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## **HUNGARY AND THE LIMITS OF EUROPEANIZATION: INEFFICIENT ENLARGEMENT AND EU'S STRATEGIC VULNERABILITIES**

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This research analyses Hungarian foreign policy in the context of recent geopolitical events and reveals existing limits of Europeanization. Through taking a Hungary as a case study, the paper argues that the European Union experiences particular challenges due to its less efficient conditionality approach, especially during times of harsh geopolitical competition where other actors are also seek to expand their spheres of influence. At the end, main conclusion of the paper is that EU-Hungary internal divisions clearly demonstrates insufficiency of institutional membership since without comprehensive and deep normative alignment the Western solidarity and consolidation will continue facing substantial challenges.

Key words: inefficient enlargement, EU strategy, illiberal democracy, conditionality, Hungary

JEL: F20, F50

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

The 2004 eastern enlargement of the European Union was widely celebrated as a historic step toward the reunification of Europe not only geographically, but also politically, economically and ideologically. By welcoming an accession of ten countries, primarily from Central and Eastern Europe EU sought to stabilize post-socialist democracies, and promote core, liberal values. Hungary was among the early success stories, rapidly adapting its institutions to meet the Copenhagen criteria and positioning itself as a committed participant in European integration. However, more than two decades later, the trajectory of Hungarian domestic and foreign policy has raised fundamental questions about the effectiveness and sustainability of this enlargement process.

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Since Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party came to power in 2010, Hungary's political trajectory has moved noticeably away from the European Union's established normative framework. A series of constitutional amendments, curbs on judicial independence, and the consistent centralization of executive authority have drawn sustained criticism from Brussels. At the same time, Budapest has pursued foreign policy positions that frequently diverge from the EU consensus, most notably its cautious stance on economic sanctions against Russia, willingness to receive large-scale Chinese investment, maintaining of close ties with Türkiye and its resistance to certain EU-NATO cooperative measures. Together, these trends have highlighted structural vulnerabilities within the Union, particularly its limited ability to uphold democratic norms and ensure geopolitical unity among its members under harsh geopolitical circumstances.

This study employs a process-tracing approach to examine key political and foreign policy events involving Hungary since its EU accession, such as Budapest's veto of EU sanctions against Russia and its facilitation of Chinese investment projects. These case events are analyzed as critical indicators of the Hungarian government's normative divergence from EU principles and its pursuit of an autonomous foreign policy agenda since for the Brussels relations with the Kremlin are strained, while China against the background of unfolded geopolitical events in the Eastern Europe and contradictions with the USA began to be associated as a Russia's situational partner or even strategic partner. In this context, deviations from the general course of EU policy puts Hungary in an unfavorable light. Taking it into consideration, Hungary can serve as a test case for potential enlargement of the EU.

By systematically linking these events to the broader theoretical framework of enlargement efficiency, the study assesses whether Hungary's formal compliance during accession masked underlying dissonance with EU norms. Specifically, the logic follows that if Hungary's policy decisions consistently undermine collective EU strategies or contradict shared values, this evidences the "inefficient enlargement" phenomenon where accession does not guarantee substantive integration. This method allows for tracing causal mechanisms between Hungary's actions and the erosion of EU normative cohesion, thus testing the central hypothesis of the paper.

## **2 METHODOLOGY AND DATA**

The research adopts a qualitative, case-study approach supported by the analysis of empirical data. The primary focus is Hungary's integration trajectory within the European Union and NATO, with special attention to the period following the Russia–Ukraine war of 2022. To ensure the reliability of findings, the study incorporates multiple sources: official EU and NATO documents, resolutions of the European Parliament, voting records of Hungary in EU and UN institutions, as well as government statements and policy papers published in Budapest. Statistical data from Eurostat, World Bank, and Freedom House indices were also reviewed to contextualize Hungary's economic,

democratic, and geopolitical standing within Europe. The empirical framework is organized around process tracing, which enables identifying sequences of political decisions and their outcomes in both domestic and foreign policy. Case evidence from Hungary's obstruction of EU sanctions against Russia, its approach to NATO's collective defense measures, and its energy dependency on Moscow serves as the foundation for comparative evaluation. These empirical cases are further supported by content analysis of speeches by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his cabinet members, which highlight the ideological justifications behind Hungary's foreign policy behavior.

Secondary academic sources-peer-reviewed articles, policy briefs, and think-tank reports are employed to triangulate findings and reduce interpretive bias. Combining empirical institutional data with political discourse analysis ensures that the study balances structural evidence with leadership-driven explanations.

