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Illiberal loyalists: Viktor Orbán's regional clientelistic networks in the Western Balkans

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Abstract: *After the decisive Hungarian parliamentary election on 12 April 2026, which ousted long-time Prime Minister Viktor Orbán from power, it might be apt to take stock of his policies toward the countries of the Western Balkans. Officially, the Hungarian government, under the leadership of Orbán, always supported the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries, but at the same time adopted anti-EU narratives. Moreover, on a bilateral level Orbán provided financial and political support to establish loyal networks and influence politics in the region. Orbán's objective was to create a regional leadership role for himself, which seems to be the driving factor of establishing close relationships with the political leaders in the region. The research question is whether Orbán succeeded in establishing a leadership role in the Western Balkans, supported by a regional clientelist network? The article provides an overview of the background of the Hungarian foreign policy role and Orbán's interpretation of Hungary's place in Europe. The paper provides insights into Hungary's motivations for cooperation with the Western Balkan states and how the anti-EU narratives and the disdain for "Brussel" in FIDESZ rhetoric were framed. Moreover, the paper examines the concepts of clientelism, corruption, and state capture, which were partly deliberately expanded into Hungary's neighbouring states in order to increase Hungarian influence in the region. The paper assesses the bilateral relations between Hungary and the Western Balkan states from 2010 until 2026, with a special focus on relations with Serbia and North Macedonia. The analysis of the bilateral relations is based on investigative reports and newspaper articles. The relationship with Orbán can be categorised into a low-intensity of just personal sympathy, a more strategic relationship of ideological alignment and the final stage, which combines loyalism, ideological outlook and links it to the establishment of clientelist networks.*

Keywords: *Western Balkan, Hungary, clientelism, state capture, anti-EU rhetoric*

Introduction

"Orbán is looking for vassals in the Balkans, politicians who accept him as a regional leader and with whom he can have cordial ties", Istvan Szent-Ivanyi, expert on the Western Balkans, former Hungarian ambassador to Slovenia and former member of the European Parliament.[1]

One of Hungary's foreign policy priorities is its active support of EU enlargement for the countries of the Western Balkans, Moldova and Georgia. For Orbán, the accession of Ukraine was unacceptable.

When Hungary, together with many other former socialist countries, became an EU member in 2004, it seemed that the country had achieved its objective by "returning to Europe". Hungary's experience of EU accession was considered to be a role model for other states. However, the post-socialist countries experienced different political realities, compared to the founding members of the EU. After the enthusiasm of EU membership faded, resentment was building up in the societies of Central Europe. The political elites in the countries of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, the Visegrád Group (V4), started questioning the EU's underlying norms and values. Within the V4 countries, a sentiment emerged that the "older" EU member states and the EU's founding members do not fully appreciate Central European perspectives. During the so-called migrant crisis in 2015, differences in attitudes became apparent. The V4 countries opposed the EU's proposal of accepting refugees on the basis of an agreed quota and publicly took a diverging stance from the EU mainstream opinion. The EU's internal cohesion was challenged. From 2015 onwards the then Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán became more outspoken and moulded its role as a foreign policy leader. He publicly opposed German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the EU's proposed refugee plan. At the time two political role models were on offer, "the Merkel way" or "the Orbán way". Orbán depicted himself as a defender of Christian Europe in general[2] and acted as a speaker for the Central European EU countries, which had their grievances and felt misunderstood by the "West".

Meanwhile, the disillusionment with the EU's accession process in the Western Balkans grew and negatively affected politics in the region. The EU enlargement process became a slow, unpredictable, and tedious process which produced no progress. Despite rhetorical promises by the EU, its member states occasionally blocked the enlargement and left the Western Balkan countries in a political limbo. Hungary's commitment to the accession of the Western Balkan states remained a priority and still is. Hungary, or rather its former Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, attempted to take up a regional leadership role by actively engaging with the countries of the Western Balkan region. While in the Western Balkan region the frustration with the EU took hold, Orbán maintained its support of the accession countries and gained their trust. These relations were substantiated by the narrative that Hungary better understood the Western Balkan states than the "old" EU, due to the shared historical experiences of foreign domination and of post-socialist transition. As a result, the ambiguous situation emerged in which Orbán openly criticised the EU on a number of political issues, including its fundamental values, while continuing to support the policy of EU enlargement.

[1] Edit Inotai and Srecko Latal "Viktor Orbán's visit to Bosnian Serb strongman puzzles observers", *BalkanInsight* (November 9, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/09/viktor-orbans-visit-to-bosnian-serb-strongman-puzzles-observers/ (accessed on April 16, 2026).

[2] Ian Traynor, "Migration crisis: Hungary PM says Europe in grip of madness", *The Guardian* (September 3, 2015). https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/migration-crisis-hungary-pm-victor-orban-europe-response-madness (accessed on April 16, 2026).

Moreover, Orbán pushed for a more political enlargement process, with less focus on conditionality. In 2019, the Hungarian diplomat Olivér Várhelyi was appointed EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, who showed a tendency to especially assist Serbia in moving forward on its EU accession path. Soon enough it became apparent that the EU made a mistake by trusting a close ally of Orbán with the task of fostering EU enlargement. By demanding a stronger political influence, Hungary weakened the "merit-based principle", which is the EU's strategic approach to EU membership.

