, has stated ahead of Putin's last visit in 2017 that "Russia should not be perceived as a threat to Hungary or any other NATO or European Union state" [Russian Today, 2017]. This statement shows similarly to many others by Orbán's government that the division between being a friend and enemy is clear for Hungarian present government.

Hungary was never a Soviet republic and not seen as near-neighbour (unlike, Estonia or Ukraine) – and the Russians accepted that HU left the Warsaw Pact and joined NATO. In this regard, initiating a new friendship course in 2010 vis-à-vis Russia was not much noteworthy or open to Western criticism. Especially, after being introduced "Eastern Opening" policy made positive changes for Hungary in terms of having seemingly good political and economic ties with Russia. The author's aim is to show how the Hungarian government is utilizing this so-called Russian influence in a positive way in order to make more trade partners - friends and if it possible balancing the EU. The official goal of the incumbent Hungarian government is to reduce the economic, trade, and political dependency of Hungary on the Western allies. As Orbán himself clearly expresses "why stand on one foot when we have two?"<sup>3</sup> What invites closer scrutiny whether the 'second leg' can possibly strong enough, and its movements would not cross the moving of the first? In order to see the issues clearer, one must look into the noticeable evolution of the personal attitude of Mr Orbán, and the sharp evolution of the attitude of Fidesz towards Russia.

## 1 EASTERN OPENING POLICY OF THE ORBÁN'S GOVERNMENT

Viktor Orbán, has started his political career as an opposition youth leader in 1989, and became known in with a forceful speech calling that Soviet forces should leave the country after more than four decades of occupation. He and his liberal youth party Fidesz (literally meaning alliance of young democrats) stood for human right and western values and protested against Chinese crackdown on students in Tiananmen Square. He became, as a rather young politician, prime

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.paprikapolitik.com/2015/03/pivoting-without-principles-hungarys-foreign-policy-shift/>

minister in 1998, chairing at that time a centre-right coalition (that had by that time lost its leader with the untimely death of Prime Minister Antall). The Orbán cabinet was clearly pro-NATO, pro-Europe, and Hungarian-Russian political relations were rather cool while economic links, as usual after 1990, functioned without problems (Russia supplying gas, oil, other materials, and Hungary selling finished goods). However, the same Orbán re-elected in 2010, and his public rhetoric on Russia began to take on a positive tone [Dewan, Kosztolanyi, 2018]. This change took a while. The very first Orbán's government presented the foreign policy section of the government program called "On the threshold of a new millennium" which underlines the satisfaction that "with the NATO membership, Hungary has finally obtained a place in the community of advanced Western democracies" [Varga, 2000]. Euro-Atlantic integration was one of the main targets of the cabinet and anti - Russian rhetoric was popular. When the Fidesz party was in opposition between 2002 and 2010, the relationship between Fidesz and Russia was problematic. By 2010, the Russia policy of Mr Orbán had visibly changed. After 2010, Ernő Keskeny became responsible for foreign policy strategy towards the post-Soviet Commonwealth countries. The relations between Orbán and Ernő date back to the first Orbán administration, Ernő was ambassador to Moscow. He was the one lobbying for a more openly pro-Russian policy and also he was the one who played an important role in securing for Orbán a personal meeting with Putin as the leader of the opposition in 2009 [Budapest Beacon Translation of Szabolcs Panyi's article, 2015].

It is well-known fact that Hungary has extreme economic openness [Munkácsi, 2007] that is why the global financial crisis in 2008 hit HU harder than average in the EU. Hungary has a dual economy, a large part of Hungary's GDP today accrues to foreign, primarily EU-based, multinational companies (car and machine assembly industries) while local subcontracting firms or SMEs are taking a subordinate position [Borocz, 2012]. Eventually, this economic status of Hungary leads society to have mixed opinions regarding the European Union. Because Hungary has definitely not been catching up with Western Europe [Borocz, 2012] and Hungary did not become as advanced as hoped for. While most of the Hungarians think the free movement of persons is beneficial, but on the other hand, as a result of the crisis, European citizens, including Hungarians, have lost some confidence on the EU in terms of economy [Nagy, Kadlót, Köves, 2016].

We must assume that the 2008 global economic crisis was eye-opening for Orbán himself made him to re-evaluate the Hungarian economic position in the world system and in the club (EU). The loan issue between predecessors of Orbán and IMF led Orbán government, claiming to fight a 'freedom fight' against the IMF, clearly won the communication battle, due to the IMF's policy of communicating solely with governments and not with the population at large, it was unable to effectively refute the claims [Akos, 2015]. This move, eventually, provided to Orbán's government to direct the Hungarian economy with new policies.