This methodological design allows for a comprehensive understanding of Hungary's dual role as both an EU and NATO member state and a challenger to their collective policies in the context of modern geopolitical challenges.

The study is constrained by its reliance on publicly available secondary data and official documents, which may reflect institutional or political biases. While discourse analysis of governmental rhetoric provides insights into Hungary's strategic positioning, it does not fully capture informal negotiations or behind-the-scenes decision-making processes. Additionally, the focus on Hungary's role within the EU and NATO inevitably narrows the scope, leaving broader comparative perspectives underexplored. Despite these limitations, triangulation of multiple sources mitigates bias and enhances the validity of the findings.

### **3 LITERATURE REVIEW**

Academic scholarship touching upon the EU enlargement is quite extensive, with much of the earlier research focusing on the transformative influence of EU conditionality. A central assumption in this body of work was that commitment to the Copenhagen criteria - covering democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and a functioning market economy would naturally pave the way for the long-term consolidation of liberal democracy in countries which were once post-communist ones (Hungary Today, 2024). The pre-accession process, supported by detailed screening procedures and ongoing monitoring, was widely credited with encouraging institutional reform and political modernization across the states of Central and Eastern Europe.

However, scholars such as Kochenov and Dimitrova have highlighted the imbalance between the EU's strong leverage during the pre-accession stage and its relatively weaker capacity to enforce rules after a concrete country's accession (Kochenov, 2008; Dimitrova, 2010). Once it is achieved, much of the Union's ability to preserve and provide compliance diminishes, leaving it dependent on softer tools like political dialogue, peer influence, and, in exceptional circumstances, the Article 7 TEU

procedure. However, the latter requires unanimous agreement among member states and has proven politically difficult to implement in practice.

Within this discourse, Hungary is often referred as the most notable case of democratic backsliding after EU accession. Particular experts documented the steady weakening of checks and balances under the Fidesz government, showing how constitutional redesign, tightened control over the media, and manipulation of electoral rules have eroded liberal democratic norms (Bánkuti et al., 2012; Kelemen, 2020). At the same time, Hungary's deliberate cultivation of bilateral ties with other powerful actors like Russia, Türkiye and China has drawn attention from scholars of international relations, who view these moves as raising questions about the EU's strategic autonomy and its susceptibility to internal divisions (Government of Hungary, 2013).

New scholarship has shifted the discussion from questions of enforcement to the very design of the enlargement framework. Sedelmeier claims that the EU's heavy dependence on formal, legalistic benchmarks left it ill-equipped to recognize deeper political dysfunctions (Sedelmeier, 2017). Against this backdrop, Hungary's place within the EU became a subject to discussions in light of ongoing geopolitical challenges, including the war in Ukraine. (Ranschburg and Schlanger, 2024).

This analysis draws on two overlapping theoretical perspectives: One of the grand theories of the European integration, namely neo-functionalism and enlargement conditionality theory. Classical approaches such as neo-functionalism offers a distinct explanation for how states integrate and what holds supranational cooperation in a sustainable or desirable level. Neo-functionalists, following E. Haas and L. Lindberg, argue that integration generates spillover effects, leading over time to deeper cooperation through the work of supranational institutions.

Interestingly, Hungary's behavior in recent years challenges the expectations of the mentioned theoretical frameworks. Although economic integration has advanced without major obstacles, political convergence has either stagnated or moved in the opposite direction. The country continues to draw substantial material benefits from membership, especially through cohesion funds and recovery programs yet remains resistant to further political integration. This pattern indicates that material interdependence on its own is not enough to uphold shared democratic norms, casting doubt on the explanatory power of both paradigms. The conditionality framework has long been a cornerstone of the EU's enlargement policy, constructed on the assumption that prospective members would adopt and internalize EU norms in order to secure accession. According to the "external incentives model," compliance is most effectively achieved when the Union's conditions are perceived as credible and consistent, and when the potential rewards, such as full membership carry substantial political and economic value (European Commission, 2021). Although Hungary fulfilled the formal requirements for accession, its subsequent divergence from EU norms underscores the limits of conditionality once the main incentives have been secured. The Union's

post-accession tools: relying largely on financial leverage, public criticism, and legal infringement proceedings have proven insufficient in countering determined illiberal practices. As Kelemen observes, this situation produces an “authoritarian equilibrium,” in which governments are able to erode democratic standards while continuing to enjoy the material and political advantages of EU membership (Kelemen, 2020).