The paper discusses the tendencies of the transfer of policies, procedural approaches, and ideas of Viktor Orbán's illiberal model to the countries in the region and his motivation of supporting and working with other more autocratic political leaders in the Western Balkan region. This close political cooperation was accompanied by economic investments and financial aid from Hungary to the candidate countries, creating dependency, fostering corruption and establishing clientelist networks in the region. The paper puts a focus on Hungary's special relations with Serbia, which moreover impact on Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, as well as, North Macedonia. Both cases combine ideological motives, as well as the ambition of establishing profitable clientelist network. After providing an overview of the background and the political context of Orbán's Western Balkan politics, the concepts of clientelism, corruption and state capture, political ideas are introduced and in the final part the bilateral relations with the Western Balkan countries are presented. The objective is to demonstrate Orbán's attempts to expand his policies and models to Hungary's neighbours and how he gained importance and influence in the region. These dynamics are discussed under the term of regional clientelism, a network based on personal loyalism, cross-border corruption and state capture supported and funded by Orbán's Hungary. The overall question of the paper is whether Orbán succeeded in establishing a leadership role in the Western Balkans, supported by a regional clientelist network?

Background: Hungary's Role and Influence in Neighbouring Regions

From the moment Hungary regained its full sovereignty in 1991 and was able to conduct an independent foreign policy, it followed three main principles: Euro-Atlantic integration, good neighbourly relations, and support for the Hungarian minorities living abroad.[3] Hungary became a NATO member in 1999 and immediately faced the difficult situation of joining the NATO mission against Serbia with the objective to curtail its aggression against Kosovo's population at the time. Hungary was concerned about possible retaliatory acts against its Hungarian minority in Serbia, but still participated in the mission. Hungary also initiated the Szeged Process in 1999 within the framework of the Stability Pact to support democratic forces in Serbia.[4] With the accession to NATO and the EU, the goals shifted and Hungary became an active partner and a strong advocate for the Western Balkan states in the EU's enlargement process. The V4 group made EU enlargement a main priority, but it was Hungary — due to its location and its Hungarian minorities in the region – that became the main promoter of EU accession of the Western Balkan countries. Before Orbán's anti-EU policies prevailed, Hungary supported the Western Balkan region

[3] Beáta Huszka, "Hungary's Western Balkan policy in the Visegrad context", *EU Frontiers,* Policy Paper, Centre for EU Enlargement Studies - CEU CENS (Budapest, November 2010) p. 7.
[4] Beáta Huszka, "Hungary's Western Balkan policy in the Visegrad context", *EU Frontiers,* Policy Paper, Centre for EU Enlargement Studies - CEU CENS (Budapest, November 2010) p. 11.

through the established regional or European institutions,[5] but with increased criticism of the EU, Hungary started to intensify bilateral relations with the Western Balkan countries. Huszka argues that supporting EU enlargement of the Western Balkan countries "serves Hungary's rational self-interests."[6] According to Huszka, the well-established relations of the Hungarian Government under Viktor Orbán with the countries of the Western Balkans can be explained due to geographical proximity, the existence of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries, as well as the strong economic connections. Moreover, due to Orbán's ambitions, the regime tried to establish and maintain relationships with new partners, who would spread the values of illiberal populism and nationalism, argues Huszka.[7]

From the perspective of the Western Balkan countries, the cooperation with Hungary is beneficial, because Hungary provides practical and political support in implementing the required reforms for EU accession. The Western Balkan countries understand that any EU member country can block or delay the enlargement process, so an overall gratitude exists for having in Hungary a supportive partner. In the case of Kosovo, however, Hungary became an obstacle to membership in regional organisations, because Orbán felt that Hungary had to remain loyal to Serbia's wishes. The relationship between Hungary, as an EU member, with the Western Balkan states, as EU candidate countries, is asymmetrical. Orbán could use this asymmetry to his advantage to bolster his own personal profile in providing various forms of assistance and by working closely with the political elite in the region. On the other hand, Orbán was assisted by strong politicians in the region, who officially reinforced Orbán's profile as regional leader. The Western Balkan "stabiliocrats"[8] who claim to provide political stability in the region, while in fact continuously creating instabilities themselves, at the same time charmed Orbán to receive financial, political and administrative support to bolster their anti-democratic policies in the region. Orbán's personal ambition created an opportunity for the regimes in the Western Balkans to take advantage of him for their own benefit.

Expanding Clientelism and State capture

Orbán's regime was dominated by one-party,[9] which had built a clientelist network, based on corruption and state capture. Similar features can also be found in the Western Balkan countries, such as Albania under Prime Minister Edi Rama (since 2013), the then Republic of Macedonia under the premiership of Nikola Gruevski (2006–2016) and the current regime of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić (since 2014), as well as the former president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik (2010-2018, 2022-2025).

Political clientelism is seen as a "particularistic exchange of material benefits (distributed by patrons) for political services (performed by clients)".[10] Bliznakovski defines political clientelism

[5] Zlatko Šabić and Annette Freyberg-Inan, "Central Europe and the Balkans. So Close and Yet So Far", in *Regional and International Relations of Central Europe,* eds. Zlatko Šabić and Petr Drulák, (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), pp. 261-285, here p. 272.

[6] Beáta Huszka, "Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* Vol 17, No. 4 (2017), pp. 591-609, here p. 593.

[7] Beáta Huszka, "Eurosceptic yet pro-enlargement: the paradoxes of Hungary's EU policy", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol 17, No. 4 (2017), pp. 591-609, here 593.

[8] Florian Bieber, "The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilitocracies", *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development,* No. 10, (2018), pp. 176-185.

[9] Although the Fidesz government was officially in coalition with the KDNP (Christian Democratic People's Party, Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt), which was not promoting an independent policy from Fidesz.