In 2010, the Orbán's government has introduced Eastern Opening (EO) (Keleti Nyitás) policy. However, the roots and correlation of Eastern Opening (EO) can be traced back to Gyurcsány-government's 'global opening' concept, Hungarian External Relations Strategy of 2008, that gained momentum after the [second] Orbán-government came to power and EO has appeared as a Prime Minister Orbán's discourse [Istvan, Voros, 2014]. Eastern Opening aims to decrease dependency of the Hungarian economy on its Western allies, particularly on European Union (EU) [Lambert, 2018]. Additionally, there has been another motive behind this initiative that EO is a natural way of utilizing the country's good access point to the markets of Asian and Post-Soviet states, which possibly could make Hungary a logistical and transportation hub bet-

ween the EU and Asia [Peter, 2015]. There have been some claims that [Toth, 2018] Eastern Opening or Opening to the East announcement is exclusively focused on the attraction of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to Hungary, however, that certain new foreign policy aspect involves several regions and plenty of countries, such as Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Russia [Kalna, 2014].

A statement by Viktor Orbán himself, “We are sailing under a Western flag, though an Eastern wind is blowing in the world economy,” gave life to the Hungarian Eastern-economic opening strategy [Sarnyai, 2018]. In order to reach the goal of new policy new measure has been taken by renaming the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, additionally, with the help of effective diplomatic measures, high-level meetings and strategic agreements [Peter, 2015] the Eastern Opening had its tools to work on target. When we consider the Hungarian economy, evaluations vary about Orbán's new policy towards the East. For instance, Péter Szijjártó, current minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, underlined how the Eastern Opening policy is bringing new investors to Hungary that he said, “the Eastern Opening policy is not only facilitating the increased foreign market presence of Hungarian products and services but also the Hungarian investments of well-capitalised Asian companies”<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, criticism has been raised that there are few beneficiaries of the new foreign policy approach, Vietnam being one of them [Sarnyai, 2018]. However, we can assume that the new approach has contributed Hungarian foreign policy and it ensured new momentum in terms of political and diplomatic ties of Hungary with target countries to restore economy, particularly with Russia. Due to the European Union sanctions against Russia, and Russian own measures in response, Hungarian businesses have lost a total of some 7 billion dollars in export opportunities, besides that before sanctions Russia was a second most important economic partner, but today is only the twelfth [Szijjártó, 2018]. After some years of losing, the trade between Hungary and Russia has grown by 30 percent to 5.5 billion dollars in 2017 [Szabo, 2018].

**Table 1: Vladimir Putin's meetings with European leaders between 2014 and 2018 (ranked by the number of meetings)**

Politician	Number of meetings
Angela Merkel - German Chancellor	9
Sauli Niinistö – President of Finland	8
Francois Hollande – President of France	7
Viktor Orbán – Prime Minister of Hungary	7
Matteo Renzi - Prime Minister of Italy	5
Emmanuel Macron - President of France	4
Alexis Tsipras - Prime Minister of Greece	4

Source: [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=2307](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article_read=1&article_id=2307)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/the-eastern-opening-policy-is-bringing-new-investors-to-hungary>

When we consider the number of visits by Putin to Hungary, the given data above depicts that Eastern Opening rapprochement opened up a new chapter in terms of bilateral relations between Hungary and Russia. But, this number of visits does not mean that Russia itself could replace the European Union in terms of economy - trade relations and heal Hungarian wounds from the global economic crisis or can fully cover - protect any economic risks in the long term. According to Grauwe [2018], Russia is politically and militarily strong while being an economic dwarf. The numbers never lie unless they are manipulated by human beings. Therefore, there is a need, briefly, to look at numbers in order to show Russian limited economic power and its importance to Hungary. In 2017, Russian GDP was \$1,469 billion, the combined GDP of Belgium and the Netherlands is together \$1,315 billion, in GDP terms, Russia is only 12% larger than Belgium plus the Netherlands [Grauwe, 2018]. The International Investment Bank (IIB) is insignificant, with only €319 million in the capital, while the European Investment Bank's capital stock is €243 billion [Hungarian Spectrum, 2019]. In 2017, the Hungarian export to Romania almost has reached \$6 million while the same year export from Hungary to Russia was barely \$2 million and Russian import to Hungary was over \$3, 5 million.<sup>5</sup> From the statistical data, it is obvious that Hungarian-Russian trade relations are not balanced and the Russian portion is much larger than Hungary. Moreover, the foreign direct investments from core EU member states are forming a decent structure of the Hungarian economy, especially Germany.