#### **4 DEFINING THE CONCEPT: DIFFERENTIATION AND CONDITIONALITY**

The concepts of conditionality and differentiation are closely interrelated in the study of European integration, especially in the context of enlargement. Conditionality shapes the criteria and incentives for joining or remaining in good standing within the Union, while differentiation reflects the reality that member states do not always integrate at the same pace or to the same extent (Hooghe and Marks, 2022). In practice, the two interact in complex ways. Conditionality sets the benchmarks that prospective members must meet, yet differentiation often determines the extent to which those benchmarks are applied, enforced, or adapted to distinct national circumstances. This means that even before accession, differentiation can emerge in the form of tailored requirements, transitional arrangements, or opt-outs. For example, some candidate states may receive extended timelines for implementing parts of the *acquis*, creating an asymmetry in integration depth from the outset. Once states become members, post-accession conditionality is constrained by the same political realities that drive differentiation (Schimmelfennig, n.d). Governments that resist certain EU norms can exploit differentiated arrangements, such as opt-outs or exceptions, to shield themselves from deeper compliance pressures. Conversely, the absence of strong post-accession conditionality can unintentionally widen differentiation, as compliant and non-compliant members drift further apart in their adherence to shared values. This dynamic has been visible in the divergence between states committed to deeper political integration and those prioritizing sovereignty over supranational authority. At the same time, differentiation can serve as a pragmatic tool to keep the integration process moving when uniform compliance is politically unrealistic. In such cases, the EU may tolerate partial integration in exchange for stability, even if this weakens the credibility of conditionality. This trade-off becomes particularly problematic when illiberal actors use the benefits of differentiated integration without maintaining the democratic standards that conditionality was meant to secure. In short, conditionality is the formal mechanism for aligning members around common norms, but differentiation often determines the political space within which compliance is negotiated, contested, or avoided. The interplay of the two helps explain why the EU can appear both cohesive and fragmented at the same time, especially in periods of political crisis.

Among the newest works dedicated to the analysis of post-accession conditionality and enlargement in whole, the research works of Bakó (n.a.) and König (n.a.) deserves attention. Bakó states that full membership in the EU no longer promises

absolute access to its fundamental assets, but rather it causes mutual suspicion and skepticism between the EU and the candidate states, which undermines solidarity (Bakó, n.d). In turn, M. König considers that approach demonstrated by EU to outsiders in the context of its enlargement can barely be acknowledged as efficient since ‘eternal waiting room’ for candidate states leads to frustration, weakens reform incentives and fosters the perception of selective treatment, significantly undermining the credibility of the EU (König, n.a.).

Conditionality has been the cornerstone of the European Union’s enlargement strategy, functioning as both an incentive structure and a mechanism for norm diffusion. It refers to the EU’s practice of linking benefits, most notably membership to the fulfillment of specific political, legal, and economic conditions. This practice has evolved into two distinct phases: pre-accession conditionality and post-accession conditionality, each with different tools, leverage, and levels of effectiveness. Pre-accession conditionality operates during the candidacy phase, when prospective member states must align their institutions, legal systems, and policies with the EU’s *acquis communautaire* and the Copenhagen criteria (Vachudova, 2005). The EU wields significant leverage in this phase, as membership itself serves as a powerful incentive. Compliance is monitored through regular progress reports, and accession negotiations can be delayed, suspended, or conditioned on further reforms. This stage has historically proven effective, as seen in the widespread institutional transformations across Central and Eastern Europe in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Vachudova, 2005). Candidate countries often pursued reforms not only to gain membership but also to signal alignment with Western democratic norms. In opposite, post-accession conditionality refers to the EU’s ability to enforce compliance with its values and rules after a state has become a full member. This phase is considerably more constrained. Once accession is granted, the EU’s main enforcement tools shift from conditional rewards to legal and financial penalties, such as infringement proceedings (via the European Court of Justice), suspension of voting rights under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), or the withholding of EU funds through mechanisms like the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation. However, these instruments often face political, procedural, or legal limitations (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). For example, Article 7 requires unanimity among member states to impose sanctions, rendering it politically difficult to activate in practice—especially when illiberal governments form protective alliances, as seen between Hungary and Poland.