[10] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021), pp. 3-12, here p. 3.

as "a dyadic relationship based on asymmetry of power and contingency [...] where the role of patrons is assumed by political parties, their members, and most broadly, the political elite, while the role of clients by a variety of social actors, including (but not limited to) citizens/voters, civil servants, judges, private companies and religious leaders."[11] Clientelism is an informal hierarchy, based on the asymmetrical relationship between politicians, acting as patrons and dependent citizens. The main aim of the politicians is to remain in office, which also benefits the politicians` clients. Politicians taken on the role of middlepersons between the state institutions and the citizens, who ensure that the "loyal" citizens receive benefits. The patrons can provide a range of different services from election handouts, access to welfare, employment opportunities to procurement contracts and business permits. The clients, on the other hand, are expected to reciprocate by voting for the candidate, or for being actively engaged in election campaigns, in the organisation of party events, or for providing financial support to the party or party members or any other forms of assistance.[12] Politicians' "services" contribute to disparities, intransparency, unfairness and inefficiency within societies. Djolai and Stratulat note that clientelism creates "negative and destructive dynamics within social relations that disempower many citizens",[13] contributes to a breakdown of social networks, as well as a decline of social trust within society. Clientelism is based on unequal power relations between the politician and the citizen, depends on reciprocity and contributes to unfair and non-transparent distribution of services and goods. Clientelism is accompanied by the politicisation of the public administration and favouritism, which impacts negatively on the effectiveness and efficiency of state institutions. Citizens are trapped in these asymmetrical informal relationships because it becomes nearly impossible to access the state's services or social benefits through a regular, transparent pathway.[14] The existence of clientelist systems damages democratic structures, because the power is held by informal networks, instead of the state, that should be the main, independent and neutral provider of social and public services. Political clientelism has remained very resilient in the countries of the Western Balkans and undermines democratic processes.[15]

Connected to the phenomenon of clientelism are the concept of state capture and corruption. State capture is an intentional activity of extracting financial resources from the state for the use of the political and economic elites. The political elite controlling the political institutions, together with business elites, use state structures, facilities and resources for their own personal benefit.[16] State capture is the "collusion of political and economic elites with the goal of extraction from the state".[17]

[11] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021), pp. 3-12, here p. 4.
[12] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021), pp. 3-12, here p. 4-5.
[13] Marika Djolai and Corina Stratulat, "Clientelism (Chapter 5)", in: *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion,* eds. Marko Kmezic, Florian Bieber, Policy Study, BiEPAG (Graz 2017), p. 73 -74. https://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf (accessed on April 18, 2026).
[14] Marika Djolai and Corina Stratulat, "Clientelism (Chapter 5)", in: *The Crisis of Democracy in the Western Balkans. An Anatomy of Stabilitocracy and the Limits of EU Democracy Promotion,* eds. Marko Kmezic, Florian Bieber, Policy Study, BiEPAG (Graz 2017), p. 78-79. https://www.biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TheCrisisofdemocracy.pdf (accessed on April 18, 2026).
[15] Jovan Bliznakovski, "Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans: Collections of Papers", in: *Political Clientelism in the Western Balkans,* eds. Jovan Bliznakovski, (Skopje: Institute for Sociological, Political and Judicial Research, 2021) pp. 3-12, here p. 3.
[16] Predrag Cvetičanin and Jovan Bliznakovski, Nemanja Kristić, "Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,* Vol 24, No. 1 (2024) pp. 41-62, here p. 41.
[17] Predrag Cvetičanin and Jovan Bliznakovski, Nemanja Kristić, "Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies,*

Due to the prevailance of state capture in Hungary and in the Western Balkan countries, it became easier to establish business deals, whereby Orbán was able to direct investments to certain areas, especially to the Vojvodina and the Republika Srpska. Overall, Hungary as a neighbouring country has a natural interest in maintaining good political relations and exploring possibilities of investment in the countries of the Western Balkans. Orbán's good relations with the local political elites seemed to have been boosting Orbán's political profile in the region and opened up some non-transparent business deals and financial transactions. Similarly, the state capture systems in the Western Balkans solidified the political leaders' positions, hence any outside support in providing funds was welcome, whereby the cooperation between Orbán and the politicians in the region was beneficial for everyone involved.

A result of clientelism is the phenomenon of "society capture" or "captured society", which describes a situation where people cannot freely participate in the political process, but are rather bound to wishes or demands of their "patrons". Not only citizens are captured, but also political parties, trade unions, civil society organisations, as well as private businesses and media companies.[18] People's dependency on the assistance of politicians in obtaining employment, permits for businesses or access to social services "captures" the citizens' choices and behaviour.

These clientelist dynamics depend on the individual contexts of the Western Balkan countries and their political leadership. Orbán with the help of his regional partners was able to use the clientelist networks in the Western Balkan countries to expand his own influence. Apart from Vučić's support for Orbán's activities, the Hungarian Prime Minister was in close contact with a Hungarian minority party, which he "captured" to ensure that it implemented Orbán's policies in the Vojvodina. The Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (VMSZ) is the largest Hungarian minority party in Serbia and is ideologically aligned with Orbán's Fidesz party. VMSZ won six seats in the Serbian parliament and nine seats in the local Assembly of Vojvodina. In this capacity, the party bolsters Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Moreover, the Hungarian government gained access to the Pannon RTV station based in Vojvodina, founded in 2006 in Subotica, which adopted the Hungarian National Council's media strategy (Magyar Nemzeti Tanács média stratégiájának) in 2012.[19]

Orbán's ambition to be accepted as a regional leader was easiest to achieve in the Western Balkans, given the asymmetrical relationship between EU member state Hungary and the Western Balkan candidate countries. The Western Balkan countries dependent on the support of the EU and its member states to achieve EU membership. On the other hand, the cooperation with the Western Balkan states was smoother for Orbán because of the similarities in personalities in the respective governments and Orbán's ability and willingness to provide investments.

