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**A triangle of (mis)trust:  
HUNGARY'S  
ENLARGEMENT  
STAKES IN  
SERBIA AND  
KOSOVO**

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# Abstract

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Ever since his return to power in 2010, Hungary's Viktor Orbán has established himself at the helm of a new illiberal paradigm of government and values that has gained traction across the EU and beyond. In his quest for ally diversification away from the West, Orbán has developed an interest-based relationship with the six countries of the Western Balkans, where Serbia stands out as a preferred partner. In this context, several concerns emerge not only in relation to Budapest's enlargement vision but also with respect to its political ties with other countries in the region, where Kosovo stands out as the most critical case.

This study argues that Hungary finds itself at a triangular juncture between Serbia and Kosovo, built on the premise that holding equal bilateral relations with both countries could compromise its well-nurtured ties with Belgrade. Through three dimensions of analysis—the economic, the security, and the ideological—and three empirical cases—the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, Kosovo's applications to the Council of Europe and to the EU, and the EU enlargement policy as a whole—the study finds that Hungary will enact a policy supportive of Serbia's domestic and international goals, even if this has negative implications on Kosovo's national interests and threatens its diplomatic ties with Prishtina. More broadly, the study reveals that Hungary's triangular relationship with Serbia and Kosovo is one of trust and mistrust, where the Budapest-Belgrade axis is set to thrive in a global arena of increasing authoritarianism, while the weaker end, namely Kosovo, is set to struggle without more and better support from other EU Member States.

# 1. Introduction

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Since regaining executive power in 2010, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has turned his country's domestic political and social spheres upside down, while rendering Hungary instrumental in its obstructionism at the heart of the European Union's (EU) decision-making and operational machinery. Realist and pragmatic in its approach to international relations, trade, and geopolitics, Orbán's Hungary has opened up to the East and fraternized with autocracies the size of Putin's Russia and Xi's China, while engaging in the pursuit of the illiberal State as a new governance paradigm.

In his quest for ally and resource diversification, the Hungarian Prime Minister is also multifaceted in his relations with the six countries of the Western Balkans, whose EU accession candidacies he has fervently supported over the years. Among all enlargement hopefuls, however, Serbia undoubtedly stands out as Hungary's preferred partner. It is safe to argue that Budapest's brotherly relations with Belgrade, predominantly cemented upon the inter-personal connections between Orbán and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, frame a sizeable portion of Hungary's approach to EU enlargement. In light of this privileged partnership, though, several concerns emerge not only in relation to Budapest's enlargement vision but also with respect to its political ties with other countries in the region—where Kosovo stands out as the most critical case.

The primary argument of this study is that, as a consequence of its foreign policy course, Hungary currently finds itself positioned at a critical juncture between Serbia and Kosovo—in a triangular relationship of interests—built on the premise that holding equal bilateral relations with both countries could compromise its well-nurtured ties with Belgrade. To avoid this, Hungary will enact a policy supportive of Serbia's domestic and international goals, even if this has negative implications for Kosovo's national interests and places Hungary's open recognition of Kosovo under scrutiny. The extent to which this argument can be supported constitutes the foremost purpose of this study.

Following the introduction to the topic, Section 2 outlines the precepts and principles of Hungary's foreign and enlargement policy since 2010 and maps out Budapest's strategic interest vis-à-vis the Western Balkans across three interdependent dimensions: the economic, the security, and the ideological. It then goes on to provide, first, a historical account of Hungary's bilateral relations with Serbia and with Kosovo; and second, a scale of convergence along these three dimensions, outlining the main overlaps in detail and drawing a preliminary scheme on Hungary's imbalanced triangular relationship with both countries. Section 3 constitutes the empirical body of this study and illustrates the trilateral misbalance through three different cases of analysis: the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, Kosovo's applications to the Council of Europe (CoE) and to the EU,

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and the EU's enlargement policy. Section 4 provides practical conclusions to the study and reflects on the future of the Hungary-Serbia-Kosovo relationship through the EU's institutional lens, emphasizing the main shortcomings and weaknesses of Brussels' approach to date. Section 5 features a set of policy recommendations based on the study's findings, addressing not only EU institutions and Member States, but also the leaders of the Western Balkans.

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## 2. The Orbán years: Hungary's foreign and enlargement policy since 2010

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It is an undisputed fact that, ever since his return to power in 2010, Viktor Orbán has transformed Hungary and established himself at the helm of a new paradigm of government and values that has gradually gained traction across the EU and beyond. The consistent crushing majorities that his political party, Fidesz, has garnered in the Hungarian parliament over the past 14 years has given the Prime Minister and his executive *carte blanche* to do and undo at their discretion—even at the expense of the rule of law, the separation of powers, and the liberal-democratic institutional architecture. In the framework of his self-termed governance ideal, the illiberal State<sup>1</sup>, Orbán has slowly subverted Hungary's steady relations with the West, fraternizing with like-minded autocrats and establishing a pragmatic approach to foreign relations.

### 2.1. Precepts and priorities: less integration, more connectivity

Orbán's illiberal vision also finds an expression in the foreign and geopolitical domains. His government arguably follows many of the precepts set out by the classical realist theory, whereby sovereignty is an underpinning principle to any negotiation.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore not surprising that many of Orbán's assumptions about the conduct of countries, as well as many of his decisions, evidence

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1 'Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp', 2014. <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

2 Botond Feledy, 'Hungary: populism or politics?' CIDOB Report 1, 45–47, 2017.

realist traits.<sup>3</sup> In a speech in late 2022, Orbán mapped out Hungary's challenges and opportunities in the field of foreign policy, which were summarized by his political director in an article for Hungarian news magazine *Mandiner*.<sup>4</sup> The piece outlines Orbán's main aim of transforming Hungary into a developed State and "getting out of the group of medium-developed countries" in a broader context of risk where the Cold-War bloc era could be restored—potentially exacerbating Hungary's "peripheral" irrelevance in the world.

Orbán claims that the decline of the neoliberal economic and political world order—accentuated by the 2008 economic crisis, migration, Brexit, the victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election, the COVID-19 pandemic, and now the "Ukrainian-Russian war" [sic]—points to a world that is doomed to operate in blocs.<sup>5</sup> As a pragmatic way out of irrelevance, his thesis proposes building bridges across blocs and rejects severing ties with potential partners, in what he terms a connectivity-based model:

*"[I]n the international system understood as a network, a country must strive to be connected to other countries and market players at as many points as possible. The nature of the connections goes beyond economic aspects. These include trade, infrastructural relations, investment and knowledge transfer, as well as public diplomatic relations... [T]he increase in the number of contacts increases the economic role of the country more and more."*<sup>6</sup>

Orbán's penchant for connectivity is apparent in his Eastern Opening (Keleti Nyitás in Hungarian) strategy, introduced in 2011.<sup>7</sup> In his endeavor to reduce Hungary's dependence on trade with the West and enable the country to catch up with EU partners through economic growth, Orbán has sought additional sources of investment with fast-growing countries of the East—like China and the United Arab Emirates—which he has also identified as Hungary's most important economic diplomacy priority.<sup>8</sup> Hungary has not only boosted its trade relations and diplomatic ties with Moscow and Beijing,<sup>9</sup> possibly the two most vivid examples, but also with the Central Asian autocracies through its

3 Devin Haas, 'Understanding Hungarian foreign policy', *Emerging Europe*, 2023. <https://emerging-europe.com/news/understanding-hungarian-foreign-policy/>

4 Balázs Orbán, 'Nem a szétbontásra, igen az összekapcsolásra - ez Orbán stratégiája a következő évtizedre!' *Mandiner*, 2023. <https://mandiner.hu/hetilap/2023/01/nem-a-szetbontasra-igen-az-osszekapcsolasra-a-magyar-strategia>

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 'Orbán Viktor: folytatódik a keleti nyitás', 2011. <https://2010-2014.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/hirek/orban-viktor-folytatodik-a-keleti-nyitas>

8 Zsuzsanna Végh, 'Hungary's 'Eastern Opening' policy toward Russia: ties that bind?' *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 24(1-2), 47-65, 2015. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26591857>

9 Péter Visnovitz and Erin Kristin Jenne, 'Populist argumentation in foreign policy: the case of Hungary under Viktor Orbán, 2010-2020', *Comparative European Politics* 19, 683-702, 2021. DOI: 10.1057/s41295-021-00256-3.

observer status in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS).<sup>10</sup>

Instrumental to Hungary's Eastern Opening was the appointment in 2014 of Peter Szijjártó as Minister of Foreign Affairs, as part of a deeper "structural transformation" of the foreign policy hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> Having already been responsible for the Eastern strategy as part of Orbán's cabinet, Szijjártó proved indispensable to the Prime Minister's aim of growing the country's bilateral economic ties with partners in Asia and the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> Shortly after his appointment, Szijjártó, who still holds this ministerial position, swiftly restructured the ministry's policy-making hierarchy, including the dismissal of 107 staff and 34 ambassadors within his first month in office.<sup>13 14</sup>

The diversification of partnerships through the pursuit of non-traditional alliances, with the goal of rendering Hungary a link between the Western and Eastern universes of values and governance,<sup>15</sup> clearly constitutes one of the three main legs upon which Budapest's foreign policy stands. Another of those legs is cooperation with and within the Visegrád Group, also known as the Visegrád Four, comprising the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. United by their common history, geographical location and cultural heritage, the Visegrád Group has since 1991 advanced its members' ambitions towards regional integration and cooperation in fields such as interior affairs, tax and customs, education, culture, and tourism.<sup>16</sup> For Orbán's executive, intra-Visegrád cooperation "remains the focus of Hungary's foreign policy strategy"<sup>17</sup> and represents the preservation of shared interests in times of high migratory pressure and great geopolitical shifts, based upon the common belief that "Central Europeans are the ones who respect the original values of the EU: family, religion and sovereignty".<sup>18</sup> Growing political divergences among the executives of the Visegrád countries appear to have stalled the group's progress, not least in the context of the war in Ukraine and the EU's ongoing process of diversification of energy resources away from Russia—where Hungary, in its balancing act with Moscow, has held categorically opposing views to the other

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10 Zoltán Egeresi, 'Hungary in the Organization of Turkic States: A Bridge between East and West', Anadolu Agency, 2021. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-hungary-in-the-organization-of-turkic-states-a-bridge-between-east-and-west/2424575>