## **5 THE CASE OF HUNGARY**

During last decade, Hungary has experienced a profound political transformation that has drawn concern from both EU institutions and scholars of European integration. Once regarded as a model for successful post-socialist transition and EU accession, Hungary in recent years has shifted toward what Orbán himself described as an “illiberal democracy” – a system characterized by centralized authority, weakened checks and

balances, and deliberate constraints on pluralism (Biro-Nagi, 2017). These domestic changes have strained Hungary's relationship with the EU, highlighting the Union's limited capacity to enforce post-accession conditionality and safeguard its foundational values. The 2010 electoral victory of Fidesz, securing a two-thirds parliamentary majority, provided the party with constitutional authority to reshape Hungary's political and institutional framework without meaningful opposition oversight. This supermajority allowed the government to consolidate power through a series of legal and structural reforms that systematically curtailed democratic safeguards. Rather than dismantling democracy entirely, the government engineered a model of enduring dominance, often described as "electoral autocracy" or "illiberal democracy".

One of the most noticeable measures taken at earlier stage was the adoption of a new constitution, the Fundamental Law of Hungary in 2011 (Government of Hungary, 2011). Drafted and passed with minimal input from opposition parties, the constitution curtailed the independence of key institutions, redefined the powers of the Constitutional Court, and embedded ideological principles closely aligned with Fidesz's nationalist and conservative agenda (Bánkuti et al., 2011). At the same time, the government moved decisively to control the media landscape. The establishment of the National Media and Infocommunications Authority (NMHH) and the Media Council have fostered self-censorship and reduced media pluralism. Independent outlets faced financial pressure, ownership consolidation, and diminished advertising revenue, while pro-government media benefited from state subsidies (Schimmelfennig, 2018).

Tensions between Hungary and the EU reached a peak in 2018 when the European Parliament invoked Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union, arguing that there was a "clear risk of a serious breach" of core EU values such as democracy, the rule of law, and fundamental rights (De la Baume and Bayer, 2018). This was a historic move, as the mechanism had never before been triggered. Yet, in practice, the process has stalled. The reason lies in the high political bar set by Article 7: sanctions can only be adopted if all other member states agree unanimously. Hungary, however, has managed to block progress by relying on its close alliance with Poland, which faces similar accusations of democratic backsliding (European Parliament, 2018). These developments have reignited debate over whether the Union needs stronger enforcement tools or new models of differentiated integration in order to defend its core values and maintain cohesion in the future. In response to persistent institutional gridlock, the EU has increasingly turned to financial instruments as a means of enforcing compliance. In 2020, it introduced the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism, which links the disbursement of EU funds to adherence to rule-of-law standards (European Commission, 2020).

Despite these measures, their effectiveness remains contested. Orbán has framed EU criticism as an infringement on Hungarian sovereignty, using nationalist rhetoric to strengthen domestic support and deflect attention from governance shortcomings. At the same time, EU institutions face a difficult balancing act: enforcing compliance without

undermining overall cohesion, particularly in an era of geopolitical instability exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Critics argue that Hungary's resistance demonstrates the limits of post-accession conditionality, highlighting the challenge of ensuring that member states maintain democratic standards once the benefits of membership have been secured. Moreover, the selective application of financial leverage has fueled debates over fairness, as some question whether the EU is able to treat all member states consistently while respecting political realities. Observers also note that Hungary's ability to exploit procedural complexities and form strategic alliances with like-minded states weakens the deterrent effect of conditionality.

## **6 GEOPOLITICAL DIVERGENCE OF HUNGARY'S FOREIGN POLICY**

While Hungary's democratic backsliding has received substantial attention from EU institutions, its growing geopolitical divergence presents an equally serious political challenge to the Union's strategic coherence. In an era defined by external instability, the EU's foreign policy relies increasingly on coordination and solidarity among its member states. Yet Hungary has repeatedly undermined these collective efforts, aligning itself with authoritarian powers and obstructing unified decision-making. This pattern not only underscores the limitations of the EU's enforcement mechanisms but also exposes the inherent geopolitical vulnerabilities of the enlargement model, where strategic loyalty is often assumed, rather than guaranteed.

### **6.1 Alignment with Russia: strategic outlier**

Perhaps the clearest example of this divergence is Hungary's persistent closeness to the Russian Federation, even as most EU member states have sought to distance themselves following Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its military activities of unprecedented levels in relation to Ukraine in 2022. Budapest has repeatedly criticized, delayed, or watered down EU sanctions packages against Russia, frequently citing energy dependence and economic considerations as justification. As Orban said "Europe shot itself in the lungs with sanctions against Russia" (Euractive, 2022). In several instances, Hungary has leveraged its veto power to stall collective EU initiatives aimed at penalizing the Kremlin, frustrating efforts to present a unified front. Hungary's bilateral relations with Moscow remain robust, particularly in the energy sector. The 2021 long-term gas supply agreement with Gazprom exemplifies Hungary's continued reliance on Russian energy, while the planned expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant-financed and technologically supported by Russia, further entrenches these ties. Such decisions directly contradict the EU's broader strategy of reducing dependency on Russian energy and developing a cohesive European energy policy. Beyond policy alignment, Orbán's public rhetoric has often echoed Kremlin narratives, framing the war in Ukraine as a consequence of Western expansionism and portraying NATO's posture as unnecessarily provocative (The Straits Times, 2025). Hungary's stance illustrates how