From this perspective, it assumes that EO is not targeting to find an alternative to the European Union, and potentially Russia cannot be that alternative due to its economic size, but it only tries to gain trade benefits and more markets for exports of its goods as much as she (HU) could in order to eliminate or minimize too much depending on economically one side, in this case, it is Hungary's Western allies, particularly core EU member states.

*As cited by Peter Daniel [2015] “We Hungarians are a part of Europe and the border of the East at the same time; therefore it would be worth using out the advantages of both cultures and economic areas. We need a new opening for the world economy, including an Eastern orientation, while keeping the benefits of our EU membership. The Hungarian export economy has to be connected to the rapid development of China, Russia, India and other East Asian economies. This might open new markets for the Hungarian agricultural products, the processing industry and tourism.” (FIDESZ, 2010: 39)*

## 2 WHO REALLY WANTS WHAT?

Early stages of his political journey of Viktor Orbán, he believed that joining the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would help Hungary to overcome its economic

<sup>5</sup> <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/hungary/tradestats>

stagnation—and free it from Moscow’s influence [Matthews, 2018]. And his dream, it was the cornerstone of Hungarian politics since 1990, came true; Hungary became one of the members of the EU<sup>6</sup> and NATO<sup>7</sup> with other Central European nations. The alliance, NATO, which has 29 members committed to collective defence until the collapse of Warsaw Pact and re-described itself since the conclusion of the Cold War by underlying common values, human rights, and respecting democracies. The end of the Cold War was mean the end of a bipolar world that the transition period took a while, where the USA was the single dominant power, from a bipolar world to a multipolar world. As a result of it, there is no longer a European approach to Russia like there was during the Cold War. In contrast, every single member state has its own policies and interests determined by its own current geographic realities [Synder, 2018]. When it comes to Hungary, like all other states of an alliance from the European continent Hungary has been benefiting protection by the NATO since it joined, but Hungary does have its self-policies. These policies cannot be analysed if we neglect the geopolitics of Hungary, therefore there is a need briefly to look at Hungarian position. Ukraine is Hungary’s eastern neighbour which is developing closer ties with the West and it has been having a buffer zone role between West and Russia.

The integration of Ukraine with West and if it means a greater Western military presence in Ukraine that it could create a movement of Russian troops towards the Hungarian border which would make things even worst for Hungary [Synder, 2018]. For this reason, such moves can be seen that at a meeting of NATO foreign ministers (December 2018), the Hungarian envoy did his best to sabotage any improvement in relations between the Western alliance and Ukraine [Kirchick, 2019]. In this regard, Hungary must create such a balance that it would not harm its interests and NATO’s by being close to Russia. Because Russian desire to dispatch a mess inside the NATO is a clear fact that any crack within the ally system provides room for Russia to meddle in it. According to the Trump administration’s 2017 National Security Strategy and it says, “Russia aims to weaken U.S. influence in the world and divide us from our allies and partners” [Berschinski, 2018].

When it comes to energy deal with Russia and possible land extension of Turkish Stream, which is an ongoing project to transfer Russian gas to Turkey via a pipeline under the Black Sea, could cross through Hungarian soil and eventually reach European markets. Putin has a positive approach to an idea offered by Orbán that even he said “We are examining the possibility of connecting our Hungarian partners with the new routes of transporting Russian gas to Europe. I do not exclude that a land extension of the Turkish Stream pipeline could be built crossing Hungary” [Szabo, 2018]. Hungary is, like many other countries in the EU, heavily depending on Russian gas. We can assume that Russia consolidates its energy market within the EU by having good political ties with Hungary, but Hungary secures its energy demand as well. On the subject of the Paks upgrade, we could include it to the scope of the “Eastern Opening” policy initiative, which originally focused mainly on economics and targets to attract investments.

Despite bitter experiences with Russia during Hungarian history, current firm relations of Fidesz, Orbán’s ruling party, with Russia serves Orbán’s goal of restoring national pride in his country [Janjevic, 2018] since Orbán puts emphasis on political engagement with power centres

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<sup>6</sup> 2004

<sup>7</sup> 1999

of world politics. Even after the U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's visit to Budapest in February 2019, there was no press conference between Pompeo and Orbán that when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Budapest, in 2011, Orbán was willing to hold a joint press conference [Balogh, 2019]. Besides that Hungary, particularly Orbán on the meeting with Putin, in 2018, showcased himself as a mediator of peace between the East and the West [Political Capital, 2019]. Hungary has been a vocal opponent of EU sanctions on Moscow for its actions in Ukraine, and Orbán said "If there were no sanctions, we would be able to cooperate more and make greater advances" [Newton, 2018].

