

Beyond “Russia-Friendly” Hungary’s Foreign Policy Rationales

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Hungary’s divergence from its Western allies regarding Russia and its war against Ukraine has led many to label it as pro-Russian or “Russia-friendly.” Though Hungary’s foreign policy occasionally aligns with Russian interests, its motives are often more nuanced. This memo explores four rationales that have explanatory potential for Hungary’s foreign policy toward Russia and the war in Ukraine, offering a deeper understanding of Hungary as a foreign policy actor and potential trajectories for its future policy towards Russia.

IN RECENT YEARS, Hungary has frequently clashed with its Western partners on critical foreign and security policy issues, particularly concerning Russia and its full-scale war against Ukraine. It has taken several actions in this regard that appear at odds with its commitments as a member of both NATO and the EU. Thereto, given Hungary’s relatively recent experience with Soviet dominance and its geographic proximity to an increasingly assertive and imperialist Russia, its foreign policy choices may seem counterintuitive.

In the broader debate, one explanation that appears for this is that Hungary is pro-Russian or “Russia-friendly.” Several factors, however, indicate that this is overly simplistic. One can argue that Hungarians are only somewhat more favourably disposed towards Russia than Central Europeans generally.¹ What, then, are the rationales behind the Hungarian government’s recent policy line?

This memo discusses four rationales identified in academic literature that offer explanatory potential for Hungarian foreign policy toward Russia and its war in Ukraine: historical grievances, “in-betweenness,” dependency on Russia, and political leadership. Though initially considered separately for analytical purposes, the analysis identifies intriguing interconnections between them. For example, one can argue that historical grievances have primarily been used by the political leadership to justify its policy to a domestic audience, rather than independently explaining foreign policy outcomes. Furthermore, the idea of in-betweenness is linked to deepened economic relations with external actors, which

has led to an energy dependency on Russia that is now costly to reverse.

Overall, the intended contribution of this memo is to provide a better understanding of Hungary as a foreign policy actor and the potential trajectories for the future development of its policy towards Russia.

THE HUNGARIAN POLICY

In July 2024, Hungary assumed the role as rotating chair of the Council of the European Union. To Hungary’s European allies, its first week as chair was astounding, to say the least. After a surprise trip to Kiev to meet with the Ukrainian president, Hungary’s prime minister, Victor Orbán, followed up with a trip to Moscow, and then Beijing. In his own words, the visits represented a self-imposed “peace mission.” This stood in sharp contrast to the widely agreed EU policy line that a peace initiative must include Ukraine, preferably after a Russian withdrawal from Ukrainian territory.

Although Orbán’s peace mission stood out as particularly misaligned with allied policy, it can be viewed as a natural continuation of Hungary’s policy toward Russia and the war in Ukraine, both before and after the full-scale invasion in 2022. The Hungarian policy line has repeatedly included concessions to Russia, primarily in sanctions and trading, as well as refusal to militarily or financially assist Ukraine.

In the EU, Hungary has used its veto for this cause. For example, in May 2022, it vetoed extensive sanctions on Russian energy.² A month later, it vetoed a list of sanctioned Russian individuals.³ In

December 2023, Hungary blocked the EU's financial aid package to Ukraine.⁴ Beyond multilateral fora, in the two years since the start of the war, Hungary has refused to assist Ukraine with any military materiel and blocked all transportation of allied military aid through its territory.

A MIXED IMAGE OF RUSSIA

In the broader public debate, the foreign policy of the Hungarian government and the actions of Prime Minister Orbán in particular are explained with Hungary being “pro-Russian,” or “Russia-friendly.”⁵ There is no uniform definition to what this entails, but experts and journalists often point to Orbán's special relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin, the multifaceted trade and energy relation between the two countries, and Hungarian accommodation to Russia with regard to Ukraine.