domestic political calculations can intersect with foreign policy in ways that challenge collective European action. Orbán's approach is shaped by a combination of nationalist ideology, electoral considerations, and strategic opportunism. Domestically, portraying the EU as intrusive or hostile resonates with his political base, consolidating support through appeals to sovereignty and national identity. Internationally, cultivating ties with Russia allows Hungary to secure favorable economic deals, particularly in energy and infrastructure, which are vital to the government's domestic agenda. This strategic outlier behavior has broader implications for the EU. First, it complicates the Union's attempts to present a unified foreign policy, weakening sanctions regimes, diplomatic efforts, and defense coordination. Second, it sets a precedent for other member states that may consider prioritizing national interests over collective commitments, potentially eroding trust within the Union. Third, Hungary's actions highlight the limitations of post-accession conditionality: while the EU can attach incentives to membership, it struggles to enforce normative compliance in domains that intersect with high-stakes geopolitics.

In sum, Hungary's foreign policy trajectory represents a dual challenge: it undermines EU solidarity and exposes the structural weaknesses of an enlargement model that assumes loyalty and convergence once accession is achieved. The combination of domestic political centralization and strategic opportunism abroad allows the Orbán government to navigate between EU rules and external partnerships in ways that maximize national advantage. This dynamic illustrates the interdependence of domestic illiberalism and international behavior: the erosion of democratic norms at home enables a foreign policy that diverges from collective European goals. From a broader perspective, Hungary's case raises pressing questions for EU governance. How can the Union ensure strategic alignment among its members when enforcement mechanisms are limited, and veto power can be exercised to obstruct common action? What lessons does Hungary provide for future enlargement, particularly in regions where candidate states might possess divergent strategic interests or strong ties to external powers?

Addressing these questions requires a multi-dimensional analysis. Observers argue that differentiated integration may offer partial solutions, allowing willing states to advance more rapidly on shared initiatives, while constraining the influence of outlier members. However, differentiation alone cannot fully mitigate the risks posed by states that exploit institutional loopholes to pursue unilateral agendas. Hungary's case underscores the importance of combining normative conditionality, strategic enforcement mechanisms, and a vigilant monitoring of member-state alignment in foreign and security policy. Failure to address these challenges risks not only short-term policy fragmentation but also long-term erosion of the EU's credibility as a cohesive geopolitical actor.

## 6.2 Engagement with China: strategic opportunism

Hungary's foreign policy divergence extends well beyond its stance toward Moscow; it has also actively courted economic and diplomatic ties with China, often in clear defiance of efforts to foster a unified EU approach toward Beijing. Hungary joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2015 (Li, 2023) and quickly became one of Europe's top recipients of Chinese investment, receiving approximately \$571 million in outbound capital that year and accounting for nearly a quarter of all Chinese foreign direct investment in Europe between 2022 and 2024. In 2023, bilateral trade with China exceeded \$10 billion, and Hungarian territory now hosts significant ventures in energy, technology, and manufacturing (Wu, 2024).

Diplomatically, Hungary has repeatedly obstructed unified EU messaging on sensitive Chinese issues. In 2021, it single-handedly vetoed an EU Foreign Ministers' statement condemning China's national security law in Hong Kong, undermining collective efforts to speak with a single voice on human rights and democracy (Chalmers and Emmott, 2021). While that source draws from diplomatic statements reported in media, the pattern is consistent: Budapest often acts as China's European foil, diluting EU criticism on topics ranging from Hong Kong and Xinjiang to Taiwan. Taken together, these developments reinforce Hungary's role as a key outlier within the EU- a member actively deepening ties with Beijing across economic, educational, and diplomatic frontiers. These policies not only bolster Hungary's strategic autonomy in the short term but also complicate Brussels's bid for unity in foreign affairs, especially amid rising global competition with China.