11 Péter Visnovitz and Erin Kristin Jenne, 2021.

12 Zsuzsanna Végh, 2015.

13 'Még ma kirúghatnak 107 embert Szijjártó minisztériumából', HVG, 2014. [https://hvg.hu/itthon/20141031\\_meg\\_ma\\_kirugnak\\_107\\_embert\\_kulugy](https://hvg.hu/itthon/20141031_meg_ma_kirugnak_107_embert_kulugy)

14 András Dezső, 'Most röhögnek rajtunk, leírják az országot', Index, 2014. [https://index.hu/belfold/2014/12/15/mi\\_van\\_a\\_kulugyben/](https://index.hu/belfold/2014/12/15/mi_van_a_kulugyben/)

15 Devin Haas, 'What is Hungary doing in the Organisation of Turkic States?' Emerging Europe, 2023. <https://emerging-europe.com/news/explainer-what-is-hungary-doing-in-the-organisation-of-turkic-states/>

16 'Main presidency activities and achievements, July 2021 - June 2022', Hungarian Presidency 2021/22 of the Visegrád Group, 2022. <https://v4.mfa.gov.hu/assets/39/94/92/04310803148fe4b06c68bd4d00e07f25e6567dcc.pdf>

17 'Visegrád Group Remains the Focus of Foreign Policy Strategy', Hungary Today, 2023. <https://hungarytoday.hu/visegrad-group-remains-the-focus-of-foreign-policy-strategy/>

18 Balázs Orbán, 'Magyarország továbbra is elkötelezett a szoros V4-es együttműködés fenntartásában', Mandiner, 2022. <https://mandiner.hu/velemeney/2022/11/orban-balazs-v4-velemeney-kulfold-belfold-kozep-europa-eu-csalad-vallas-szuverenitas>

three members of the alliance.<sup>19</sup> The recent electoral swing in Poland is also likely to have cost Budapest its closest EU ally.<sup>20</sup> However, Orbán's government has remained determined to preserve the functionality of the group.

All things considered, Orbán's realist-based illiberal approach to foreign policy raises important questions about the country's compatibility with the values intrinsic to EU membership. In his illiberal guise, the Hungarian premier can freely veto EU foreign policy decisions, but also engage in opaque domestic and trans-border corruption schemes that go unpunished at home—let alone at the EU level, where Hungary's status as a Member State thwarts any potential retaliation. Orbán's illiberal outlook operates hand in hand with his realist approach to foreign policy, which enables him to further advance his goals uncontested and in open disregard of the EU's core values of democracy, equality, and the rule of law.

## 2.2. Three dimensions to an enlarged Union

Budapest's third foreign policy leg is nested at a geographical level between the EU's (ultra-)periphery, namely the economies of Eurasia and East Asia, and the immediate intra-EU vicinity, embodied in the Visegrád Group. In Hungary's immediate extra-EU vicinity lie the six countries of the Western Balkans, intrinsically tied to the EU enlargement process as their most salient policy expression. The Orbán government has traditionally held the view that the main direction of an enlarged EU needs to be towards the Western Balkans, as a stable and developed southeastern region is in Hungary's interest.<sup>21</sup> In the framework of a sluggish enlargement process that has stalled since Croatia's EU accession in 2013, Hungarian authorities have been adamant about the need to speed up the procedure, and have generally opposed the establishment of stricter rules or technicalities that might result in delays.<sup>22</sup>

Hungarian society is remarkably positive towards the idea of enlarging the EU, with 64 percent of citizens in favour as of 2023.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, the Hungarian government has emphasized its position as one of the few EU Member States, alongside its Visegrád counterparts, that genuinely and proactively supports and promotes the enlargement policy: "the fact that enlargement is on the EU

19 Matt Boyse, 'Visegrad 4 is limping along', Geopolitical Intelligence Services, 2023. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/visegrad-4-political/>

20 Jędrzej Bielecki, 'Polska osierociła Viktora Orbána. Węgom grozi pełna izolacja w Unii', Rzeczpospolita, 2023. <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art39307351-polska-osierocila-viktora-orbana-wegrom-grozi-pelna-izolacja-w-unii>

21 'Hungary's Foreign Policy after the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011. [https://brexit.kormany.hu/admin/download/f/1b/30000/foreign\\_policy\\_20111219.pdf](https://brexit.kormany.hu/admin/download/f/1b/30000/foreign_policy_20111219.pdf)

22 'Hungarian Foreign Minister Urges Brussels To Speed Up EU Enlargement Process', RFE/RL, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/balkans-hungarian-minister-szjijarto-eu-enlargement/32329963.html>

23 'Standard Eurobarometer 100 – Autumn 2023', European data, 2023. [https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s3053\\_100\\_2\\_std100\\_eng?locale=en](https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/s3053_100_2_std100_eng?locale=en)



agenda at all is a huge achievement, as the Visegrád countries are united in their support for the Western Balkans, unlike many Western European leaders who only take this position in public”, claimed Foreign Minister Szijjártó in 2023.<sup>24</sup>

Hungary’s strategic foreign policy interests in the Western Balkans are manifold, spanning trade and investment, the protection of national minority rights, energy security, and regional stability.<sup>25</sup> However, three main dimensions articulate Hungary’s favourable position towards the accession of the Western Balkans to the EU. It is, first and foremost, an economic question. Hungary eyes the Western Balkans as a strategic market with which it is currently engaging in a consolidation of trade relations, and which is seeing the gradual expansion of Hungarian companies, especially in the banking and telecommunications sectors. As of 2020, Hungary was the fourth largest EU exporter to the Western Balkans and had the EU’s biggest trade surplus with the region at €1.2 billion.<sup>26</sup> The energy field is likewise a key aspect linked to Hungary’s trade balance, not least as a vulnerable country that is extremely dependent on Russian energy and which has limited energy sources of its own.<sup>27</sup> Budapest’s strengthening of relations with Belgrade, for instance, underlines Hungary’s quest for energy diversification and security, which has found a partial expression in the steady construction of interconnectors that transport gas from Turkey through Serbia and into Hungary.<sup>28</sup>

The second dimension is security, with a specific focus on migration, which Orbán considers to be “at the heart of the conflicts between the European Union and Hungary”.<sup>29</sup> A proponent of replacement theory, the Hungarian Prime Minister has made his anti-immigration campaign one of his most prominent battles, especially during the 2015 refugee crisis and the ensuing migration waves that consolidated the so-called ‘Balkan route’ across North Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, and Hungary into Western and Northern Europe. In the wake of the crisis, Orbán had a four-metre fence erected along the border with Serbia.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, his close allyship with several Western Balkan leaders, particularly President of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić and former Prime Minister of North Macedonia Nikola Gruevski, allowed him to advance his anti-immigration agenda by further narrowing collaboration with key transit countries, all the

24 ‘Visegrád Group Remains the Focus of Foreign Policy Strategy’, *Hungary Today*, 2023. <https://hungarytoday.hu/visegrad-group-remains-the-focus-of-foreign-policy-strategy/>

25 Srdjan Cvijić, Maja Bjeloš, Luka Šterić, Ivana Ranković and Marko Drajić, ‘Balkan Csárdás: Hungarian Foreign Policy Dance’, *Belgrade Centre for Security Policy*, 2023. <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/hungary-ENG-06-1.pdf>

26 ‘Western Balkans-EU - international trade in goods statistics’, Eurostat. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Western\\_Balkans-EU\\_-\\_international\\_trade\\_in\\_goods\\_statistics&direction=next&oldid=558733#The\\_Western\\_Balkans\\_trade\\_with\\_the\\_EU\\_and\\_other\\_main\\_partners](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Archive:Western_Balkans-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics&direction=next&oldid=558733#The_Western_Balkans_trade_with_the_EU_and_other_main_partners)

27 Srdjan Cvijić, Maja Bjeloš, Luka Šterić, Ivana Ranković and Marko Drajić, 2023.

28 ‘Serbia and Hungary connect Balkan Stream gas pipeline’, *N1*, 2021. <https://n1info.rs/english/news/serbia-and-hungary-connect-balkan-stream-gas-pipeline/>

29 ‘Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 32nd Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp’, 22 July 2023. <https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-32nd-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

30 ‘Hungary closes border with Serbia and starts building fence to bar migrants’, *The Guardian*, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/17/hungary-closes-border-serbia-starts-building-fence-bar-migrants>

while strengthening his position among his illiberal peers in the region.<sup>31</sup>

Third, it is an ideological question. In his attempt to render the EU a community of sovereign nation-States through the prism of illiberal democracy, Orbán has a vital interest in garnering like-minded allies in the Western Balkans such as Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia, Milorad Dodik in Bosnia and Herzegovina's Republika Srpska, and (formerly) Nikola Gruevski in North Macedonia. Gruevski currently resides in Budapest after fleeing a two-year jail sentence on corruption-related charges in his country and being granted asylum by the Hungarian Immigration and Asylum Office.<sup>32</sup> Ultimately, the region is an arena for Orbán to pursue his foreign policy vision, as well as a source of support that he otherwise lacks from the majority of his EU peers and the West in general.<sup>33</sup>

However, despite Hungary's ambition for an enlarged EU, not all countries hold the same significance in the regional context or vis-à-vis Budapest's interests, and therefore the country's relations with the six partners are not cultivated to the same extent.

## 2.3. Dancing to the same tune: Hungary-Serbia relations

Among the six Western Balkan countries, Serbia stands out as Hungary's preferred partner and the country that reaps the greatest benefits from its relationship with Budapest. The Orbán government has long made Serbia's EU accession a priority<sup>34</sup> and a core principle in Orbán's conception of what the EU should become—foremostly an association of sovereign nations. Indeed, Belgrade's accession to the EU constitutes one of his so-called 'seven theses' for the future of the EU: "Serbia's membership furthers the interest of the EU more than it furthers the interest of Serbia".<sup>35</sup> This vision was presented in 2021 across the EU in the form of full-page paid advertisements in daily newspapers in several Member States.<sup>36</sup>

The Budapest-Belgrade axis of friendship was not always a given—at least not to the extent it is today. Much of the two countries' bilateral relationship has evolved in the context of Hungary's 'national policy' (nemzetpolitika in

31 Beáta Huszka, 'Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 17(4), 591–609, 2017. DOI: 10.1080/14683857.2017.1367462.