These factors no doubt paint a picture of a Russia-friendly Hungarian state. In reality, however, the Hungarian-Russian relationship is complex. Scholars find that Hungarians hold a mixed image of Russia, ranging from a “friendly ally” to a “threatening enemy.”⁶ In more general terms, Hungarians differ from other Central Europeans in sharing neither language nor religious heritage with Russia.⁷ Hungarians in general do, however, perceive Russia to a greater extent as a strategic partner and less as a security threat than do most of its Central European neighbours.⁸

Considering its history with the Soviet Union, this multifaceted perception may appear counterintuitive. Throughout the Cold War, Hungary belonged to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence as part of the Warsaw Pact. Its inclusion therein was accompanied by heavy Soviet force. In 1956, the Soviet Army violently repressed a Hungarian uprising that demanded political and economic reforms, effectively pulling Hungary away from the Warsaw Pact. Two decades later, before the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Hungary attained a level of economic freedom unique in the region. As the Cold War reached its end and the Soviet Union's power diminished, Hungary found new freedom in moving towards democracy and market economy. Joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004 consolidated this process. At the time of moving away from communist dominance, Hungarians generally viewed Russia in a negative light, especially within Orbán's own political party, the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz).

The versatile perceptions Hungarians hold of Russia and the seemingly Russia-friendly policy of the Hungarian government presents a paradox. However, this memo argues that while the Hungarian government's foreign policy actions may align with Russian interests, as demonstrated in the case of Ukraine, the motivations behind this policy can be better understood elsewhere.

FOUR RATIONALES

As is often the case with a state's foreign and security policy, and as extensive academic literature demonstrates, a single explanatory factor is seldom enough. The following section offers four answers to the question of why Hungary pursues its current foreign policy toward Russia and the war in Ukraine.

Historical Grievances

When examining the rationales behind Hungarian foreign policy, analysts usually start with the historical experiences of modern Hungary. They argue that the motivation is historical grievances.⁹ This includes being part of one of Europe's major powers in the 1800s, losing large shares of territory after WWI, and carving out elements of freedom under Soviet dominance during the Cold War.

The Hungarian government, as well as outside observers, often returns to the Treaty of Trianon. After the end of WWI, Hungary, as part of the defeated Austro-Hungarian Empire, agreed to a peace treaty that completely altered the borders of the region, ultimately dividing Hungarian territory between its neighbours. As a result, only a third of the pre-war Hungarian territories remained.

The Trianon Treaty meant a Hungarian loss in both practical and symbolic terms. For instance, a third of pre-war ethnic Hungarian citizens became minorities in neighbouring countries. More importantly, however, some argue that the treaty bears significant influence on Hungarian political thinking to this day.¹⁰ Having been a part of a former great power, the Hungarian self-image is one of greater significance than granted by its actual influence.¹¹ This entails a striving for more influence in the international arena, aligning more closely with its perceived role.¹²

Historical grievances arguably form a rationale for Hungary's policies towards Russia and the war in Ukraine in two ways. Following the redrawing of borders after WWI, a large Hungarian minority lives in

Ukraine. The two states have been in a prolonged dispute over the rights of this group, for example, when Fidesz granted the group Hungarian citizenship or when Ukraine implemented a new education law, restricting the use of minority language. The Hungarian government repeatedly referred to this law when hindering further cooperation between Ukraine, NATO and the EU.¹³

From this perspective, the Hungarian policy with regard to Russia's war against Ukraine comes from resentment towards Ukraine, rather than loyalty towards Russia. Obstructing Ukrainian interests can be seen as a way for the Fidesz government to seek domestic political gain.

Moreover, obstructing allied policy on Russia can be seen as a way to gain weight internationally. By using its veto, Hungary has gained more political significance than its position would otherwise garner. For example, Orbán's self-imposed peace mission has undoubtedly gained unusually large attention in international fora, arguably serving Hungarian interests. Again, the relationship with Russia is secondary to other motives more orientated towards Hungary's perception of its rightful role on the international stage. From the lens of historical grievances, Hungary's policy is in line with its interests and identity.

In-betweenness

Both Hungarian and international analysts cite Hungary's identity as an independent state, situated "in-between" poles of power, as another rationale behind its foreign policy.¹⁴ Orbán has repeatedly accused his political opponents and the bureaucrats in Brussels of wanting to take part in the war in Ukraine, even sending Hungarian soldiers to fight in it.¹⁵ He contrasts this policy with the Hungarian government's position to not become a part of the conflict.