Narrative of Orbán's Government

Orbán's ideological orientation might be traced back to experienced disappointments regarding Hungary's EU membership and the perception of not being fully accepted as an equal partner. In 2004, Hungary joined the EU, and since 1999 it has been a NATO member. Hungary successfully managed the difficult po-

Vol 24, No. 1 (2024) pp. 41-62, here p. 43.

[18] Predrag Cvetičanin and Jovan Bliznakovski, Nemanja Kristić, "Captured states and/or captured societies in the Western Balkans", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol 24, No. 1 (2024) pp. 41-62, here p. 41-42.

[19] Pannon RTV, Pannon TV, https://pannonrtv.com/pannon-tv (accessed on April 29, 2026).

litical and economic transitions and the EU integration process. However, the transformation from socialist to democratic, liberal market economy has deeply impacted Hungarian society. The "shock therapy" of sudden economic and political reforms resulted in a sense of insecurity among the wider population. Not only were the populations of the post-socialist countries exposed to existential transformations, but these experiences were not valued by the EU.

The migration situation in 2015 was another turning point in the relations between the "old" and the "new" EU member states. The diverging stands on the issue of migration contributed to the idea that the Central European states were not being taken seriously and were supposed to be policy takers only, rather than active policy makers. Since then, the Hungarian government under Viktor Orbán began to oppose some EU policies and rejected EU values. In 2014, Orbán in his famous speech in Băile Tuşnad (Tusnádfürdő), declared that he would adopt the illiberal form of government for Hungary.[20] Since then Orbán continued to speak out against liberalism and in favour of a Christian Europe, defending its values.[21] His politics became more nationalist, following his interpretation that Central Europe - due to its history of communism and its denial of national sovereignty - is more positively related to national values.[22] Bershidsky writes: "Post-communist nations have taken two decades to decide what they are, and the decision is almost unanimous: They are countries based on strong national traditions and interests".[23] Orbán attempted to offer an alternative policy model to the EU members and to the EU candidate countries. For more than a decade "the EU has been challenged by geopolitical competition from the outside and by nationalism and illiberalism from within".[24]

Orbán demanded that EU member states' sovereignty be strengthened and the influence of "Brussels" limited. Orbán depicted this as a conflict over sovereignty within the EU, which Fidesz occasionally compares to the former Soviet Union's control over Hungary.[25] According to Orbán, the EU's liberal ideas were "inevitably prone to a despotism which they tend to call 'the rule of law' but which is simply 'the rule of blackmail'; they are vulnerable to infiltration by Soros-style networks, and if they are forced to choose between the citizens of individual national communities and the big guns of global capital, in the end they will always opt for the latter."[26] The concept of liberal democracy was questioned by Orbán: "The doctrine that 'democracy can only be liberal' - that golden calf, that monumental fetish - has been toppled. [...] It seems that conservative and

[20] Edit Inotai, "Hungary's Orban tries to give 'illiberalism' a makeover", *BalkanInsight* (July 30, 2019). https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/30/hungarys-orban-tries-to-give-illiberalism-a-makeover/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[21] Viktor Orbán, "Viktor Orbán's speech at the 14th Kötcse civil picnic" (September 5, 2015) published September 17, 2015, *Website of the Hungarian Government*. https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-14th-kotcse-civil-picnic (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[22] Ivan Krastev and Stephan Holmes, "Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents", *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 29, Issue 3 (July 2018) pp. 117-128, here p. 120.
[23] Leonid Bershidsky, "A Nationalist Eastern Europe Reshapes the EU", *Bloomberg Opinion* (September 7, 2016). https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-09-07/a-nationalist-eastern-europe-could-reshape-the-eu (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[24] Faris Kočan and Marko Lovec, "What can the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the European Union do for the Western Balkans?", *ÖGfE Policy Brief* 12 '2021 (October 4, 2021), p. 1. https://www.oegfe.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/PB-122021.pdf (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[25] Krisztina Than, "Hungary's Orban accuses Europe of 'Soviet-style' meddling", *Reuters* (January 5, 2013) https://www.reuters.com/article/world/hungarys-orban-accuses-europe-of-soviet-style-meddling-idUSBRE9640BS/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[26] Viktor Orbán, "Together we will succeed again" (September 21, 2020), Originally published in Hungarian in *Magyar Nemzet*, https://miniszterelnok.hu/together-we-will-succeed-again/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).

Christian democratic parties and political movements can finally escape from the deadly embrace of the liberals'".[27] Orbán argued that "radical change was needed in the organising mode of society and the community. We expressed this by saying 'yes' to democracy and 'no' to liberalism."[28]

Pragmatism made Orbán change from an originally liberal politician to a Christian-conservative one, and pragmatism was a trait of his political style which he applied to bilateral relations. Orbán was a regional promoter of an illiberal, national, and traditional governance model and pushed for changes in the EU's enlargement policy.