## 6.3 Relations with Türkiye

In response to Hungary's democratic divergence, the EU has attempted to strengthen its enforcement arsenal. A significant step was the adoption of the Rule of Law Conditionality Mechanism in 2020, which explicitly linked the disbursement of EU funds to respect for rule of law standards (Wahl, 2022). Hungary became the first member state to face suspension of funds under this framework, with billions of euros withheld pending reforms to anti-corruption bodies, judicial guarantees, and public procurement transparency. Yet despite these innovations, effectiveness remains debated. Orbán has portrayed EU criticism as an assault on Hungarian sovereignty, framing disputes as part of a larger struggle between "Brussels bureaucrats" and "national democracy." Such nationalist rhetoric has helped consolidate domestic support, while EU institutions remain constrained by the need to preserve cohesion, particularly amid heightened geopolitical instability following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is against this backdrop of tension with Brussels that Hungary's deepening ties with Türkiye must be understood. Far from being an isolated diplomatic pivot, Hungary's engagement with Türkiye forms part of a broader strategy of diversifying partnerships beyond the traditional Euro-Atlantic sphere. Orbán has consistently emphasized the concept of "Eastern Opening" (*Keleti*

*Nyitás*), a foreign policy doctrine announced in 2010 that sought to expand Hungary's economic and political cooperation with non-Western powers, particularly in Asia. Within this framework, Türkiye has emerged as a central partner due to geographic proximity, shared historical legacies, and complementary geopolitical aspirations.

On the bilateral front, Budapest-Ankara links have deepened markedly over the past decade. Trade between the two nations reached a record high of USD 4.3 billion in 2023, up 18% from 2022, with Hungarian exports to Türkiye growing by 29% and contributing to Hungary's historic €150 billion export total (Daily News Hungary, 2024). This expansion included significant trade in medical supplies, printing services, and beverages, reflecting a broader diversification of exchange and cooperation. Defense and security ties have simultaneously accelerated. In 2025, Hungary and Türkiye established a Defense Innovation Working Group, signaling a strategic deepening of their relationship in defense industry research, training, and innovation (Brader, 2025). The cooperation involves Hungary's Defense Innovation Research Institute (VIKI) and Türkiye's TÜBİTAK, as well as joint planning for R&D, educational partnerships, and technology development.

This relationship is undergirded not merely by transactional interests but also by memory, narrative, and political symbolism. Hungary's leadership increasingly frames the partnership as rooted in shared heritage and as part of a broader civilizational identity. As Hungary's Minister of Defense emphasized, "Hungary is proud of its Asian cultural roots and its close and friendly relationship with Türkiye," portraying the partnership as bridging Europe and the Turkic world. Orbán himself has repeatedly alluded to Hungary's "Eastern roots" and its role as a bridge between Europe and the Turkic cultural space, a narrative that underpins both strategic and ideological dimensions of the bilateral bond.

This civilizational rhetoric has found its most concrete institutional expression in Hungary's engagement with the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Hungary was granted observer status in 2018, becoming the first non-Turkic country to formally join the organization's institutional framework. This was a highly symbolic development, as it underscored Hungary's willingness to identify with Turkic heritage narratives and to institutionalize its relations with the Turkic world. For Orbán, participation in the OTS represents not merely cultural diplomacy but also strategic positioning. By embedding Hungary within the structures of the Turkic world, he signals that Budapest has alternative partnerships beyond the EU, thereby bolstering Hungary's bargaining position in Brussels (Hamzaoğlu, 2025). At the same time, Hungary benefits from access to new markets, energy corridors, and political platforms that extend its influence eastward. Hungary's active presence within the OTS has elevated its role beyond that of a passive observer. Budapest has hosted OTS-related events, promoted cultural and educational exchanges, and emphasized energy cooperation, particularly in relation to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Hungary's advocacy for the diversification of energy supplies aligns closely with the OTS agenda, which seeks to establish transport and energy connectivity across

Eurasia (Egeresi, 2021). In this context, Hungary sees Türkiye as a vital transit hub for Caspian gas and as a partner in advancing connectivity projects such as the Southern Gas Corridor. By linking itself to Turkic networks, Hungary enhances its strategic autonomy in energy policy, reducing reliance on Russian supplies while also signaling independence from EU-dominated frameworks.

The convergence between Hungary and Türkiye also reflects broader geopolitical dynamics. Both Orbán and Erdoğan pursue what might be described as “sovereignist” politics, emphasizing national sovereignty, challenging liberal norms, and asserting an alternative model of governance. This ideological affinity facilitates political cooperation, particularly in multilateral arenas where both leaders seek to resist what they perceive as Western overreach. For Hungary, Türkiye provides not only an economic partner but also a political ally within NATO and beyond, capable of supporting Budapest’s positions or mediating between Hungary and other regional actors. For Türkiye, Hungary represents an important EU member willing to endorse Ankara’s regional role and to advocate for closer EU-Türkiye ties at a time when accession negotiations remain stalled.