In identifying the contrast, Orbán deftly captures this in-betweenness. It refers to a geographic, cultural, and political in-betweenness, which, according to Orbán, has benefitted Hungary. A prerequisite for this identity is almost unlimited Hungarian autonomy.¹⁶ It is solely up to Hungary to decide on its policy positions or partners in international relations.

This in-betweenness is further linked to Hungarian "pragmatism," an attribute emphasised by both the Hungarian government and outside observers.¹⁷ According to analysts, this pragmatism ties together external relations and trade.¹⁸ Throughout the years of Fidesz's

governance, one of its top priorities has been to link trade with foreign policy and diversify Hungary's external relations by reaching out to non-European actors, including Russia, Türkiye, and China, for example with the policy package titled "Opening to the East."¹⁹ Putting shared economic interests ahead of common values is thought to bring growth and prosperity to Hungary, especially in a time when the Hungarian government is anticipating a decline in Western influence and progress.²⁰ According to Fidesz, the financial crisis in 2008, which hit Hungary very hard, confirmed the decline in Western prosperity.²¹

It can be argued that in-betweenness is a rationale behind Hungary's policies towards Russia and its war in Ukraine in two ways. First, as explicitly expressed by Orbán, it is reasonable for Hungary to take measures to remain outside the conflict, even when this is out of step with its allies. Second, it is in Hungary's interest to autonomously decide on the nature of its relationship with Russia. If economic gain can come from this relationship, this will prevail over other concerns, for example, the moral obligation to assist Ukraine in its fight for sovereignty. The policy is in line with ideals of non-engagement and autonomy, that make up the essence of in-betweenness.

A clear limit to this in-betweenness, however, is the fact that Hungary is a member of both the EU and NATO. With its memberships, Hungary has agreed to an extensive political and legislative framework, including security and foreign policy. Notably, Hungary has agreed to most sanctions imposed on Russia, and refrained from blocking support to Ukraine coordinated by the EU. Its relatively sturdy engagement in both the EU and NATO are in sharp contrast to its repeated anti-Western rhetoric.

On the other hand, the protection offered by NATO membership may be key to understanding Hungarian foreign policy, as it has enabled Hungary to prioritise economic interest over security, with the latter being taken care of by NATO. The appeal of a close relationship with Russia may appear differently when not under the protection of a military alliance.

Dependencies on Russia

To some scholars, the asymmetrical economic dependency between Hungary and Russia is a primary rationale behind Hungary's foreign policy.²² The Hungarian government echoes this view, arguing that agreeing with sanctions on Russian energy would mean a substantial

blow to the Hungarian economy and livelihood, even threatening the country's energy security.²³

Around the mid-2000s, guided by the ambition of “opening to the East,” Hungary invested heavily in its energy relationship with Russia. Today, the country imports gas, oil, and nuclear technology from Russia. For over a decade, Russian-related actors have dominated the Hungarian energy sector, hampering the development of alternative energy sources.²⁴ Two motives guided this development. First, the Fidesz government made cheap energy for households a priority issue. This has been rewarded by voters, contributing to Fidesz's re-election in 2014 and 2018. Second, diversifying trade relations beyond Western partners was an explicit aim of Fidesz, linked to the idea of pragmatic foreign policy. Russian energy played a key part in this policy.²⁵

In contrast to most other European states, Hungary continued its import of Russian energy after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Together with a handful of other EU members, Hungary fought for exemption from the Union's common sanctions on Russian energy. At the time, the EU agreed, wanting to give member states with high levels of imports a transition period to diversify their energy sources and thereby maintain financial stability.²⁶ By 2024, however, Hungary has not only failed to reduce its energy imports from Russia but has, on the contrary, increased them.²⁷

Therefore, seeing economic dependency as a rationale behind Hungary's policies towards Russia is complex. Hungary is indeed dependent on Russian gas, oil, and nuclear technology for its economic stability and prosperity. What several analysts have pointed out, however, is that the absence of a new direction for its energy policy is the consequence of a scarcity of political will, rather than a lack of alternative energy sources, so-called “false dependencies.”²⁸ As other European states have demonstrated, significantly reducing imports of Russian energy can be complicated and at times costly, but it is by no means impossible. In fact, with relatively modest investments, Hungary could replace its oil imports from other sources.²⁹ From this perspective, energy dependency shapes Hungarian foreign policy, but the inevitability of this can be questioned.