32 'Hungarian court refuses to extradite former Macedonian PM Gruevski', Reuters, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-hungary-gruevski-idUSKCN1TS1ZT>

33 Jana Juzová, 'Visegrad in the Western Balkans: Losing ground?' *Think Visegrad Policy Brief*, 2019. <https://europeum.org/data/articles/2-juzova.pdf>

34 'Hungary's Foreign Policy after the Hungarian Presidency of the Council of the European Union', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary, 2011. [https://brexit.kormany.hu/admin/download/f/1b/30000/foreign\\_policy\\_20111219.pdf](https://brexit.kormany.hu/admin/download/f/1b/30000/foreign_policy_20111219.pdf)

35 'Viktor Orbán's address at the conference "Thirty Years of Freedom"', 2021. <https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/viktor-orbans-address-at-the-conference-entitled-free-for-thirty-years/>

36 'No thanks: Some Europe newspapers refuse political ads from Hungary's Orban', Reuters, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/no-thanks-some-europe-newspapers-refuse-political-ads-hungarys-orban-2021-07-01/>

Hungarian), which upholds as a priority the protection of the 1.8 million ethnic Hungarians living outside the borders of present-day Hungary—a direct consequence of the redrawing of borders enacted in the Treaty of Trianon at the end of the First World War. More than 180,000 of them live in Serbia, mostly in the northern region of Vojvodina, and their relationship with the Serbian State has fluctuated over the years. Tensions peaked between 2003 and 2005, when a series of ethnically-motivated episodes targeting Vojvodina Hungarians prompted mutual animosity,<sup>37</sup> and again in 2008 in the wake of Kosovo’s declaration of independence, which Hungary recognized within less than a month.<sup>38</sup> After this, however, both countries developed a more pragmatic bilateral approach at a time when Serbia was in need of Hungary’s support for its EU candidacy bid.<sup>39</sup>

The breakthrough came in 2012 with the marking of a historical reconciliation. The timing was politically convenient, as Aleksandar Vučić’s Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) had just entered government and had established itself as Serbia’s most popular political force. Vučić’s ideological convergence with Orbán proved to be a determining factor for the restoration of friendly relations, with symbolic acts of condemnation for past atrocities being held in 2013 between the two countries.<sup>40</sup> István Pásztor, chairman of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ) party and President of the Assembly of Vojvodina, was also instrumental in this process. Pásztor, a Serbia-born ethnic Hungarian, helped to establish warm relations between Vučić and Orbán.<sup>41</sup> A revealing indication of Pásztor’s pivotal role was the presence of Vučić, Orbán, and Republika Srpska president Milorad Dodik at Pásztor’s funeral in November 2023: “Pásztor’s name will be written not only in Hungarian, but also in Serbian textbooks”, Vučić said.<sup>42</sup>

The improving minority rights frameworks and the common interests of both countries’ leaderships, especially in the framework of the EU integration process, have aided the reconciliation process between Hungary and Serbia. Perhaps more importantly, they have also enhanced the personal bond between Vučić and Orbán. This has been underpinned by the growing network of clientelist exchanges woven between the VMSZ and the SNS. Official bilateral visits involving Heads of State and government, or other government officials, happen regularly and evidence the friendly relations that now exist between

37 ‘Assaults on minorities in Vojvodina’, Human Rights Watch, 2005. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/serbia1005/7.htm>

38 ‘Croatia and Hungary recognize Kosovo’, The New York Times, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/19/world/europe/19iht-kosovo.4.11264986.html>

39 Igor Novaković and Anna Orosz, ‘Overcoming the legacies of the past together: Serbia and Hungary’, EUROPEUM Policy Paper, 2019. <https://www.europeum.org/data/articles/policy-paper-srb-hngr.pdf>

40 Ibid.

41 Márton Losonczi, ‘The Life and Legacy of István Pásztor – A Great Witness of Hungarian-Serbian Reconciliation’, Hungarian Conservative, 2023. [https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture\\_society/istvan\\_pasztor\\_vojvodina\\_death\\_csurog\\_massacre\\_wwii\\_partisans\\_ethnic-hungarians/](https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/istvan_pasztor_vojvodina_death_csurog_massacre_wwii_partisans_ethnic-hungarians/)

42 ‘Pastor sahranjen u Subotici: Prisustvovali Vučić, Orban, Dodik i brojni ministri i građani’, 021, 2023. <https://www.021.rs/story/Novi-Sad/Vesti/357499/Pastor-sahrnjen-u-Subotici-Prisustvovali-Vucic-Orban-Dodik-i-brojni-ministri-i-gradjani.html>

Hungary and Serbia.<sup>43</sup> The alliance reached a new peak with the establishment in June 2023 of a Strategic Council for Cooperation between the two countries, whose multiple agreements have included the establishment of joint diplomatic missions in Malta and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as the creation of ten bilateral multi-disciplinary working groups.<sup>44 45</sup>

The three dimensions that articulate Hungary's policy interest in the Western Balkans find their clearest manifestation vis-à-vis Serbia. The economic field is arguably the most important, not least given both countries' realist pragmatic approach to international relations and partnerships. Hungarian-Serbian economic relations are, as both leaderships have claimed, "at a maximum level": Hungary is Serbia's fifth largest trade partner globally while Serbia is Hungary's seventeenth, their trade exchange amounting to €3.6 billion, five times higher than a decade ago.<sup>46</sup> Hungarian economic interests are focused on Serbia as the largest market in the Western Balkan region, which in turn provides Serbia with a main gateway into the EU's economies. Hungary's presence in Serbia is channeled through major investments and the gradual expansion of Hungarian companies—chiefly in the banking, telecommunications, and infrastructure sectors, to name a few—many of whose top executives hold close ties to Orbán's entourage and to Orbán himself.<sup>47</sup> In parallel, sizeable infrastructure ventures, such as the opaquely administered high-speed Budapest-Belgrade railway project, financed at 85 percent through Chinese loans, continue to reaffirm the willingness for joint investments—also in trilateral partnerships with Beijing.<sup>48</sup>

A particularly strategic strand of the two countries' economic friendship has emerged in the energy realm, further enhanced in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the decision by a majority of EU Member States to diversify their energy sources away from Moscow. Hungary, alongside Serbia, belongs to the group of countries that rejected a boycott on Russian oil and gas on pragmatic reasons: "Serbia and, I believe, Hungary have no special affection for the origin of gas and oil. It is only important for us to have them. Our citizens cannot live and heat on promises", said Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica

43 'Dačić i Sijarto: Odnosi Srbije i Mađarske na najvišem nivou u novijoj istoriji', Euronews Serbia, 2023. <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/politika/86991/dacic-i-sijarto-odnosi-srbije-i-madarske-na-najvisem-nivou-u-novijoj-istoriji/vest>

44 'Strategic step forward made in relations between Serbia, Hungary', 2023. <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/208572/strategic-step-forward-made-in-relations-between-serbia-hungary.php>

45 'Oil Pipeline and Further Agreements between Serbia and Hungary', Hungary Today, 2023. <https://hungarytoday.hu/oil-pipeline-and-further-agreements-between-serbia-and-hungary/>

46 'Strategic step forward made in relations between Serbia, Hungary', 2023. <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/208572/strategic-step-forward-made-in-relations-between-serbia-hungary.php>

47 Blanka Zöldi and Ana Ćurić, 'Companies dominate public lighting in Serbia with controversial Hungarian methods', Direkt36, 2019. <https://www.direkt36.hu/en/a-szereb-kovzilagitast-is-letaroljak-az-elios-cegek-a-szabalytalan-magyar-modszerrel/>

48 Lisa Irimescu, 'Hungary's Eastern Opening: Political and Economic Impacts', KKI Policy Brief 57, 2019. [https://kki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/57\\_KKI-Policy-Brief\\_HU-CHN-Irimescu\\_20191220.pdf](https://kki.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/57_KKI-Policy-Brief_HU-CHN-Irimescu_20191220.pdf)

Dačić in early 2023 at a meeting with Hungarian counterpart Peter Szijjártó.<sup>49</sup> The welcoming of energy resources regardless of the supplier is a core principle in both countries' approach to economic relations—a principle that predated the EU's boycott of Russian energy. For instance, the opening in 2021 of Balkan Stream—an offshoot of the Turk Stream pipeline—which circumvents Ukrainian territory to transport Russian natural gas to Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary via the Black Sea and Turkey, has been portrayed as a joint success. The war in Ukraine further prompted a new stage in the partnership, namely through the establishment of the joint natural gas company SERBHUNGAS, and the signing of a memorandum of understanding to build an oil pipeline from Algyó in southern Hungary to Novi Sad by 2028 to provide Serbia with Russian crude.<sup>50</sup>

In the security dimension, Hungary and Serbia also show high levels of convergence. Under the framework of the 2023 Strategic Council for Cooperation, for instance, both governments signed an agreement on the enhancement of strategic cooperation in the field of defence.<sup>51</sup> However, it is the fight against illegal migration and asylum seekers that both countries consider to be a key priority in economic, sociological, and demographic terms. Orbán's narrative depicts the ongoing migration flows into Europe as a threat common to the entire continent and a "matter of survival" where Serbia plays a crucial role and shares Hungary's fate.<sup>52</sup> Although Budapest's decision to build a four-metre fence along its border with Serbia to deter migrants triggered a bitter response at first, Belgrade never enacted any countermeasures against Hungary, suggesting that bilateral relations remained stable and that Serbia was determined to reap the long-term benefit of Hungary's allyship in their common crusade against immigration.<sup>53</sup> More recently, a new dimension to this partnership developed in late 2022 that includes Austria, with whom Hungary and Serbia signed a memorandum of understanding with the aim of keeping migrants away from the EU's external borders.<sup>54</sup> This envisages a stronger police presence along Serbia's key southern border with North Macedonia, to which Hungary pledged material support.<sup>55</sup>

The ideological convergence of Hungary and Serbia's governance systems is well embodied in the political identity of their leaders. Viktor Orbán

49 'Ivica Dačić: relations between Serbia and Hungary at the highest level in the past 10 years', 2023. [http://www.budapest.mfa.gov.rs/newstext.php?subaction=showfull&id=1673618013&ucat=19&template=Headlines&#disqus\\_thread](http://www.budapest.mfa.gov.rs/newstext.php?subaction=showfull&id=1673618013&ucat=19&template=Headlines&#disqus_thread)

50 Milica Stojanović and Edit Inotai, 'Serbia and Hungary Set Up Joint Natural Gas Company', *Balkan Insight*, 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/20/serbia-and-hungary-set-up-joint-natural-gas-company/>

51 'First Session of Serbia - Hungary Strategic Cooperation Council', 2023. <https://www.mod.gov.rs/eng/20209/odrzana-prva-sednica-strateskog-saveta-za-saradnju-srbije-i-madjarske20209>

52 Nikolaus J. Kurmayer and Zoran Radosavljević, 'Austria teams up with Hungary, Serbia to end 'asylum a la carte'', *Euractiv*, 2022. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/austria-teams-up-with-hungary-serbia-to-end-asylum-a-la-carte/>

53 Beáta Huszka, 2017.

54 *Ibid.*

55 'Sijarto: Mađarska će glasati protiv članstva Kosova u evropskim telima', *Tanjug*, 2023. <https://www.tanjug.rs/srbija/politika/7611/sijarto-madarska-ce-glasati-protiv-clanstva-kosova-u-evropskim-telima/ves>

and Aleksandar Vučić cemented their political control almost in parallel, with the Hungarian Prime Minister and the Serbian President both regaining power in the early 2010s, barely two years apart. Both leaders share a right-wing populist, autocratic style, as well as a nativist approach towards their respective nations.<sup>56</sup> They have tended to mirror each other's progressively centralist and illiberal policies in the realms of media freedom, human rights, and the rule of law.<sup>57</sup> This alliance is regularly sealed through episodes of mutual political support ahead of elections in Serbia and Hungary, which have become a standard procedure.<sup>58</sup> Despite both strongmen's political tendency to lean rightwards, they strive to convey a moderate and centrist demeanor vis-à-vis their domestic electorates and international observers, and they instrumentalize the existence of more extremist right-wing parties in their respective party systems.