Hungary's position on the Western Balkan enlargement

For some years now a power struggle over the hearts and minds of the EU candidate countries wishing to join the EU, emerged. The "old" EU, which is perceived to have been in a state of a prolonged crisis for more than fifteen years and was not able to deliver on EU membership for the Western Balkan countries, was opposed by Orbán's more technical and pragmatic approach to EU enlargement. Orbán promoted the idea that EU enlargement is a political process, which should not focus on compliance with the preconditions for accession, such as the rule of law and the EU's fundamentals. Hungary presented itself as an alternative role model for the Western Balkan states.[29]

Hungary enjoyed a high level of trust in the region. The more objective reasons for maintaining close relations with the region are of an economic and security nature, as well as energy security. Additionally, Hungary always referred to shared cultural links and experiences of occupation or domination by empires, such as the Ottoman empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire and later the communist experience. Countries in the Southern European region can relate to these shared historical legacies. Hungary's support for the Western Balkan countries is very much appreciated in the region, whereby it is perceived as an "honest broker". Orbán took the side of the Western Balkan countries by claiming that the EU had shown a lack of interest in the region, even though the Western Balkan countries had implemented sufficient reforms, while the EU had failed to deliver on its promises. He criticised the EU, asserting that further accession delays would invite external influence in the region. Orbán argued that a focus on the issue of rule of law or quality of democracy is not providing a useful approach, rather a political decision on accession should be taken by the EU. Orbán promoted the political approach to EU accession and consequently weakened the EU's "merit-based process", which foresees fundamental reforms prior to accession. In 2019 Hungarian diplomat Olivér Várhelyi served as EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, a position in which he indirectly supported Orbán's approach to the EU accession process.

Yet, some EU member states are cautious to proceed with the Western Balkan enlargement, due to previous negative experiences - especially the accession of Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, as well as, Hungary's, Poland's and meanwhile Slovakia's democratic backsliding incidents. Because of these experiences, the EU insists on compliance with its fundamental values, especially the rule of law. A pure political approach is not in the interest of the majority of EU countries. The more enlargement-sceptic countries within the EU fear that the Western

[27] Viktor Orbán, "Together we will succeed again" (September 21, 2020), Originally published in Hungarian in *Magyar Nemzet,* https://miniszterelnok.hu/together-we-will-succeed-again/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[28] Viktor Orbán, "'Yes' to democracy, 'no' to liberalism", (July 28, 2019). https://miniszterelnok.hu/yes-to-democracy-no-to-liberalism/ (accessed on April 30, 2026).
[29] Fanni Elek and Christina Griessler, "Hungary, an anti-role model for successful EU integration?", *ÖGfSE Policy Brief,* Vienna: Österreichische Gesellschaft für Europapolitik (October 22, 2021). https://www.oegfe.at/policy-briefs/hungary-an-anti-role-model-for-successful-eu-integration/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

Balkans may not fully incorporate EU values and may question them once they achieve EU membership. The cohesion of the EU could be weakened furthermore and political leaders such as Orbán, who are making the case for an illiberal model of democracy would benefit from the EU accession of similarly minded leaders. The group of defective democracies within the EU would grow and ultimately fundamentally change the basis on which the EU is built.

Another important aspect is that a shift of power within the EU would occur, once Serbia and other Western Balkan states have joined the EU. The push for a revision of the EU values might follow. Orbán had an interest in side-lining the issue of rule of law, which his government was not complying with. Hungary throughout the last years, tried to strengthen its economic and political ties and to present itself as an investor and political friend. Over the years, Hungary had established excellent relations with Serbia, on a political as well as on the personal level between Orbán and Vučić. Hungary had improved its relations with Albania, North Macedonia and the Republika Srpska. Relations with Montenegro were overall good and focused on economic cooperation; with Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina relations are more complex due to Hungary's preference of Serbia.

Hungarian bilateral Relations to the Western Balkans[30]

Although Hungary has always been supportive of EU enlargement of the Western Balkans, Orbán has made relations with the countries a personal issue. He maintained good relationships with some of the Western Balkan leaders and he travelled there regularly. For years, Hungary provided administrative assistance in preparation for EU accession by posting Hungarian experts to the countries. Moreover, Hungary delegated military personnel for the peacekeeping missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina (EUFOR Althea) and Kosovo (KFOR). Hungarian diplomats and experts were involved in UNMIK, EULEX and other international activities in the region.[31] Despite Orbán's policies, Hungary has acquired an expertise in the region, provided valuable support to the countries and was seen as an "honest broker" for the countries' interests. With the new Tisza government, it can be expected that Hungary's foreign policy will move away from the clientelist policies and the personal loyalties established by Orbán and (re-)connects with all the countries on an equal basis.

The analysis of the bilateral relations between Hungary and the Western Balkans focusses on Serbia and its closer neighbourhood, where it has a strong political influence, such as Republika Srpska and Kosovo. On the other hand the case study of North Macedonia and its mainly political connections are analysed. At the end a brief look at Albania and Montenegro brings this chapter to a conclusion.

Serbia: Hungary's main regional partner in the Western Balkans

Relations between Hungary and Serbia were central to Orbán's Western Balkan policy during his time in government. They were key to understanding Orbán's policies towards Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo and are therefore discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

[30] The part on the bilateral relations between Hungary and the countries of the Western Balkans is partly based on a previously published Blog by Christina Griessler, "Viktor Orbán und die Staaten des Westbalkans: Strategische Vernetzung oder transregionaler Klientelismus?" [Viktor Orbán and the Western Balkan states: Strategic networking or transregional clientelism?], *AUBlog,* (Andrássy University Budapest, 2026) https://aub.eu/universitaet/nachrichten/viktor-orban-und-die-staaten-des-westbalkans-strategische-vernetzung-oder-transregionaler-klientelismus/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

[31] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024), pp. 76-100, here p. 89.