Political Leadership

Some analysts consider that Hungary's political leadership in general, and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in particular, offers more insights into the country's foreign

policy than do structural factors such as history and economy. They argue that political leadership is the primary rationale behind Hungary's foreign policy.

With Russia, this is particularly prominent. As Hungarians generally have limited language or cultural ties to Russia, in contrast to other nationalities in Central Europe, accommodation to Russia arguably comes from a top-down initiative, rather than bottom-up.³⁰ Public enthusiasm for deeper engagement with Russia in Hungary has grown alongside extensive government efforts to promote and strengthen this relationship.³¹

In making this argument, scholars highlight a number of changes in the political environment under Fidesz's rule that correlate with the growing acceptance of Hungarian-Russian relations. First, Hungary has moved toward an increased concentration of power, making the country stand out in the region.³² A smaller informal circle around Orbán has increased its oversight over foreign policymaking, limiting the Hungarian diplomatic corps.³³ In this, the Hungarian Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, has played a crucial role, personally promoting the Hungarian-Russian relationship.³⁴ Analysts argue that more than reflecting the interests of Hungary as a whole, foreign policy has increasingly become an instrument for domestic policy goals and thereby a continuation of the interests of Fidesz.³⁵

Second, Hungary has seen a drastic increase in corruption since 2010, when Fidesz took office.³⁶ Several individuals belonging to Orbán's informal circles have benefitted from state-sponsored contracts in the infrastructure and energy sectors, many of which have had a Russian component.³⁷ From this perspective, Hungarian policy toward Russia and its war in Ukraine is driven by economic interests held by a small group of individuals, as its continuation is the prerequisite for their continued accumulation of wealth.

Third, in recent years, the governing party has established almost total control over the media. Fidesz and Orbán have utilised these government-leaning media channels to propagate their current policy towards Russia and the war in Ukraine.

Finally, various analysts highlight one last aspect of political leadership. When examining factors that co-exist with general pro-Russian views, scholars find that there is particularly prominent support for strongman rule, alongside satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions.³⁸ This underlines the importance

of Viktor Orbán himself. Often characterised as a dominant and charismatic leader, Orbán has been essential in shaping Hungary's political landscape. In fact, Hungary's growing closeness to Russia coincided with a significant shift in Orbán's personal stance on the country, evolving from a staunch critic in the early 2000s to an increasingly accommodative position by 2010.³⁹ In tandem with his own conversion, Orbán transformed the political landscape in a way that made the ground fertile for a new Russia policy.⁴⁰

Together, these shifts in the political landscape have facilitated and reinforced the current relationship between Hungary and Russia. Hence, from this perspective, the role of the political leadership in Hungary is the primary rationale for Hungary's policy toward Russia and the war in Ukraine.

THE FUTURE OF HUNGARIAN FOREIGN POLICY

The starting point for this memo is that the "Russia friendly" factor has limited explanatory potential when examining Hungary's policies towards Russia and its war in Ukraine. Instead, the discussion considers four rationales identified in academic literature that offer deeper insight into these policies: historical grievances, "in-betweenness," dependency on Russia, and political leadership.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from this overview. First, it is evident that these factors are often interlinked and work in tandem to influence foreign policy. For example, the idea of pragmatism facilitated deepened energy relations, resulting in an energy dependency that is now challenging to reverse. Furthermore, the Hungarian understanding of autonomy is fundamental to several of the four rationales presented.