The alignment between Hungary and Serbia, and foremostly between Prime Minister Orbán and President Vučić, has been carefully cultivated over the past decade. Both leaders have shared not only a compatible ideological architecture that translates into the realms of economy and energy but also a similar profit-making vision for their countries' economic elites and their own political entourages. The common security challenges that emerged in 2015 brought them closer to a joint policy strategy, leading to a co-dependent relationship where mutual long-term benefit is pursued in spite of occasional bilateral stand-offs.

## 2.4. Old acquaintances, new problems: Hungary-Kosovo relations

Hungary recognized Kosovo in 2008, barely one month after its declaration of independence, with broad parliamentary support. Hungary's recognition was, primarily, an expression of its *nemzetpolitika*, which also holds for its aim of securing autonomy for the 1.5 million-strong Szekler Hungarian community living in Transylvania, in neighbouring Romania.<sup>59</sup> This vision has acted as the backbone of Budapest's approach to Kosovo. Hungary has traditionally had sympathy for nations deprived of their right to self-determination, not least due to the sizeable Hungarian communities currently living outside the country's borders. The two-decade-long presence of Hungarian military forces in Kosovo as part of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR), and Budapest's steady contribution of troops—currently at 433, making it the third largest provider of operational forces—is arguably the most important dimension to both countries' recent common

56 András Biró-Nagy and James Hare, 'Understanding the Orbán-Vučić relationship', *Policy Solutions*, 2020. [https://www.policysolutions.hu/en/news/511/understanding\\_the\\_orban-vucic\\_relationship](https://www.policysolutions.hu/en/news/511/understanding_the_orban-vucic_relationship)

57 Maja Živanović, 'Serbian Leader 'Following Orbán' in Controlling Media - Freedom House', *Balkan Insight*, 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/05/serbian-leader-following-orban-in-controlling-media-freedom-house/>

58 "SAMO NAPRED, GOSPODINE PREDSEDNIČE" Orban poslao pismo podrške Vučiću: Iz komšiluka navijamo da nastavimo da pišemo našu uspešnu priču', *Blic*, 2023. <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/orban-poslao-pismo-podrške-vucicu-pred-izbore-2023/lbtwe31>

59 Jakub Lachert and Róbert Gönczi, 'Kosovo in foreign policies of Poland and Hungary', *Warsaw Institute*, 2021. <https://warsawinstitute.org/kosovo-foreign-policies-poland-hungary/>

history.<sup>60</sup> It also feeds into the Hungarian view of a stable Western Balkan region as a precondition for a stable Hungary, and it is in this framework that more recent diplomatic ties between the two countries have been developed.<sup>61</sup>

Hungary had already established a Liaison Office in Prishtina in 2005, which it quickly remodeled into an Embassy after Kosovo's independence, helping to speed up the consolidation of bilateral diplomatic relations.<sup>62</sup> Since then, institutional cooperation between the two countries has occurred mostly through the lens of Kosovo's integration into European organizations, chiefly through its EU accession process.<sup>63</sup> Hungarian authorities emphatically supported Kosovo's tortuous bid for visa liberalisation and consistently showed a proactive demeanor around Prishtina's integration efforts, tapping into the fields of trade, economic investment and education.<sup>64</sup> The turning point seemed to arrive in early 2023, when Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó announced that Budapest would be voting against Kosovo's applications for European bodies, such as the EU and the Council of Europe (CoE).<sup>65</sup> This marked a considerable shift in Hungary's usually constructive approach, the consequences of which are still unfolding.

As with Serbia, the three dimensions that articulate Hungary's policy interest in the Western Balkans also find their expression in Kosovo—albeit to a significantly lesser degree. In the economic realm, bilateral trade has almost tripled since 2015 and is expected to reach an all-time high, with telecommunications and audio equipment ranking as the most important sector.<sup>66</sup> By and large, however, Kosovo remains a marginal partner in Hungary's trade relations, arguably due to rule of law concerns that put the investment climate at risk.<sup>67</sup> In 2016, Hungary pledged Kosovo a soft loan of €62 million for infrastructure projects, but this never materialized due to the expiration of the agreement amid Kosovo's prolonged institutional instability.<sup>68</sup>

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60 Róbert Gönczi, 'Hungary in Command - The Importance of the KFOR Mission from Hungarian Perspective', Warsaw Institute, 2021. <https://warsawinstitute.org/hungary-command-importance-kfor-mission-hungarian-perspective/>

61 Mariann Őry, 'President Novák Visits Hungarian Soldiers Serving in Kosovo', Hungary Today, 2022. <https://hungarytoday.hu/president-novak-visits-hungarian-soldiers-serving-in-kosovo/>

62 László Márkus, 'Hungarian View on the Independence of Kosovo' in Krisztián Csaplár-Degovics (ed.) "These were hard times for Skanderbeg, but he had an ally, the Hungarian Hunyadi" Episodes in Albanian-Hungarian Historical Contacts' Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2019.

63 'Osmani takon Bencze, konfirmohet mbështetja për liberalizimin e vizave', RTK, 2021. <https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=517581>

64 'Hungaria vlerëson se Kosova i ka përbushur të gjitha obligimet për liberalizimin e vizave', Koha, <https://www.koha.net/arberi/238228/hungaria-vlereson-se-kosova-i-ka-permbushur-te-gjitha-obligimet-per-liberalizimin-e-vizave/>

65 'Sijarto: Mađarska će glasati protiv članstva Kosova u evropskim telima', Danas, 2021. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sijarto-madarska-ce-glasati-protiv-clanstva-kosova-u-evropskim-telima/>

66 'Hungary's trade expected to be record-breaking in 2023 with this small country', Daily News Hungary, 2023. <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungarys-trade-expected-to-be-record-breaking-in-2023-with-this-small-country/>

67 László Márkus, 2019.

68 Written interview with Gjenez Budima, Ambassador of Kosovo to Hungary. 30th November 2023.

In contrast, the security domain represents a primary area of interest, which reached its peak during the 2015 refugee crisis. Kosovo's location as a transit country along the 'Balkan route', while less crucial than that of Serbia or North Macedonia, reinforced the country's instrumental role in Budapest's fight against mass migration.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, however, Kosovo also became a country of origin for thousands of migrants and asylum applicants in Hungary and the EU at the beginning of 2015, many of which were held in camps and flown back.<sup>70</sup> It is believed that this migration wave from Kosovo laid the groundwork for organized crime groups "to prepare and fine-tune their strategies, and to develop more power" ahead of the bigger EU-bound migration waves in the summer of 2015.<sup>72</sup> Thus, even with Kosovo's location on the migration route, its non-key transit nature and its role as a country of origin for thousands of asylum seekers did not leave the Prishtina authorities in the most advantageous position vis-à-vis Hungary.

The ideological dimension is less clear in Kosovo. This reflects both the widespread and open support that most of Kosovo's political parties profess towards the EU and its relatively unstable political system and volatility, which reduce the potential for a concentration of authority in the hands of a single party or individual. Kosovo's political leaders have displayed illiberal traits over the years, but the fluid nature of the party system partially explains the weaker entrenchment of State-level illiberal structures that might be sympathetic to Budapest's governance approach.<sup>73</sup>

## 2.5. A triangular dilemma?

Despite holding well-established diplomatic ties with both Serbia and Kosovo, Hungary's relationship with the two countries is uneven—which correlates directly with the degree of convergence around Budapest's strategic foreign policy interests. On the one hand, Serbia occupies a fully convergent position on Hungary's priority list—in the economic, security, and ideological senses—while Kosovo, for the most part, fails at this exercise. This, alongside Budapest's interest in the Hungarian minority in Serbia and its clientelistic ties to the Vučić regime, inevitably tilts the orbit of influence and partnership towards Belgrade, within which Hungary can keep nourishing its short, medium, and long-term policy goals.

As early as 2008, following Hungary's recognition of Kosovo, Hungarian

69 Róbert Gönczi, 2021.

70 Fatos Bytyci and Krisztina Than, 'Dramatic surge in Kosovars crossing illegally into EU', Reuters, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kosovo-eu-migrants-idUSKBN0L81120150204>

71 Una Hajdari, 'Kosovo Migrants Flown Home from Hungary', Balkan Insight, 2015. <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/02/25/kosovo-migrants-flown-home-from-hungary/>

72 Interview with the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary. Budapest, 7th November 2023.

73 Agon Maliqi, 'Transition to what? Western Balkans democracies in a state of illiberal equilibrium', Sbunker, 2020. <https://sbunker.net/uploads/sbunker.net/files/2020/December/04/Transition-to-what-Western-Balkans-democracies-in-a-state-of-illiberal-equilibrium1607078207.pdf>



government representatives offered support to Serbia in the framework of its EU integration and visa liberalisation processes, not least in an attempt to minimize the political backlash fueled by the recognition.<sup>74</sup> Since then, an uneven triangular relationship between the three countries, with Hungary at its juncture, has developed. In the current geopolitical context, where the Hungarian–Serbian partnership axis remains remarkably strong and stable, it is worth asking what Hungary’s current (and surely future) role is as a strategic axis between Serbia and Kosovo. The situation from 2024 onwards is one of uncertainty with a diverse range of potential scenarios: from Budapest attempting to reap concessions from Brussels in exchange for a more constructive stance towards Prishtina, to Hungary’s (unlikely) de-recognition of Kosovo.<sup>75</sup> The elections to the European Parliament (EP) in June 2024 and the lengthy political discussions that are bound to ensue will add a new layer of complexity—to which can be added Hungary taking over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU between July and December 2024.

