



INSTRUMENTALIZING MULTILATERALISM: PRESIDENT ERDOĞAN VISITS HUNGARY FOR THE SECOND TIME IN 2023

László Szerencsés, 2023/24 Mercator-IPC Fellow

Hungary and Turkey are currently enjoying exceptionally good relations.¹ While differences have surfaced between Budapest and Ankara during the Israel-Hamas war, with Turkey expressing solidarity with Hamas and Hungary aligning with Israel, the shared perspectives of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the transactional nature of international politics downplayed the discord during their most recent meeting on December 18, 2023. In addition to their shared worldview, a crucial factor cementing the connection between the Orbán and Erdoğan regimes—beyond cooperation on energy,² culture,³ and migration⁴—is their critical view of their country's membership in the Western security architecture. Although this link was not explicitly mentioned during the meeting,⁵ which was more ceremonial than substantial, celebrating the 100th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries, it is worth exploring how Turkey's and Hungary's ruling regimes use multilateral organizations to extract benefits from cooperation.

Transactional Benefits from Cooperating with Hungary in NATO and the EU

Though Turkey and Hungary are both integral members of the Western security architecture, they are both critical of it.^{6,7} Both countries are NATO members,

and while Hungary is a member of the EU, Turkey is a candidate country and has a Customs Union with the organization. Rather than wholeheartedly embracing the democratic foundations of these institutions, they strategically navigate their relationships to extract benefits. This pragmatic stance leads Ankara and Budapest to collaborate on specific policy issues.

Within NATO, only two countries have yet to ratify Sweden's accession: Turkey and Hungary. Turkey has postponed Stockholm's ratification due to concerns about Sweden's harboring of groups that Ankara deems as terrorist organizations.⁸ Subsequently, President Erdoğan introduced a new condition—Turkey's EU membership⁹—as a factor influencing the decision. More recently, the delay has been attributed to the delivery of F-16s from the United States.¹⁰

Hungary's stance is less transparent. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó suggested¹¹ that Sweden's criticism of Hungary's rule of law situation is the reason for non-ratification; yet in another instance, he indicated¹² Hungary would follow Turkey's lead on this matter. During the December 18 meeting, both leaders refrained from commenting on their ratification positions during the press briefing, and on December 21, Prime Minister Orbán stated that there was no agreement between Turkey and Hungary on this matter.¹³ While Hungary's motivations remain unclear, it is evident that Budapest's hesitancy indirectly aids Turkey in shouldering the responsibility for impeding NATO enlargement.

Within the EU, Hungary's membership proves advantageous for Turkey, as it allows Ankara to leverage Budapest as a strategic ally in advancing its agenda within EU institutions. Prime Minister Orbán underscored¹⁴ this collaborative approach on December 18, declaring Hungary's commitment to actively support the modernization of the Customs Union and advocate for visa liberalization with Turkey. Notably, these efforts are expected to be intensified during Hungary's Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2024.

Organization of Turkic States: Boosting Orbán's Confidence and His Regime's Legitimacy

For Hungary's Orbán, cultivating a positive relationship with the Erdoğan regime serves as an alternative platform through which the prime minister can project himself as a respected statesman. The primary arena for realizing this diplomatic theater is the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), of which Hungary became an observer member in 2018.¹⁵ President Erdoğan expressed his joy over Hungary's presence in the OTS on December 18.¹⁶

Notably, Hungary has assumed a significant role by diplomatically and financially supporting the opening of an OTS office in Budapest in 2019, which is the only such office in the EU.¹⁷ Demonstrating its commitment to the organization, the Hungarian government has generously provided a villa for the organization's offices rent-free, covering both operational and staffing expenses.¹⁸ Furthermore, Hungary underscored its dedication by joining the Turkic Investment Fund, the foremost financial institution established by the OTS, with an investment of EUR 100 million.¹⁹

The expected benefits of this investment are mostly non-material. First, among his EU partners the Hungarian Prime Minister is faced with criticism because of the dire rule of law situation in Hungary. In contrast, Orbán is treated with respect by his partners in Turkey and Central Asia, where power structures often align with Hungary's approach. While this might seem tangential to Budapest's conventional foreign policy considerations, the affirmation that Orbán receives from partners within the OTS can assuage potential insecurities stemming from the criticism that Hungary faces in Brussels.