Second, while separating rationales can offer analytical clarity, it may also create an artificial representation of reality. This is particularly evident when considering historical grievances and political leadership. Rather than seeing these as two distinct rationales that shape Hungary's foreign policy, several scholars argue that Fidesz strategically leverages Hungary's history for political purposes, a practice often referred to as the leadership's strategic play with the politics of memory.⁴¹ Fidesz explicitly put the nation at the forefront of its political project, reviving nationalistic historical narratives and national symbols.⁴² In this context, historical grievances, on their own, offer limited explanatory power for foreign policy outcomes, and should be viewed as a tool

or means for the use of the political leadership, rather than a primary motive. The same can be said for economic dependencies, as previously discussed.

Third, analysts should pay attention to the way they repeat certain wordings used by the Hungarian government. For example, the actual degree of "pragmatism" in Hungary's policies towards Russia and Ukraine is disputable. One could question whether the most pragmatic approach for a relatively small country is to alienate a majority of its allies and partners, positioning itself as an obstructive force in international forums.⁴³ Such a policy may rather be a reflection of the interests of a few than Hungary as a whole. While the government may justify its actions with the idea of pragmatism, the policy itself may, in reality, be far from pragmatic.

Looking ahead, despite the analytical limitations, some conclusions can be drawn from this overview regarding the future trajectories of Hungary's policy towards Russia. First, if structural factors such as historical grievances and national identity dominate, continuity is more likely than change. The current policy line has no doubt given Hungary more influence in international relations than justified by its actual weight. The same is true for the maximising of Hungarian autonomy and safeguarding an impartial position. One can argue that despite limited support to Ukrainian sovereignty, the current policy has in fact facilitated these ideals. Using the lens of historical grievances and national identity, the Hungarian government may likely continue its current policy towards Russia and the war against Ukraine.

A continuation of its policy line may, however, bring about change for Hungary in international forums, as the international political landscape is currently under transformation. Throughout his election campaign to seek the US presidency, Donald Trump expressed admiration and kinship with Prime Minister Orbán. In addition to his more general praise of Orbán's leadership, Trump's rhetoric mirrored political values of autonomy and impartiality, including criticism of multilateral forums. In statements on Russia's war in Ukraine, he was more aligned with the Hungarian policy line than with that of other European allies. With the election of Trump as the next US president, Orbán may hence regain prestige and credibility on the international stage, even amplifying his influence through his close relationship with Trump. In short, the Hungarian government will likely continue its current policy, but the context surrounding it could change.

If shifting the focus to Hungarian political leadership, there is potential for both change and continuity. While Hungarians are in general more inclined than some of their Central European neighbours to view Russia as a strategic partner rather than a security threat, a significant portion of Hungarians hold the opposite view.⁴⁴ In a think-tank research poll conducted in 2023, 54 percent of Hungarians agreed with the statement that “economic sanctions against Russia work and should be in place until Russia withdraws its soldiers from Ukraine.”⁴⁵ This indicates that the Hungarian public may welcome a change in course regarding Russia over time.

In 2024, a political party named Tisza, which positioned itself as a challenger to Fidesz, saw a swift rise on the Hungarian political scene, even pulling ahead of Fidesz in opinion polls.⁴⁶ Though its leader Péter Magyar predominantly takes aim at domestic issues such as corruption and democratic decline, his statements on foreign policy indicate a break with the current

government’s policy line regarding Russia and its war in Ukraine. For instance, he has stated that he supports Ukraine’s right to defend itself, described Russia as the aggressor, and emphasised the international protection of Ukraine’s independence and sovereignty.⁴⁷ On the other hand, he wants to retain the current restrictions on arms deliveries through Hungarian territory, citing the sensitive issue of endangering the Hungarian minority in Ukraine.⁴⁸

Whether Tisza can truly challenge Fidesz in a parliamentary election remains an open question. Nevertheless, focusing on political leadership and the possible change this could bring highlights that Hungary’s policy towards Russia is neither predetermined, nor permanent. With internal pressure leading to change in political leadership, Hungary may opt for a different foreign policy in the future. Thus, as this memo establishes, Hungarian foreign policy involves more than simply being “Russia-friendly.” ■

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Endnotes

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