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## 3. Enlargement à la Orbán: Hungary’s engagement with Serbia and Kosovo

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Steered by its well-defined enlargement philosophy and lifted by its unique geopolitical positioning, Hungary has managed to tailor and pursue a policy vision of its own. Three main instances—the Belgrade–Prishtina dialogue, Kosovo’s CoE and EU applications, and the EU’s enlargement policy—help illustrate Budapest’s contemporary strategy towards the Western Balkans and shed light upon the devices and policy tricks that can be expected from an Orbán-led Hungary in the short, medium, and long run. All three cases are, to varying degrees, set to further define Budapest’s uneven relationship with Serbia and Kosovo.

### 3.1. The Belgrade–Prishtina dialogue

The ongoing process of normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo kicked off in 2011 under the auspices of the EU. Over the past 15 years, it

<sup>74</sup> László Márkus, 2019.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Dveri Orbanu: Pokažite da ste prijatelj, povucite priznanje nezavisnosti Kosova’, N1, 2021. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/dveri-orbanu-pokazite-da-ste-prijatelj-povucite-priznanje-nezavisnosti-kosova/>

has evolved amid a general mood of instability and undelivered pledges, despite some modest breakthroughs in the attempt to bring the parties closer. Hungary, like all other Member States, views the dialogue as the key precondition for Serbia and Kosovo's peaceful reconciliation process, which is in itself tied to both countries' EU accession bids.<sup>76</sup> Hungary's interest in preserving stability in the Western Balkans, as a neighbouring country, is visible in the way it understands the dialogue as the main avenue to avoid escalation and violence, and to reach a legally-binding agreement.<sup>77</sup>

The Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue currently finds itself in a state of tense stagnation following the mass withdrawal of Kosovo Serbs from institutions in the north of Kosovo in late 2022, following months of mounting tensions. As such, the success of the dialogue is currently measured in terms of the capacities of the involved parties to de-escalate the situation. Within the framework of Hungary's uneven triangular relationship with Serbia and Kosovo, Budapest has tried to maintain a low profile around the bilateral negotiations. However, major episodes of tension between Serbia and Kosovo in 2023 pay testimony to Hungary's indirect influence in the political dynamics of the dialogue—albeit from the sidelines.

Amid this gradual escalation, opportunities for rapprochement between Belgrade and Prishtina have been scarce. In 2023, the leaders of both countries, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, convened in Brussels on the 27th of February, and in Ohrid on the 18th of March, to reluctantly conclude an agreement laying the groundwork for the gradual restoration of bilateral negotiations.<sup>78</sup>

They did not have to wait long for the first test of this agreement. Local elections were held on the 23rd of April in the four municipalities in the north of Kosovo: North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan and Zubin Potok. Due to a boycott from Kosovo Serbs, the vote resulted in a record low 3.47 percent turnout<sup>79</sup> and generated concern over its legitimacy among Hungarian government representatives, who immediately described it as “an unbelievable sign of the existing instability”.<sup>80</sup> The newly-elected mayors swore office in the municipality of North Mitrovica on the 19th of May, and in Leposavić, Zvečan and Zubin Potok on the 25th of May. Violence erupted in the latter three municipalities one day later, as the new mayors tried to enter the municipality buildings escorted

76 'FM: Hungary has interest in Serbia-Kosovo compromise', 2023. <https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/fm-hungary-has-interest-in-serbia-kosovo-compromise>

77 Written interview with Zsolt Németh, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Hungarian National Assembly and Head of the Hungarian delegation to the Council of Europe. 20th November 2023.

78 'Belgrade-Prishtina Dialogue: Implementation Annex to the Agreement on the Path to Normalisation of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia', EEAS, 2023. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/belgrade-pristina-dialogue-implementation-annex-agreement-path-normalisation-relations-between_en)

79 'Objavljeni konačni rezultati lokalnih izbora na severu Kosova', RFE/RL, 2023. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/objavljeni-kona%C4%8Dni-rezultati-lokalnih-izbora-na-severu-kosova/32378797.html>

80 Speech of Zsolt Németh at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 24 April 2023. <https://pace.coe.int/en/verbatim/2023-04-24/pm/en>

by Kosovo police forces, only to be met with resistance from Kosovo Serb protestors. This led to violent clashes that lasted for several days—particularly in Zvečan—between the demonstrators and KFOR peacekeeping forces, which had been deployed to protect the Kosovo authorities.<sup>81</sup> Officials in Budapest observed the situation with discrete disapproval and advocated for de-escalation,<sup>82</sup> yet they failed to openly condemn the violent actions that left over 20 Hungarian KFOR soldiers injured, of which seven were injured seriously—most likely to avoid damaging relations with Belgrade.<sup>83</sup> Coincidentally, the day the unrest broke out, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó was attending a rally in the Serbian capital in support of Aleksandar Vučić’s Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).<sup>84</sup> In the days following the clashes, the EU went on to announce “reversible and temporary” political and economic sanctions against Kosovo for failing to keep the situation in the north at bay.<sup>85</sup> The measures were officially enacted in July with the approval of all 27 Member States.

The most explicit instance of Hungary’s role in the dialogue, namely as an agent of de-escalation, came almost in parallel with the announcement of sanctions against Kosovo. On the 14th of June, tensions between Belgrade and Prishtina escalated following reports that three Kosovo police officers had been arrested in the northern municipality of Leposavić, presumably by Serbian forces that had entered Kosovo illegally.<sup>86</sup> Belgrade authorities, however, explained that the police officers had been detained almost two kilometres into Serbian territory. Orbán met with Vučić barely a week later, on the 20th of June, under the framework of the bilateral Strategic Council for Cooperation, and made a frank request: “I respectfully ask you, President, dear Aleksandar, that you think carefully about it [...] I think it would be good that you listen to Hungary’s recommendation and return those three Albanians to Kosovo, I think it would help you”, Orbán said at the press conference that followed the meeting.<sup>87</sup> Four days later, the Hungarian Prime Minister announced on social media that Serbian authorities would release the police officers “in accordance with the request” that he had expressed, and that Vučić had informed him about

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81 Fatos Bytyci, ‘NATO soldiers injured in Kosovo clashes with Serb protesters’, Reuters, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/nato-soldiers-deploy-around-kosovo-town-halls-standoff-with-serb-protesters-2023-05-29/>

82 Interview with Julianna Ármás, Research Fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. Budapest, 6th November 2023.

83 John Woods, ‘Two Hungarian soldiers lost their legs after Kosovo attack’, Daily News Hungary, 2023. <https://dailynewshungary.com/two-hungarian-soldiers-lost-their-legs-in-kosovo-attack/>

84 ‘Peter Sijarto na mitingu „Srbija nade“: Vučić se potrudio da između Srba i Mađara vlada prijateljstvo’, N1, 2023. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sns-miting-aleksandar-vucic-sns-srbija-nade-madjari-srbi-peter-sijatrol/>

85 Xhorxhina Bami, EU Announces Measures Against Kosovo Over Unrest in North, Balkan Insight, 2023. <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/14/eu-announces-measures-against-kosovo-over-unrest-in-north/>

86 ‘Pristina Says Serbia ‘Kidnaps’ Three Police Officers In North Kosovo; Belgrade Says Arrest Took Place On its Territory’, RFE/RL, 2023. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-kidnaps-police-officers/32459322.html>

87 ‘Orban zamolio Vučića da pusti kosovske policajce’, Danas, 2023. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/orban-zamolio-vucica-da-pusti-kosovske-policajce/>

this development.<sup>88</sup> To dispel public suspicion over the likely political grounds for releasing the police officers, the Director of Serbia's Office for Kosovo, Petar Petković, clarified that the decision had been "judicial, not political".<sup>89</sup>

While the extra-legal motives behind the release remain unclear, diplomatic sources in Prishtina indicate that Orbán's claim to be the key broker of the decision came as "a slap" in the face for the United States and especially for the EU, whose attempts to achieve de-escalation were now seen as worthless and ineffective.<sup>90</sup> This further suggested that the future stability of the dialogue could eventually depend on the leverage of Serbia's close ally. Other sources suggest that Vučić's decision to release the police officers had been made well before Orbán's request—but this, however, gave the Serbian President an alibi to achieve a double victory. On the one hand, the declaration could be exploited as public recognition that Orbán's diplomatic influence extended beyond that of the EU's institutions and Member States, further nurturing both leaders' instrumental co-dependence; on the other hand, it could serve as proof of Serbia's good faith in complying with external calls for de-escalation.<sup>91</sup>

The critical episode of tension, however, did not arrive until the early morning of the 24th of September. In the village of Banjska, in the municipality of Zvečan, a group of around 30 armed Serb militants opened fire against Kosovo police and barricaded themselves inside the 14th-century Banjska Monastery. The attack, which saw one Kosovo police officer and three militants killed, ended after several hours, once Kosovo's forces were able to recapture the monastery.<sup>92</sup> It was later discovered that the paramilitary offensive had been plotted and personally led by Milan Radoičić, a Kosovo Serb politician linked to Vučić's SNS party entourage. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti claimed that the intention behind this "terrorist attack" was for Kosovo to violate the agreement that prohibits the deployment of its Security Force in the north of Kosovo without the consent of KFOR, giving Serbia justification to engage in military escalation.<sup>93</sup> Other versions hold that the attack was used as a pretext for Kosovo to further deploy its police forces in the north.<sup>94</sup>

The events in Banjska were immediately discussed at the EU level,

88 Vojin Radovanović, 'Viktor Orban reagovao na puštanje kosovskih policajca: Informisao me Vučić, veoma cenimo ovaj korak', *Danas*, 2023. <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/viktor-orban-reagovao-na-pustanje-kosovskih-policajca-informisao-me-vucic-veoma-cenimo-ovaj-korak/>

89 'Petković o puštanju kosovskih policajca: sudska, a ne politička odluka', *RTV Puls*, 2023. <https://rtvpuls.com/petkovic-o-pustanju-kosovskih-policajca-sudska-a-ne-politicka-odluka/>

90 Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of Kosovo. Prishtina, 23rd November 2023.