Second, from an electoral perspective, meetings such as the one on December 18 are an alternative stage where the Hungarian ruling regime can project leadership and confidence. Outside of crisis scenarios that prompt Orbán's engagement²⁰ with Western counterparts, securing meetings with willing partners from the West can prove challenging. However, Orbán's regular meetings²¹ with politicians from Central Asia and Turkey serve as tangible evidence of Hungary's continued relevance, attempting to counter the criticism that the country is isolated²² in the realm of international politics.

From Multilateralism to Bilateralism

Meetings such as the December 18 meeting between Orbán and Erdoğan are an integral element of the transactional relationship²³ between Ankara and Budapest. As especially evident over the last year, the Turkish ruling regime wields multilateral organizations as tools to advance its distinct agenda, even at the cost of impeding crucial decision-making processes such as Sweden's NATO accession. To bolster the effectiveness of this approach, Ankara seeks to build its partnership with similarly governed states such as Hungary. While this strategy may yield short-term gains, it also results in the isolation of both Turkey and Hungary within the Western alliance. Although the Turkey-Hungary partnership garners publicity, particularly through the OTS, the long-lasting damage to the credibility and reliability of the two countries within NATO and the EU could further marginalize them in pivotal decisions shaping the future of these organizations.

Endnotes

- 1 János Hóvári, "Folyamatosság, Törések És Változások a Magyar-Török Kapcsolatok Százéves Történetében. 2013: Egy Korszakváltás Kezdeté," *Külügyi Szemle* 22, no. 2 (2023): 3-22.
- 2 "Miért Számít Sokat Az a Pici Török Gáz, Amit Szent Istvánkor Vettünk?" Válasz Online, August 28, 2023, <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2023/08/28/torokorszag-foldgaz-balkan-erdogan-orban-botas-mvm-energetika/>.
- 3 Anadolu Agency, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Türkiye-Macaristan Kültür Yılı Açılış Programı'na Katıldı," YouTube December 18, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGP-jen3iEjc&abchannel=AnadoluAjans%C4%B1>.
- 4 "Novák Katalin: Törökország Kulcsország Magyarország Számára Az Illegális Migráció Feltartóztatása, Valamint Az Energiabiztonság Szempontjából," Híradó, December 18, 2023, <https://hirado.hu/belfold/cikk/2023/12/18/novak-katalin-torokorszag-kulcsorszag-magyarorszag-szama-ra-az-illegalis-migracio-feltartoztatasa-valamint-az-energiabiztonsag-szempontjabol>.
- 5 "Orbán Viktor: A Nagy Terv Az, Hogy a 21. Században a Magyarok És a Törökök Együtt Lesznek Győztesek," 444, December 18, 2023, <https://444.hu/2023/12/18/orban-viktor-a-nagy-terv-az-hogy-a-21-szazadban-a-magyarok-es-a-torokok-egyutt-lesznek-gyoztesek>.
- 6 Dániel Hegedüs, "The Erosion of Democracy and Rule of Law in Hungary," *GMF Insights*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, November 15, 2022, <https://www.gmf-us.org/news/erosion-democracy-and-rule-law-hungary>.
- 7 Galip Dalay, "Deciphering Turkey's Geopolitical Balancing and Anti-Westernism in Its Relations with Russia," *SWP Comments*, no. 35 (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, May 20, 2022), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2022C-35TurkeyRelationsRussia.pdf>.
- 8 "Sweden Will Not Get Turkey's Nod for NATO Bid Unless It Stops Sheltering 'terrorists,' Erdogan Says," Reuters, March 7, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/sweden-will-not-get-turkeys-nod-nato-bid-unless-it-stops-sheltering-terrorists-2023-07-03/>.