Serbia and Hungary have undergone a successful reconciliation process, which had already begun prior to 2010. Historically, the relations were tainted by the events of the two World Wars and the atrocities committed on both sides. Vojvodina, once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire home to a substantial number of Hungarians, became part of Serbia after World War I. During World War II the region was occupied by Hungarians, but returned to Yugoslavia after the war. Atrocities on both sides took place during those years. The massacre of Hungarians against Serbs in January 1942 in Novi Sad and the retaliation against Hungarians committed in autumn of 1944, when the partisans took over the area, remained in living memory. The shifting of borders and rearrangements of territories have impacted the neighbourly relations and demonstrates the interconnectedness of both countries. During communism relations improved a bit, but outstanding historical issues were not addressed.

Shortly after Hungary joined NATO in 1999, it was part of the NATO campaign against Serbia to halt the atrocities in Kosovo. The Hungarian government at the time was concerned that their NATO engagement could lead to reprisals against the Hungarian minority in Serbia. Occasional attacks against the Hungarian minority in Serbia were recorded previously; therefore, the objective of the Hungarian government was to improve their relationship with the Serbian government after 2000. In September 2004 Hungarian President Ferenc Mádl visited Serbia and Montenegro and met with President Svetozar Marović to address the issues of bilateral relations and the Hungarian minority. President Mádl also visited Subotica in Vojvodina at the time.[32] The attempts to promote a reconciliation process were intensified around 2010, when politicians from both sides publicly addressed the committed crimes during the two World Wars. A joint commission of historians was established in 2010 to examine the historical events. Reciprocal visits and participation of politicians in commemorative events took place. In 2012, the then-presidents of Hungary and Serbia, János Áder and Tomislav Nikolić, commemorated the innocent Hungarian and Serbian victims of the World Wars. In 2013, in a speech before the Serbian Parliament, János Áder apologised for the crimes committed by Hungarians during the Second World War. Further reconciliation efforts followed in the subsequent years, attempting to shift the public discourse toward a more positive perspective regarding the opposing sides' negative attitudes.[33]

For Orbán, Serbia was the most important partner in the region due to its direct proximity and his personal ties to President Aleksandar Vučić. Although Vučić, at the beginning of his term as Prime Minister (2014-2017), appeared to be a pro-EU politician, this image has since been replaced by that of an autocrat. Since 2014, both governments have organised regular joint meetings on the bilateral level. The frequency of visits between Orbán and Vučić increased, after the Hungarian elections in 2018.[34] In September 2021, a Strategic Partnership Agreement between the then Prime Ministers Viktor Orbán and Ana Brnabić was signed, which was accompanied by a number

[32] Nicholas Wood, "Attacks Against the Hungarian Minority in Serbia Are Increasing", *New York Times,* (September 16, 2004). https://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/16/international/europe/attacks-against-the-hungarian-minority-in-serbia-are-in.html (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[33] Gyurkovics Virág, "Intertwined Political Relations Between Hungary and Serbia", *Átlátszó Vajdaság*, (November 19, 2024) https://atlatszo.rs/en/2024/11/19/intertwined-political-relations-between-hungary-and-serbia/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[34] Fanni Elek, "Die special relationship zwischen Viktor Orbán und Aleksandar uund deren Einfluss auf den serbischen EU-Beitrittsprozess" [The special relationship between Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić and their influence on the Serbian EU accession process], *Andrássy Working Papers zur Demokratieforschung,* No. 12, (Budapest, 2023). https://aub.eu/forschung/andrassypublikationen/die-special-relationship-zwischen-viktor-orban-und-aleksandar-vucic-und-deren-einfluss-auf-den-serbischen-eu-beitrittsprozess/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

of bilateral activities, such as cooperation regarding opening smaller border crossings, infrastructure, cooperation between young farmers, and economic cooperation.[35] The strategic partnership was strengthened by the close personal ties between Orbán and Vučić, as the two leaders meet regularly bilaterally and on European level, including regular EU-WB summits and since 2022, the biannual meetings of the European Political Community (EPC). In June 2023, the then Presidents of Serbia and Hungary signed a joint political statement on establishing the Strategic Council for Cooperation between the Republic of Serbia and Hungary. During that meeting the construction of a new oil pipeline, connecting Serbia and Hungary, was agreed, as well as establishment of a joint gas trading company, aiming for closer cooperation in the area of natural resources and energy. Additionally, cooperation in the area of asylum, migration, border traffic control, customs administration, agriculture, infrastructure and strategic cooperation in the area of defence were established.[36]

The relationship between Vučić and Orbán was a rather solid one. Overall Orbán was quite supportive of the Vučić government, even when it jeopardised relations with other countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo. Also, the incident when Serbian hooligans took part in orchestrated violent protests in the North of Kosovo in June 2023, which led to severe injuries of Hungarian KFOR-Soldiers, Budapest remained silent.[37] The day before the violent protests, Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó was a speaker at Vučić's organised demonstration in Belgrade, which was meant to counter the large public anti-Vučić protests at the time. Hungary was clearly taking sides with its friend Vučić instead of the people.