91 Online interview with the Ministry of European Integration of Serbia. 28th November 2023.

92 Hanne Cokelaere and Seb Starcevic, 'Gunmen storm village in northern Kosovo in attack blamed on Serbia', *Politico*, 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/kosovo-serbia-police-attack-albin-kurti-banjska-vjosa-osmani/>

93 Remarks at the panel event 'Kosovo: The young democratic state as pawn of geopolitical interests'. Renner Institut, 13th November 2023. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7HN\\_bhDVM8&t=2613s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7HN_bhDVM8&t=2613s)

94 Online interview with Dragiša Mijačić, Executive Director at the Institute for Territorial Economic Development (InTER) in Belgrade. 22nd November 2023.

foremostly in the EP, where a Resolution calling for measures against Serbia was adopted in October.<sup>95</sup> To date, however, the European Commission (EC) and the Member States have failed to pursue a serious investigation of the attack or to enact sanctions against Serbia.<sup>96</sup> Hungary was, perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the Member States that opposed any kind of measures against Belgrade, as Orbán positioned himself “in favor of helping Serbia stabilize the region” without the need for sanctions.<sup>97</sup> Major criticism, albeit not only towards Hungary, has come from Kosovo, which faced harsh retaliation over the tense impasse in the municipalities of the north earlier in the summer, but is now seeing Serbia getting away unpunished.<sup>98</sup>

The Hungarian approach to the events that framed the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue in 2023 has gradually become more dynamic. Budapest has visibly shifted from maintaining a low profile to avoid compromising its ties with Serbia—perhaps even too low a profile, as the case of the injured Hungarian soldiers suggests—to initiating a subtle game of leverage and obstruction in favour of Belgrade. Orbán’s role in the release of the three police officers allowed Hungary to present itself as an increasingly instrumental diplomatic mediator between Belgrade and Prishtina—if only, at least for now, through informal engagement.<sup>99</sup> Hungary’s impartiality, however, can be clearly put into question: the Orbán executive has been key to shielding Serbia from any potential sanctions from the EU—a radically different approach to that taken with Kosovo, against whom Budapest did not hesitate to support retaliation from Brussels.

### 3.2. Kosovo’s Council of Europe and European Union applications

In the immediate aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Kosovo redoubled its efforts to join European organizations in the hope of furthering its integration process. The first institution targeted by the authorities in Prishtina amid the new geopolitical reality in Europe would be the CoE. Russia had been expelled from the organization barely three weeks

95 ‘EP adopts Resolution on Banjska, calls for measures against Serbian government if its involvement is proven’, *European Western Balkans*, 2023. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/10/19/ep-adopts-resolution-on-banjska-calls-for-measures-against-serbian-government-if-its-involvement-is-proven/>

96 Online interview with Marina Vulović, Research Associate at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs. 20th November 2023.

97 ‘Hungary’s Orban on sanctions against Serbia: Ridiculous and impossible’, *N1*, 2023. <https://n1info.rs/english/news/hungary-s-orban-on-sanctions-against-serbia-ridiculous-and-impossible/>

98 Interview with the Cabinet of the First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo. Prishtina, 25th November 2023.

99 Interview with Anna Orosz, Research Fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. Budapest, 6th November 2023.

after the start of the war,<sup>100</sup> boosting Kosovo's accession chances. In May 2022, Kosovo formally submitted its application for CoE membership.<sup>101</sup> In December, Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti handed in the country's official application for membership of the EU.<sup>102</sup>

Kosovo's decision to submit its EU bid prompted outrage in Serbia, with Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić announcing that he would work to muster a negative vote from all five of Kosovo's EU non-recognizers. In a meeting with Szijjártó in November 2022, Dačić sought guarantees that Hungary would also oppose Kosovo's attempts to join European bodies, which he received.<sup>103</sup> Hungary's pledge was again reconfirmed and made explicit by Szijjártó in January 2023, in the wake of Kosovo's official EU application.<sup>104</sup> Hungary has since emphasized a cautious position on Kosovo's integration into European bodies, arguing that dealing with such a delicate question in such a volatile political context risks jeopardizing peace in the Western Balkans.

The first vote on Kosovo's CoE membership was held on the 24th of April 2023 in an uneasy atmosphere, despite certainty the result would be favourable to the country's application. The head of the Hungarian delegation to the CoE, Zsolt Németh, also a long-serving member of the governing Fidesz party, considered the circumstances under which the vote was convened—an extraordinary session of the Committee of Ministers—unnecessary, and argued the vote itself could trigger further instability in the Western Balkans.<sup>105</sup> These words were met with shock in Prishtina, especially coming from a representative of a recognizing country.<sup>106</sup> The result of the vote shed light, first and foremost, on the mosaic of allegiances among the CoE members, of which 33 supported Kosovo's application, five abstained, and seven—including Hungary—voted against.<sup>107</sup> The overall decision was positive, as Kosovo had surpassed the required two-thirds majority among the 46 member countries, meaning that the question of membership would now be forwarded to the Parliamentary Assembly

100 'The Russian Federation is excluded from the Council of Europe', Council of Europe, 2022. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/the-russian-federation-is-excluded-from-the-council-of-europe>

101 Doruntina Baliu, 'Kosova aplikon për anëtarësim në Këshillin e Evropës', RFE/RL, 2022. <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/nisma-per-anetaresimin-e-kosoves-ne-keshillin-e-evropes-/31845998.html>

102 Valbona Bytyqi, 'Kosova aplikon zyrtarisht për anëtarësim në BE, më 2023 synon edhe NATO-n', Koha, 2022. <https://www.koha.net/arberi/357241/kosova-aplikon-zyrtarisht-per-anetaresim-ne-be-se-me-2023-synon-edhe-nato-n/>

103 'Dačić: Priština podnosi zahtev za prijem EU, Srbija kreće u hitne razgovore', RTV, 2022. [https://rtv.rs/sr\\_lat/politika/dacic-pristina-podnosi-zahtev-za-prijem-eu-srbija-krece-u-hitne-razgovore\\_1388756.html](https://rtv.rs/sr_lat/politika/dacic-pristina-podnosi-zahtev-za-prijem-eu-srbija-krece-u-hitne-razgovore_1388756.html)

104 Alice Taylor, 'Serbia says Hungary will vote against Kosovo EU, CoE membership', Euractiv, 2023. [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/serbia-says-hungary-will-vote-against-kosovo-eu-coe-membership/?utm\\_source=flipboard&utm\\_content=user%2FEURACTIV](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/serbia-says-hungary-will-vote-against-kosovo-eu-coe-membership/?utm_source=flipboard&utm_content=user%2FEURACTIV)

105 Speech of Zsolt Németh at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 24 April 2023. <https://pace.coe.int/en/verbatim/2023-04-24/pm/en>

106 Online interview with the Cabinet of the First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo. 25th October 2023.

107 The countries that voted against were Serbia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Georgia, Hungary, Spain, and Romania. Only Armenia was absent from the vote.

of the Council of Europe (PACE) for an opinion.<sup>108</sup> Ultimately, the vote also revealed that the claims of Foreign Minister Dačić to have received guarantees of Hungary's opposition, later confirmed by counterpart Szijjártó, were genuine and had been acted upon. Serbian President Vučić admitted Hungary's vote was "unexpected" and confirmed he had been in contact with Prime Minister Orbán two days before the vote: "I asked him [Orbán] on Saturday if he can consider the position of Serbia", Vučić said.<sup>109</sup>

Despite the largely good news for Kosovo, Hungary's negative vote angered the authorities in Prishtina, who expressed indignation and activated their diplomatic machinery through Kosovo's Embassy in Budapest. According to Kosovo officials, Szijjártó had assured them on as many as three occasions that Hungary would vote in favour of their application, and added that Orbán had communicated this decision to Serbia explaining that Hungary's negative vote "would just not look good on them".<sup>110</sup> As the vote approached, however, Hungary's abstention seemed to be the most realistic outcome, including for Belgrade.<sup>111</sup> The Hungarian authorities argued that their negative decision was not intended to punish Kosovo, but was required to meet the requirements of its strategic partnership with Belgrade, further adding that Kosovo should normalize its relations with Serbia before joining the CoE.<sup>112</sup> Budapest claims it had informed Kosovo about its plan in advance of the vote, and attributed Prishtina's reaction to the message "not coming through".<sup>113</sup>

As Kosovo engages with two parallel applications to join the CoE and the EU, and in light of Minister Szijjártó's pledge to Serbia in January 2023, it is worth considering the possibility that Hungary could adopt a consistent position on the matter and steadily vote against Prishtina's future steps toward integration. Kosovo authorities were assured by Hungary that the two pending applications would be decoupled—namely, that they would be assessed independently from one another—a view that certain experts are also considering.<sup>114</sup> Domestically, on the one hand, a section of Kosovo's diplomatic corps is positive that Budapest will support the country's EU progress in the same way it supported lifting its visa regime with the Schengen area.<sup>115</sup> However, other officials in Prishtina show signs of skepticism, as Hungary was not among the group of

108 Decision CM/Del/Dec(2023)1464bis/2.4 of the Council of Europe's Ministers' Deputies, 24 April 2023.

109 Jelena Jelovac, 'Spisak koji je Vučića i Dačića izbacio iz takta: Evo kako je koja zemlja glasala u Savetu Evrope o Kosovu', *Nova*, 2023. <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/spisak-koji-je-vucica-i-dacic-a-izbacio-iz-takta-evo-kako-je-koja-zemlja-glasala-u-savetu-evrope-o-kosovu/>

110 Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of Kosovo. Prishtina, 23rd November

111 Online interview with the Ministry of European Integration of Serbia. 28th November 2023.

112 Written interview with Zsolt Németh, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Hungarian National Assembly and Head of the Hungarian delegation to the Council of Europe. 20th November 2023.

113 Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary. Budapest, 7th November 2023.

114 Interview with Julianna Ármás, Research Fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. Budapest, 6th November 2023.

115 Written interview with Gjenez Budima, Ambassador of Kosovo to Hungary. 30th November 2023.

Member States that explicitly backed their EU candidacy application right after submission, suggesting a certain hesitation or even flat-out rejection.<sup>116</sup> What is an acknowledged fact, though, is Budapest's conviction that Kosovo will need to address structural obstacles, including its relations with Serbia, before it can make any progress.

### 3.3. EU enlargement policy

At the EU level, Orbán's Hungary has made enlargement one of its foremost priorities. Having understood Hungary's 2004 EU accession as a political decision in itself, the Prime Minister and his entourage acknowledge and celebrate the political nature of enlargement, rejecting approaches that call for the EU to improve its "institutional readiness" prior to future expansions.<sup>117</sup> Ahead of an electorally tumultuous 2024, Hungary will strive to pursue its own enlargement vision within the EU across three different dimensions: the new College of Commissioners, the six-month presidency of the Council, and its local network of advisory experts in the Western Balkans.