- 9 "Turkey's Erdogan Demands EU Membership Talks in Exchange for Backing Swedish NATO Bid," France 24, October 7, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230710-sweden-s-pm-tries-to-break-turkish-resistance-in-nato-talks>.
- 10 "Erdogan Expects Steps from US on F-16 Sale for Sweden NATO Accession," Al Jazeera, June 12, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/6/erdogan-expects-steps-from-us-on-f-16-sale-for-sweden-nato-accession>.
- 11 "Dühös Levelet Küldött Szijjártó a Svédeknek - Borulhat a NATO-Csatlakozás?" Portfolio, September 14, 2023, <https://www.portfolio.hu/global/20230914/duhos-levelet-kuldott-szijjarto-a-svedeknek-borulhat-a-nato-csatlakozas-639753>.
- 12 "Szijjártó Péter Bejelentette, Hogy Egyeztet a Törökökkel a Svéd NATO-Csatlakozás Kapcsán," Portfolio, April 8, 2023, <https://www.portfolio.hu/global/20230704/szijjarto-pter-bejelentette-hogy-egyeztet-a-torokokkal-a-sved-nato-csatlakozas-kapcsan-626017>.
- 13 "Orbán: „Nincs Nagy Gusztusuk” a Képviselőknek Jóváhagyni Svédország NATO-Csatlakozását” Magyar Hang, December 21, 2023, <https://hang.hu/belfold/orban-szerint-a-nagy-kuzdelmek-utan-nagy-tervek-eve-jon-160270>.
- 14 "Orbán-Erdogan Találkozó: Magyarország Mindent Megtesz Az EU És Törökország Közötti Vámunio Modernizálásáért," Portfolio, December 18, 2023, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20231218/orban-erdogan-talalkozo-magyarorszag-mindent-megtesz-az-eu-es-torokorszag-kozotti-vamunio-modernizalasaert-658469>.
- 15 Zoltán Egeresi, "ANALYSIS - Hungary in the Organization of Turkic States: A Bridge between East and West," Anadolu Agency, November 18, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-hungary-in-the-organization-of-turkic-states-a-bridge-between-east-and-west/2424575>.
- 16 "Orbán-Erdogan Találkozó: Magyarország Mindent Megtesz Az EU És Törökország Közötti Vámunio Modernizálásáért," Portfolio, December 18, 2023, <https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20231218/orban-erdogan-talalkozo-magyarorszag-mindent-megtesz-az-eu-es-torokorszag-kozotti-vamunio-modernizalasaert-658469>.
- 17 "A Türk Tanács Megnyitja Budapesti Bemutató Irodáját," TRT, September 19, 2019, <https://www.trt.net.tr/magyar/kultura-eletmod/2019/09/19/a-turk-tanacs-megnyitja-budapesti-bemutakozo-irodajat-1272330>.
- 18 "Közel 900 Millió Forintba Került Idáig a Türk Tanács Budapesti Képviselője," Magyar Narancs, November 8, 2021, <https://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/kozel-900-millio-forintba-kerult-idaig-a-turk-tanacs-budapesti-kepviselote-240822>.
- 19 "Százmillió Euróval Csatlakozik a Magyar Kormány a Türk IMF-Hez," 444, March 11, 2023, <https://444.hu/2023/11/03/szazmillio-euroval-csatlakozik-a-magyar-kormany-a-turk-imef-hez>.
- 20 "Macron Hosts Hungary's Orban in Bid to Unlock EU Support for Ukraine," France 24, July 12, 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231207-macron-hosts-hungary-s-orban-in-bid-to-break-ukraine-deadlock>.
- 21 "Orbán Viktor Ismertette Magyarország B Tervét," Index, March 11, 2023, <https://index.hu/kulfold/2023/11/03/orban-viktor-turk-allamok-szervezete-csucstalalkozo-ukrajnai-haboru-covid/>.
- 22 "Budapest Is Teaching Finland and Sweden a Lesson: Hungary Becomes Increasingly Isolated in NATO," Euronews, March 13, 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/03/13/budapest-is-teaching-finland-and-sweden-a-lesson-hungary-becomes-increasingly-isolated-in->
- 23 Galib Bashirov and Ihsan Yilmaz, "The Rise of Transactionalism in International Relations: Evidence from Turkey's Relations with the European Union," *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, no. 2 (March 3, 2020): 165-84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357718.2019.1693495>.