Both governments were ideologically aligned and tried building more autocratic political systems in their respective countries, thereby undermining democratic standards, weakening political institutions, attacking civil society organisations and trying to take over the media. Internationally, they maintained their good contacts with Russia and China and facilitated their investments in the region, with the intention to provide an overly positive image of these autocratic regimes. Because of Orbán's and Vučić's shared policies and close relations to autocratic external actors, such as Russia and China, EU scepticism in the countries increased.[38] The involvement of a Hungarian company in the Chinese railway project between Belgrade and Budapest became public knowledge after the deadly accident in Novi Sad in November 2024. According to sources, the task of an Hungarian company, involved in the project, were consulting, design, and supervision,[39] and it remains unclear whether the company is in

[35] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Serbia, "Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between Serbia and Hungary" (September 8, 2021), https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/press-service/news/strategic-partnership-agreement-signed-between-serbia-and-hungary (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[36] The Government of the Republic of Serbia "Serbia, Hungary sign several agreements aimed at strengthening cooperation", (Palić, June 20, 2023). https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/208530/serbia-hungary-sign-several-agreements-aimed-at-strengthening-cooperation.php (accessed on May 4, 2026); Magyar Nemzet, "Serbia-Hungary relations reach a new level", (June 20, 2023), https://magyarnemzet.hu/english/2023/06/serbia-hungary-relations-reach-new-level (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[37] Gergely Nyilas, "Why it's a failure of Hungarian foreign policy if Hungarian peacekeepers in Kosovo were attacked with Belgrade's prior knowledge", *Telex.hu,* (June 5, 2023). https://telex.hu/english/2023/06/05/why-its-a-failure-of-hungarian-foreign-policy-if-hungarian-peacekeepers-in-kosovo-were-attacked-with-belgrades-prior-knowledge (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[38] Agon Maliqi, "What Orbán's defeat in Hungary means for the Western Balkans", *Dispatches,* Atlantic Council, (April 22, 2026). https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/what-orbans-defeat-in-hungary-means-for-the-western-balkans/ (accessed on May 11, 2026).

[39] Gyurkovics Virág, "Hungarian Company Supervising Railway Reconstruction in Serbia Pocketed Millions", *Atlátszó vajdaság* (November 13, 2024). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2024/11/13/hungarian-company-supervising-railway-reconstruction-in-serbia-pocketed-millions/ (accessed on May 12, 2026).

part responsible for the failure of the construction. Corruption has been identified as a cause for the accident, which led tragically to 16 people being killed.

The dominant Hungarian minority party, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (*Vajdasági Magyar Szövetség,* VMSZ) was closely connected to the Orbán government. Moreover, it supported the policies of President Vučić and has been part of the Serbian governing coalition since 2014.[40] Hungary rewarded the political cooperation of VMSZ with investments, which primarily benefited VMSZ members.[41] Hungary's investment activities in Vojvodina were not always transparent, particularly when financing was channelled through football clubs[42] or other foundations, such as *Pásztor István Alapítvány* or the *Prosperitati Alapítvány*. Even shortly before the election, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó travelled to Vojvodina to hand over more financial support for companies in the region. Overall, 183 billion HUF (approx. €517 million) were invested in sectors of agriculture, industry and tourism.[43] The VMSZ has campaigned for Orbán's Fidesz during the Hungarian elections, to ensure that ethnic Hungarians with Hungarian citizenship voted for Fidesz. The cooperation between VMSZ and Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) was approved and even fostered by Budapest. This created the impression that the VMSZ became a tool for the Orbán government to maintain Vučić's power, but as a consequence the party became "captured" by Orbán and was less able to pursue their own policies. There is no surprise that also Vučić and Orbán have publicly supported each other's election campaigns for years. However, just some days before the Hungarian elections in April 2026, the incident of the discovery of a bomb next to a gas pipeline providing oil for Hungary close to Kanjiza in Serbia, was interpreted differently by Orbán and Vučić. This "incident" should have supported Orbán's narrative, that Hungary is under attack by Ukraine, but Vučić did not confirm this interpretation and consequently damaged Orbán's election campaign. Still, Vučić considers Orbán as a friend.[44] Over the years, these political contacts have facilitated the expansion and deepening of economic ties. However, the lack of transparency surrounding investments in Vojvodina makes it difficult to assess the extent to which Orbán's government was able to establish a localised "state capture-system", which used the local state institutions for personal benefits. For sure, the tight connections to the VMSZ, the dominance in some Hungarian media outlets, such as Pannon RTV, and the politically important role of the VMSZ in the Serbian government, in the Assembly of Vojvodina and in the Hungarian National Council (*Magyar Nemzeti Tanács*) enabled Orbán to establish a clientelist network of dependence in Vojvodina. Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić established some good personal relations and fostered further cooperation in other areas, especially Hungary's support of Serbia's EU accession.

The close political cooperation and the non-transparent economic transactions between the countries contributed to a neg-

[40] Ungarn heute, "Ungarn in Serbien erreichen ihre Wahlziele" [Hungarians in Serbia achieve their election goals] (December 18, 2023). https://ungarnheute.hu/news/ungarn-in-serbien-erreichen-ihre-wahlziele-47391/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[41] Gyurkovics Virág, "Twelve Tycoons", *Átlátszó Vajdaság* (February 13, 2023). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2023/02/13/twelve-tycoons/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[42] Gyurkovics Virág, "Invisible money: Hungarian government's €14 million grant for a soccer academy and stadiums in Vojvodina spent in a non-transparent way", *Átlátszó* (October 20, 2018). https://english.atlatszo.hu/2018/10/20/invisible-money-hungarian-governments-e14-million-grant-for-a-soccer-academy-and-stadiums-in-vojvodina-spent-in-a-non-transparent-way/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[43] Hungary Today, "New Investments Help Strengthen the Hungarian Community in North Serbia", *Hungary Today,* (March 25, 2026). https://hungarytoday.hu/new-investments-help-strengthen-the-hungarian-community-in-northern-serbia/ accessed on May 9, 2026).
[44] European Western Balkans, "First frictions between Magyar and Vučić in post-election public statements", *European Western Balkans,* (April 14, 2026). https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/04/14/first-frictions-between-magyar-and-vucic-in-post-election-public-statements/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

ative development of democracy in both countries. The VMSZ became part of the "state capture" system, which channelled Hungarian interests and funds into projects in Vojvodina, thereby fostering cross-border corruption and demanding unquestioning loyalty.