At the same time, Hungary’s engagement with Türkiye should not be seen as a rejection of the EU but rather as an attempt to diversify its external alignments. Orbán continues to emphasize Hungary’s full membership in the EU and NATO, while simultaneously highlighting that sovereignty requires openness to non-Western partnerships. This dual-track strategy creates a delicate balancing act: while Brussels views Hungary’s illiberalism with concern, Ankara values Budapest as a European interlocutor sympathetic to Türkiye’s interests. Thus, Hungary is able to leverage its unique position, presenting itself to Türkiye and the Turkic world as a gateway into Europe, while signaling to Brussels that it has viable alternatives. Nevertheless, this convergence raises important questions about the coherence of EU foreign policy and the resilience of European integration. Hungary’s identification with the Turkic world, coupled with its deepening bilateral ties with Türkiye, underscores the limits of EU cohesion at a time when common responses to external challenges are urgently needed. In the long term, Hungary’s pivot eastward may complicate the EU’s ability to pursue unified policies in areas such as energy, migration, and security. Yet from Budapest’s perspective, the strategy is rational: by aligning with Türkiye and the OTS, Hungary secures alternative channels of influence, bolsters its domestic narrative of sovereignty, and enhances its geopolitical significance.

#### **6.4 Friction within NATO and transatlantic relations**

Hungary’s role inside the Atlantic alliance has grown more complicated over the past decade. On paper, Budapest checks many of the boxes allies care about: it contributes troops to NATO missions, participates in major exercises, moved to meet the alliance’s defence-spending benchmark (Hungary Today, 2024). In practice, though, the Orbán government’s rhetoric and some high-stakes vetoes have run against the grain of NATO’s

strategic line since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The result is a layered picture: operational cooperation continues, but trust is thinner, and Hungary is viewed and perceived as a transactional sometimes unpredictable ally whose domestic politics and external ties affect alliance decision-making.

Nothing illustrated this tension more vividly than the months-long delay in ratifying Sweden's NATO membership (Bayer, 2024). While most allies cleared Stockholm's bid in 2022 – 2023, Budapest slowed the process until 26 February 2024, when the Hungarian parliament finally voted to approve accession (Csonka, 2024). The passage broke a long impasse that had irritated both Washington and Brussels and placed Hungary alongside Türkiye as the last holdouts. The episode was widely read as leverage politics unrelated to Sweden's qualifications for membership, and it strained Budapest's standing among partners who treated enlargement as a core security priority after Russia's 2022 escalation.

Senior U.S. lawmakers publicly warned that Hungary's delay undermined alliance cohesion and suggested a tougher U.S. line if the stalemate dragged on. The chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, for example, questioned whether Budapest remained a sufficiently "trusted partner," even flagging potential scrutiny of Hungary's status in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program. Those signals made clear that what Budapest framed as sovereignty-driven tactics were, for key allies, tests of reliability with costs that could outlast a single vote. In early 2024, the Senate Foreign Relations chair publicly questioned whether Hungary remained a "trusted partner" and urged the administration to consider tougher tools if Budapest kept obstructing allied priorities. Hungary has positioned itself as a flagship for national-conservative politics in the West, hosting the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) and using those platforms to champion "sovereignty" against what it casts as a liberal, globalist orthodoxy. Orbán's speeches at the Budapest editions of CPAC have openly courted U.S. conservatives and praised former President Donald Trump, giving the relationship a culture-war dimension that often bleeds into foreign policy messaging (on migration, LGBTQ issues, or the "peace vs. war" frame regarding Ukraine).

## 7 CONCLUSION

Hungary's experience as an EU and NATO member offers one of the clearest case studies of the tension between formal integration and substantive commitment to shared values. When Hungary joined the European Union in 2004 and had already become a NATO member in 1999, its accession was widely celebrated as a step toward completing the "reunification of Europe." Both institutions regarded Hungary as a democratic success story that had emerged from decades of Soviet domination and embraced liberal-democratic reforms. Yet, two decades later, Hungary has come to symbolize many of the contradictions inherent in the EU's enlargement project and the transatlantic alliance system. Instead of reinforcing Western unity, Budapest has

repeatedly acted as a spoiler, exposing the institutional vulnerabilities of both the EU and NATO.