#### 3.3.1. The new Commission

Citizens across the 27 EU Member States will go to the polls between the 6th and 9th of June to elect the 720 Members of the EP. These elections, the first held after Brexit, are set to be highly contested and lead to an extremely fragmented EP—with gains for far-right and ultra-conservative parties likely according to projections.<sup>118</sup> Lengthy cross-party negotiations are expected to ensue in order to, eventually, elect a new President of the EC and launch the process of nomination and election of the College of Commissioners, which can potentially drag on for months. It took over six months from the 2019 elections to the EP before the current College of Commissioners led by Ursula von der Leyen took office.

Amid heated discussions regarding the EU accession of the countries of the Associated Trio—Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia—the soon vacant position of European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement is set to be up for grabs. Following the previous EP election, this job went to Hungarian diplomat Olivér Várhelyi, after Budapest's initial candidate was voted down by the EP on the grounds of a potential conflict of interest.<sup>119</sup> Since taking office in December 2019, Várhelyi has been formally tasked with overseeing the accession

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116 Interview with the Cabinet of the First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo. Prishtina, 25rd November 2023.

117 Interview with the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary. Budapest, 7th November 2023.

118 'EU Election Projection 2024', Europe Elects, 2023. <https://europeelects.eu/ep2024/>

119 'Trócsányi rejected by EP over personal finances, will not go to the hearings', European Western Balkans, 2019. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/09/26/trocsanyi-rejected-by-ep-over-personal-finances-will-not-go-to-the-hearings/>



processes of prospective new Member States and managing relations with the EU's neighbours, but he has faced considerable criticism over his approach.<sup>120</sup> This criticism has focused not only on Várhelyi's close relations with Orbán,<sup>121</sup> under whose third mandate he led the Hungarian Permanent Representation to the EU, but also on his excessively lenient approach towards Serbia. Reports have revealed that the Commissioner and his cabinet deliberately pushed to soften concerns about the rule of law in candidate countries and promoted Serbia's EU membership by trying to "delete or water down language in official texts about [its] democratic failings".<sup>122</sup>

Ahead of the establishment of the new College of Commissioners and the new round of post allocations, set to take place during the second half of 2024, Budapest has made clear that it wishes to retain the enlargement portfolio, but it is aware this is unlikely given the criticism Várhelyi has received. "Why fight for the enlargement portfolio when it is not realistic we will get it?" a diplomatic source in Budapest confessed.<sup>123</sup> In this context, Hungary is already in the process of mapping out alternatives, one of which could be the role of European Commissioner for Justice.<sup>124</sup>

### 3.3.2. A housekeeping presidency

From the 1st of July 2024, Hungary is set to hold the rotating presidency of the EU Council for a six-month period, until the 31st of December. Given Hungary's dubious track record in upholding the rule of law and protecting human rights, many EU capitals view Budapest's six-month presidency with concern and there is a growing feeling of unease in Brussels.<sup>125</sup> Several members of the EP have already expressed skepticism about Hungary's ability to assume the rotating presidency, and have pushed for a non-binding Resolution on the matter. In practical terms, however, there are doubts over the extent to which the presidency could be curbed or restricted.<sup>126</sup>

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120 Online interview with Dušan Janjić, President of the Executive Board of the Forum for Ethnic Relations (FER) in Belgrade. 21st November 2023.

121 Maïa De La Baume and Lili Bayer, 'Hungary's Commission candidate insists he won't do Viktor Orbán's bidding', Politico, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-european-commission-candidate-oliver-varhelyi-insists-he-wont-do-viktor-orbans-bidding/>

122 Zosia Wanat and Lili Bayer, 'Olivér Várhelyi: Europe's under-fire gatekeeper', Politico, 2021. <https://www.politico.eu/article/oliver-varhelyi-eu-commissioner-enlargement-western-balkans-serbia-human-rights-democracy-rule-of-law/>

123 Interview with the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister of Hungary. Budapest, 7th November 2023.

124 Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary. Budapest, 7th November 2023.

125 Online interview with Jana Juzová, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Global Europe Programme at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in Brussels. 6th November 2023.

126 Eddy Wax and Gregorio Sorgi, 'MEPs outline strategy to strangle Hungary's EU presidency', Politico, 2023. <https://www.politico.eu/article/meps-outline-strategies-to-strangle-hungarys-eu-presidency/>

Government authorities in Budapest have not hidden that they intend to put the EU integration of the Western Balkans at its core.<sup>127</sup> Diplomatic sources in Budapest confirmed in November 2023 that an EU-Western Balkans Summit will be held in Hungary in 2024, and also outlined the three main lines of policy action: advancing accession talks with Bosnia and Herzegovina, resolving the issues that have seen Albania and North Macedonia's accession blocked, and opening new chapters of the *acquis* with Serbia.<sup>128</sup> Neither Montenegro, the region's enlargement frontrunner, nor Kosovo, currently the only Western Balkan country that does not hold official candidate status, featured explicitly on the priority list.

This suggests a continuation of Hungary's policy of favouring Serbia—not only through its direct and open support for Belgrade but also through the absence of enlargement prospects for Prishtina. According to diplomatic sources, Kosovo is unlikely to occupy a priority spot on Budapest's enlargement checklist until it deals with its two main structural obstacles: improving relations with Serbia, and winning over the five non-recognizing EU Member States. Other accounts believe that candidate status for Kosovo could be within reach and supported by Budapest if significant de-escalation vis-à-vis Belgrade is achieved.<sup>129</sup> In either scenario, Hungary would hold Kosovo's EU accession subordinate to the political decisions of third States, be they Serbia or any of the five non-recognizers, which could create an impasse with the potential to drag on indefinitely.

It is widely acknowledged, nevertheless, that the Hungarian presidency of the Council will be heavily constrained in its ability to implement its agenda, let alone its enlargement roadmap. Besides the fact that unanimity among the 27 Member States is needed to resolve enlargement questions, and that Hungary's propositions are usually met with opposition, Budapest will have to deal with an EU in transition: elections to the EP will have just taken place, and very few of the Union's institutions will have been formally established, which will limit the reach of its ambitious agenda.<sup>130</sup> The Hungarian presidency could find itself in a scenario where it will have limited capacity to interact with the incoming European Commission, being mostly tasked with keeping the EU house in order until all its bodies are constituted.

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<sup>127</sup> 'This is what Hungary will do during its EU presidency in 2024', *Daily News Hungary*, 2023. <https://dailynewshungary.com/this-is-what-hungary-will-do-during-its-eu-presidency-in-2024/>

<sup>128</sup> Interview with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary. Budapest, 7th November 2023.

<sup>129</sup> Interview with the Cabinet of the First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo. Prishtina, 23rd November 2023.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Ferenc Németh, Program Manager and Research Fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. Budapest, 6<sup>th</sup> November 2023.

### 3.3.3. To the region and back: Hungary's advisory proxies

Since 2015, Hungary has had designated advisors on EU integration matters in all Western Balkan governments. These appointments, made under the framework of separate bilateral agreements between Budapest and the six Western Balkan capitals, have involved the posting of a high-level official from the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade—usually at an ambassadorial level—to each of the partner countries' EU integration ministries or offices.<sup>131</sup> The advisors are endowed with political and technical responsibilities, depending on their degree of expertise and in line with internal needs, and are on Budapest's payroll.

While the presence of EU integration advisors in the governments of the Western Balkans is not a tool exclusive to Hungary, as France also relies on appointed experts posted on the ground,<sup>132</sup> it can be argued that Budapest could seek strategic advantages for its own benefit or that of its allies—notably in the framework of its relations with Serbia and Kosovo. The current Hungarian EU integration advisor in Belgrade, appointed in 2016, is attached to the team of the Minister of European Integration as part of its so-called “independent staff”,<sup>133</sup> while the official posted in Prishtina took office in 2021 and is affiliated with the cabinet of the Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration.<sup>134</sup>

The presence of a Hungarian diplomat at the core of Kosovo's EU integration apparatus—namely, most concerningly, the same office whose portfolio includes the dialogue with Serbia—has raised suspicion within the team. Sensitive information is shared to a limited extent out of fear that it could be disclosed to Budapest, to Belgrade, or to Commissioner Várhelyi in Brussels, but the risk of leaks remains high regardless.<sup>135</sup> In this way, Hungary is nurturing its enlargement strategy through a ‘feedback’ process: first, it gets to embed its own policy priorities within the local offices that its staff are an integral part of and, as a result, the information obtained through local proxies flows back to Budapest or to the other capitals of the region, which, in turn, helps feed into the countries' own accession methodologies. The case of Kosovo is particularly problematic as Prishtina's disadvantaged position vis-à-vis Hungary—as opposed to Belgrade's privileged position—could backfire, for instance through a massive leak, to the direct benefit of Orbán or Vučić, rendering the dialogue with Serbia all the more asymmetrical, and directly jeopardizing Kosovo's European integration process.

131 ‘Hungary is doing everything to facilitate the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries’, 2020. <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/hungary-is-doing-everything-to-facilitate-the-eu-accession-of-the-western-balkan-countries>

132 ‘Monténégro – Relations bilatérales’, Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/montenegro/relations-bilaterales/>

133 Organisational structure of the Ministry of European Integration of Serbia. [https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/organisational\\_chart\\_mei.pdf](https://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/organisational_chart_mei.pdf)

134 Emirjeta Vllahiu, ‘Besnik Bislimi me dy shoferë në kabinet’, Kallxo, 2021. <https://kallxo.com/lajm/besnik-bislimi-me-dy-shofere-ne-kabinet/>

135 Interview with the Cabinet of the First Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo. 25th November 2023.

## 4. A message to Brussels

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Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has radically changed Europe's geopolitical chessboard with implications that have spilled over into the domains of the economy, energy, international relations, and security. The EU's decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia reflected exceptional circumstances that are shifting the Union's axis of power towards the East. In this light, the questions of how and when to enlarge the EU—rather than whether to enlarge—have become increasingly prominent and have entered mainstream political discourse. Consequently, the erstwhile dormant matter of enlargement has gained new rhetorical momentum, arguably at the expense of the candidates of the Western Balkans, who have been engaging with the process for far longer.