It should be taken into account that Hungary is trying to act in a politically independent manner from Brussels. However, even though Hungary tries to create a positive atmosphere with Russia, it will still remain loyal to its Western institutions, EU and NATO. Because the Hungarian economy grew by 4.6 per cent between 2006 and 2015, yet a study by KPMG and the Hungarian economic research firm GKI estimated that without EU funds, it would have shrunk by 1.8 per cent [Krastev, 2018]. During Pompeo's visit, which can be seen as a warning sign for Hungary to reconsider relations with Russia, to Budapest, the Szijjártó's speech clarified that in any case, Hungarian commercial relations with China or Russia don't prevent Hungary from being a loyal member of NATO [H. Spectrum, 2019]. That's why the current intimate relations could be called low-risk affinity.

"Everything changes and nothing remains still and you cannot step twice into the same stream" said, Heraclitus. And Viktor Orban is not same Orban as he gave a speech at Hero's square in Budapest, nor same he served first time as a prime minister. A change has been observed in an attitude of Orbán and Fidesz: a formerly pro-Western and progressive-liberal person and his party first turned towards conservatism, and from anti-Russian discourse to de facto sided with Russia, especially on Ukraine issue. After the 2008 global economic crisis, Orbán transformed Fidesz into a euro-sceptic party [Boros, 2016] and decided to represent that part of society which is sceptical about dynamism in the West. Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010 coincided with the Kremlin's turn towards an explicitly anti-western foreign policy and this enabled them to develop bilateral relations to further their personal political goals [Shamiev, 2018]. Since Fidesz took office, the policy is gradual distancing it from traditional democratic allies, EU, [Kirchick, 2019], and gestures to Russia, followed by a few but large scale and sensitive projects. The term "illiberal democracy", claimed by Orbán in his speech of July 2014, has since then been widely commented on or criticized [Rupnik, 2018]. Besides, Orbán needed more room of manoeuvre in the EU, and close collaboration with Russia (and Putin) seemed to provide that. In the EU's political hierarchy, Orbán has often been cast as an unruly outsider — a loud, populist voice peripheral to the mainstream, and peripheral to real power, however, he is now possibly the bloc's greatest political challenge [Kingsley, 2018]. Even, Orbán's proximity to Putin may be the reason of Orbán's visit to White House after almost two decades.

### 3 CONCLUSION

Most scholars agree that the EU is not a state in the traditional sense since the "monopoly of the legitimate use of force" remains in the hands of the EU member states [European Union Center of North Carolina EU Briefings, 2006]. Hence, the "Opening to the East" maintains its importance for Hungary in order to boost correlation with Russia, mostly in political level, and



move its elbows freely without permission of European Union. Additionally, the Hungarian government criticise and do not accept the western attitude towards them that Sziijártó called it is an outright “hypocrisy” while Germany, France, and other western nations merrily carry on huge projects with Russia, but Hungary should not [H. Spectrum, 2019]. Orbán, the leader of a mid-sized Central European country with plenty of cultural or scientific achievements but little to show for in terms of precious natural resources or unique geostrategic location, is punching above his weight [Csaky, 2019]. When it comes to ties with Russia, for Hungary, economically Russia have not much to offer, however, more weight in diplomacy abroad if Orbán is closer to Putin than others. For Russia: an EU-sceptic periphery (Hungary, Greece, some Italians, even Austria) sounds good as a break on more European integration. Motivation is thus geopolitical in Russia. Whether Orban's government have calculated the result of new policy engagement or not, there is a certain rule in daily life that everything has a price and cost of Opening to the East is, thus, due to the political tensions have been increasing between core EU members and Hungary, a growing bill for Hungarian present government. Besides, European leaders grew worried about Orban's dismantling of Hungary's democratic checks and balances [Zalan, 2016]. Additionally, the internal problems of the EU create an opportunity for those who want to utilize it in a different way. In the short term, Hungary and Russia or Putin - Orbán engagement can be seen as beneficial for both Hungary and Russia, but in the long run, some small shifts in the international system could alter the direction of ties.

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