At the heart of these tensions lies the Orbán government's distinct geopolitical orientation. While Hungary has remained formally embedded in Western institutions, it has systematically pursued policies that deviate from their collective agendas. In the EU, this has been most visible in Hungary's obstruction of sanctions against Russia, its resistance to deeper integration in areas such as migration, and its frequent use of veto power to extract concessions. These actions reflect a transactional logic that treats EU membership not as a commitment to shared norms, but as a bargaining platform where Budapest maximizes its political and economic gains.

Within NATO, the same contradictions play out in different ways. Hungary remains militarily active and continues to participate in allied operations and exercises, but its political discourse undermines the cohesion of the alliance. Orbán's skepticism about military aid to Ukraine and his calls for negotiations with Russia position Hungary closer to Moscow's narrative than to NATO's consensus on deterrence. The delay in ratifying Sweden's NATO membership further demonstrated Budapest's willingness to instrumentalize alliance processes for political leverage. Such behavior not only damages NATO's credibility but also raises uncomfortable questions about how much divergence the alliance can tolerate from within. In the long run, Hungary's approach risks normalizing a form of semi-detachment in which member states enjoy the security benefits of NATO while selectively disregarding its political and strategic direction. These institutional frictions cannot be separated from the ideological dimension of Hungary's foreign and domestic policy. Orbán has articulated a vision of "illiberal democracy" that places national sovereignty and cultural homogeneity at the center of political life. This model has increasingly aligned Hungary with other right-wing populist and sovereigntist movements across Europe and North America. By framing liberal internationalism as a threat to traditional values and state autonomy, the Hungarian government has positioned itself not merely as a pragmatic outlier, but as part of an ideological struggle against the liberal-democratic order that underpins both the EU and NATO.

The Hungarian case also exposes the limitations of enlargement as a geopolitical tool. The EU's eastward expansion was driven by both strategic and normative motivations: to stabilize the post-communist region, prevent the re-emergence of spheres of influence, and extend the reach of liberal-democratic governance. Yet, two decades later, Hungary demonstrates that accession does not guarantee internalization of norms. Instead, it highlights the difficulty of reconciling the Union's dual identity as both a community of values and a geopolitical actor. The EU's inability to enforce compliance with its own rule-of-law standards has emboldened illiberal practices not only in Hungary, but also in other member states such as Poland. Similarly, NATO's broad

membership brings strategic depth but also amplifies the risk of internal dissent, as Hungary's pro-Russian rhetoric illustrates.

At the same time, Hungary's divergence should not be overstated as a complete rupture. Budapest continues to rely on EU funds, benefits from access to the single market, and remains dependent on NATO for its security. Its deviations have not translated into an outright exit from either organization, but rather into a precarious balancing act between East and West. This duality is perhaps the defining feature of Hungary's geopolitical strategy: retaining the material benefits of Western integration while cultivating political and economic ties with Russia, China, and other non-Western powers. Such an approach may provide short-term autonomy, but in the long run, it risks deepening Hungary's isolation within the very institutions that safeguard its stability and prosperity. Ultimately, Hungary's trajectory illustrates the paradox of modern European integration. Enlargement has undeniably expanded the EU and NATO's reach, but it has also introduced internal fractures that both institutions struggle to manage. Hungary exemplifies how a member state can simultaneously be inside the structures of the West and yet challenge their very foundations.

In this light, Hungary is not merely a domestic anomaly but a test case for the future of the European solidarity and transatlantic unity. Considering that candidate states from the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighborhood are still waiting for full accession to the EU, it would be safe to assume that Brussels faces a critical dilemma. On the one hand, accelerating enlargement remains a key strategic objective to promote stability and deter external influence in these regions. On the other hand, the Hungarian case underscores the risks of integrating states that may not fully commit to the EU's foundational values, potentially undermining cohesion and effectiveness from within. Therefore, the EU must carefully balance the geopolitical imperatives of enlargement with robust mechanisms to ensure compliance with democratic norms, lest future expansions replicate or exacerbate the institutional vulnerabilities currently exemplified by Hungary. It would be prudent for the EU to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the strategic culture of any nation seeking accession, including an assessment of the state's capacity and willingness to adhere to EU norms and standards, the degree of its political and economic autonomy in managing relationships with external actors, and the societal perceptions embodied in how citizens of that country understand and identify with the concept of being "European."

Finally, Hungary's geopolitical stance reveals the fragility of the liberal order when confronted with populist nationalism from within its own ranks. As the EU and NATO confront mounting external challenges—from Russia's revisionism to global competition with China and strategic narratives of Türkiye the capacity to manage internal dissent will become a decisive factor for their survival. Hungary's example warns that institutional membership alone is insufficient; without deeper normative alignment, the very foundations of Western unity remain vulnerable.

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