The growing political polarization and the crafting of new geopolitical and ideological alliances has rendered the role of rogue EU Member States—like Hungary and, until recently, Poland—increasingly critical in a 27-member Union that often lacks the capacity to react in a quick and unified way. This year is set to be a dynamic one in electoral terms, with key elections in both Europe and the United States. The illiberal international, which Hungary spearheads in Europe, awaits with anticipation a potential return of Donald Trump to the White House, implying a sharp turn in foreign policy priorities and a dramatic redirection of funds, human capital, and security guarantees away from Europe. In such a tumultuous scenario, which could embolden pseudo-authoritarian leaders, there will be little appetite—or even capacity—for major breakthroughs in the EU's enlargement policy for the Western Balkans, and particularly in relation to the countries in the region where bilateral conflicts still linger.

The normalization process between Serbia and Kosovo is bound to be hit by this new reality, and this will require the EU to speak more frankly and bravely against undemocratic partners—without forgetting that democratic backsliding is also happening within. By and large, the EU has persevered in its policy of appeasement towards Serbia. On the one hand, there is widespread fear that Serbia could get closer to Russia and China's authoritarian spheres of influence should the EU consider holding Serbia accountable, and both the EC and the Member States are reluctant to risk breaking Belgrade's current geopolitical balance. On the other hand, there is serious opposition from specific Member States, like Hungary and Czechia, to punish Serbia financially, given the huge impact that would have on their own domestic economies. Given this dilemma, the EU and its Member States lack the initiative to enact sanctions against Belgrade, from which Hungary clearly benefits. But it is precisely Hungary's outright opposition to sanctioning Serbia, based on grounds that demonstrably go beyond the economic and geopolitical, that the EU uses to justify its

unwillingness—and, thus, its inability—to hold Belgrade to account.

The great victor from the EU's incapacity to act unanimously on such matters is none other than Viktor Orbán himself. Above all, Hungary is further cementing its narrative of friendship with Serbia, in a context of mutual protection where both Orbán and Vučić are assured of their impunity thanks to one another. It is here where Hungary is able to rise to the occasion and present itself as the only useful EU actor that can effectively negotiate with Serbia, as the episode of the three Kosovo police officers proved, which allows Orbán to act as a broker of de-escalation at will—namely, when it benefits both his and the Serbian President's interests. Such dynamics are conducted upon the premise of never harming or compromising Hungary's relations with Serbia, which further reinforces Budapest's usefulness and leverage over other Member States. In the broader context of the dialogue, the EU's institutions have lacked the right incentives to pull Serbia and Kosovo towards the negotiating table, which Hungary has taken advantage of and used for its own (or, rather, Belgrade's) benefit. This accentuates the asymmetry of the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue, where Kosovo lacks a Hungary-like partnership among the other EU Member States, and has ultimately found itself the target of political and economic sanctions that Budapest did not veto.

An impactful policy shift from the EC and the Member States would imply the freezing of EU accession negotiations with Serbia, which could serve a twin purpose. First, it would act as a measure against the years of democratic backsliding the country has been experiencing. Second, it would strip Hungary of one of its main bargaining chips within the EU, allowing for stronger statements against Belgrade and the potential enactment of economic and political sanctions. This scenario, however, is set to falter given two main obstacles: Hungary's guaranteed veto against freezing negotiations or applying sanctions against Serbia, and the other Member States' unwillingness to give up on Hungary's obstructiveness as one of the main alibis for their political ineffectiveness.

While it is still hard to foresee if Hungary will maintain its obstructionist approach towards Kosovo's EU membership following the negative vote at the CoE, a precedent has been set and it will be difficult to ignore it. Budapest's decision is unlikely to alter the final outcome, and Kosovo should be able to enter the organization as a full-fledged member as soon as the process resumes. However, Hungary opted to do a favour for Belgrade, even in the knowledge that the result would not be affected: this, on the one hand, suggests that Budapest was willing to openly take Serbia's side despite the potential for a backlash, but it also demonstrates that recognizing Kosovo does not necessarily equal supporting it. An obstructive approach can be enacted with or without recognition.

In the aftermath of the June elections to the EP, it is unlikely that Hungary will be able to retain the enlargement portfolio, which could potentially—according to speculation—be awarded to a Member State that will place the

accession of the Associated Trio countries, chiefly Ukraine, as the top priority—leaving little hope for the Western Balkans. Notwithstanding this fact, Hungary will most likely be given the opportunity to implement its enlargement-oriented six-month presidency of the Council, where certain positive breakthroughs could be achieved as long as Member States give Budapest a chance to pursue them. Careful priority, however, should be given to those causes that abide by the parameters of a merit-based reform process, while serious cases of backsliding or non-compliance—such as Serbia’s—should stall progress.

It seems that rather than a triangle of purported stability, the triangular relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, with Hungary at its juncture, is one of trust and mistrust. Its stronger side, namely the Hungarian-Serbian connection, is set to thrive in a global arena of increasing authoritarianism, while the weaker end, Kosovo, will likely struggle without more and better support from the EU’s Member States. In this context, the EU’s institutions will urgently need to stand up to the challenge not only in the Western Balkans but also within its own house to minimize the potentially irreversible entrenchment of illiberalism that will undoubtedly further jeopardize and compromise the survival of the Union.

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## 5. Policy recommendations

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- o1 Hungary's enlargement enthusiasm is to be reckoned with—but caveats must apply.** Member States should acknowledge Hungary's push for the EU's enlargement policy and should support its agenda as long as it abides by the Union's principles of democracy, equality, and the rule of law. In relation to candidate and potential candidate countries, Member States should take an objective approach based on applicants' reform achievements and merit-based accomplishments. Member States should, moreover, not engage in hindering candidates' and potential candidates' progress over bilateral questions, for the sake of preserving the meritocratic nature of the process.
- o2 Kosovo's EU application needs to move forward.** The EU Foreign Affairs Council, or the Political and Security Committee (PSC) on its behalf, should table the discussion on Kosovo's candidacy, submitted in December 2022, and request the EC to issue an Opinion on the matter.
- o3 Non-recognition cannot stop progress.** Kosovo and its EU Member State allies should push for the enactment of Article 49 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) through the same route that was activated for the signing of Kosovo's Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA). This provision would allow for the EU Council as a legal subject, instead of the 27 Member States, to constitute Kosovo's counterpart. This, however, would only act as a legal shortcut in the short and medium run, as it would eventually be necessary for all Member States to individually ratify Kosovo's accession treaty—for which only a more solid agreement, most likely including Serbia, could incentivize the five non-recognizers to support the move.
- o4 Appeasing Serbia impacts the EU's independence and ability to react.** Member States should take a stronger stance against Serbia's solid democratic backsliding, acknowledge its obstructionism in the dialogue with Kosovo, and overcome their skepticism to punish this worrying trend. There is clear evidence that impunity for Serbia emboldens Hungary, and vice-versa. To circumvent the likely Hungarian veto against potential sanctions towards Belgrade, be it through freezing the funding under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance

(IPA) III, freezing of assets or travel bans, Member States could enact political and economic measures of a bilateral nature. The prospective enactment of sanctions would also strip Hungary of one of its main bargaining chips at the EU level.

**o5** **The Banjska attack is an EU matter and needs to be thoroughly investigated.** The EC should follow up on the EP resolution of 19th October and pursue an independent investigation into the 24th of September events in the village of Banjska to shed clarity upon the facts and motivations behind the attack, and accordingly enact sanctions against its perpetrators.

**o6** **National EU expertise can help keep Hungary's local influence in check.** Member States should consider the establishment of bilateral agreements with the countries of the Western Balkans to provide technical and political assistance to the ministries and offices dealing with European integration, just as Hungary does. Budapest's region-wide network of country advisors currently enjoys too much power, and there is a risk of sensitive information falling into unfriendly hands—with direct repercussions on the EU's leverage to, for instance, mediate in the dialogue. Likewise, Western Balkan governments should request advisory expertise from trusted Member States to counter the excessive influence of the Hungary-appointed experts. Similarly, at the EU level, the EC should consider increasing its technical presence through the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange (TAIEX) and Twinning cooperation instruments.



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# About us

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The Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) is a joint initiative of the European Fund for the Balkans (EFB) and Centre for the Southeast European Studies of the University of Graz (CSEES) promoting the European integration of the Western Balkans and the consolidation of democratic, open countries in the region. BiEPAG is grounded in the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. It adheres to values that are common to a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail. It is composed of prominent policy researchers from the region and wider Europe with demonstrable comprehension of the Western Balkans and the processes shaping the region. Members are Florian Bieber (Coordinator), Bojan Baća, Dimitar Bechev, Matteo Bonomi, Srđan Cvijić, Milica Delević, Nikola Dimitrov, Marika Djolai, Vedran Džihic, Donika Emini, Richard Grieveson, Dejan Jović, Damir Kapidžić, Marko Kmezić (Assistant Coordinator), Srđan Majstorović, Jovana Marović, Zoran Nechev, Tena Prelec, Corina Stratulat, Nikolaos Tzifakis, Alida Vračić, Gjergji Vurmo, Natasha Wunsch.

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The European Fund for the Balkans is a joint initiative of the Erste Foundation, Robert Bosch Foundation and King Baudouin Foundation that envisions and facilitates initiatives strengthening democracy, fostering European integration and affirming the role of the Western Balkans in addressing Europe's challenges. Its strategy is focused on three overarching areas - fostering democratisation, enhancing regional cooperation and boosting EU Integration. The EFB supports the process of affirming the efficacy of EU enlargement policy across the Western Balkans, improving regional cooperation amongst civil society organisations based on solidarity and demand-driven dialogue. It provides means and platforms for informed and empowered citizens to take action demanding accountable institutions and democracy. The focus is on continuous reforms of the policies and practices of the Western Balkans countries on their way to EU accession.

**[www.balkanfund.org](http://www.balkanfund.org)**

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The Centre for Southeast European Studies was set up in November 2008 following the establishment of Southeast Europe as a strategic priority at the University of Graz in 2000. The Centre is an interdisciplinary and cross-faculty institution for research and education, with the goal to provide space for the rich teaching and research activities at the university on and with Southeast Europe and to promote interdisciplinary collaboration. The Centre also aims to provide information and documentation and to be a point of contact for media and public interested in Southeast Europe, in terms of political, legal, economic and cultural developments. An interdisciplinary team of lawyers, historians, and political scientists has contributed to research on Southeast Europe, through articles, monographs and other publications. The centre regularly organizes international conferences and workshops to promote cutting edge research on Southeast Europe.

**<http://csees.uni-graz.at/>**

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