The relationship between Budapest and Belgrade under a Tisza government will change, but both governments are aware of the importance of the bilateral relations and the necessity to cooperate in the future. For the Hungarian government the support of the Hungarian minority remains a priority of its foreign policy, but advantages the VMSZ had enjoyed so far will be retracted, as a new Hungarian party has emerged, the Vojvodina Hungarian Restart (VMÚ; *Vajdasági Magyar Újrakezdés*), which is ideologically aligned with the Tisza party. Magyar has already proclaimed that he will investigate the last years of Hungarian funding for Vojvodina to reveal irregularities. Overall, it would be a positive development once the dominance of the VMSZ ends and other parties are able to participate in a pluralistic political scene within the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina.

Republika Srpska and the relations to Bosnia-Herzegovina

The relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina are rather complicated. Hungary on the one hand officially supported BiH's EU accession, but on the other Orbán was seemingly on good terms with the former separatist President of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik. Hungary provided troops and military support for the EUFOR Althea mission for years and was even leading the mission from 2024 until 2025.[45] However, Orbán's visits to the capital Sarajevo were not as frequent as to Banja Luka, the administrative capital of Republika Srpska. Moreover, Orbán's name was also linked to a non-paper (or even several non-papers) emerging in March and April 2021, which suggested a division of Bosnia-Herzegovina along ethnic lines.[46] Rumours stated that the Orbán government together with former Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša had a hand in the drafting and/or leaking of the "non-paper", but this was never officially confirmed. Relations between Hungary and the Republika Srpska in political and economic areas were intensified from 2019 onwards,[47] which is proof of the good personal relationship between Orbán and Dodik. Dodik even referred to Orbán as a friend of the Serbian people and Orbán officially supported Dodik's election in a video message in 2022.[48] However, Serbian President Vučić also had a vested interest and played a crucial role in connecting both politicians. Dodik visited Hungary in 2019 and in September 2021 he attended the Budapest Demographic Summit as a speaker. In November 2021, Orbán met with Dodik in Banja Luka without coordinating with EU politicians, which fuelled suspicions that Orbán would support the Serbian demand for the secession of Republika Srpska. Dodik repeatedly threatened to declare Republika Srpska's independence, defied the orders of the High Representative, and thus violated the 1995 Dayton Agreement. Orbán's decision to travel to Banja Luka to meet Dodik in June 2023 immediately after only a brief official

[45] Eszter Bányász, "EUFOR: Successful Hungarian Command Year Comes to a Close", *Hungarian Defence Forces Online*, January 23, 2015. https://defence.hu/news/eufor-successful-hungarian-command-year-comes-to-a-close.html (accessed on May 11, 2026).

[46] Edit Inotai and Srecko Latal, "Viktor Orbán's visit to Bosnian Serb strongman puzzles observers", *BalkanInsight*, (November 9, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/11/09/viktor-orbans-visit-to-bosnian-serb-strongman-puzzles-observers/ (accessed on May 1, 2026); Julianna Ármás; Ferenc Németh and Anna Orosz, "Non-papers on border changes in the Western Balkans: promise of an easy solution or a hazardous game?", *KKI Policy Brief, KE-2021/43*, (Budapest: Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2021), p. 6.

[47] Gyurkovics Virág, "Hungary's Neighbour of Honour: Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Átlátszó Vajdaság* (February 6, 2025). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2025/02/06/hungarys-neighbour-of-honour-bosnia-and-herzegovina/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[48] Azem Kurtic, "Hungary's Orban Champions Bosnian Serb Chief Ahead of Elections", *BalkanInsight*, (September 29, 2022), https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/29/hungarys-orban-champions-bosnian-serb-chief-ahead-of-elections/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

visit to Sarajevo was regarded as a diplomatic affront.[49] On August 20, 2023 Dodik attended the World Athletics Congress in

Budapest, where several people of Orbán's illiberal network met.[50] In April 2024, Orbán was awarded with the Order of Merit of Republika Srpska by Dodik.[51]

While the US imposed sanctions on Dodik in 2022, Orbán supported the regime with a €100 million loan in the framework of Hungary's Responsible Neighbourhood Policy and blocked any sanctions at the EU level.[52] The loan was provided by Hungary's State EXIM Bank and came with a fixed interest rate at 5 percent for a duration of 10 years.[53] Additional funds, that were €35 million in 2022 and an additional €17 million in 2023, were provided to enable small and middle-sized enterprises[54] and farming enterprises to purchase Hungarian agricultural machinery.[55] These programmes, as well as the €100 million loan that ultimately grew to €110 million, were available only to the Republika Srpska. In 2024, financing of €140 million for energy infrastructure projects in Republika Srpska was agreed upon. Some of these projects were ones from which Germany had withdrawn due to the sanctions.[56]

Despite Orbán's support for the country, relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina remain somewhat strained. Although Hungary played a constructive role in the administrative and technical preparations for EU accession, the Hungarian policy had been inconsistent with its generous economic and political support for Dodik. An agreed cooperation agreement with the Hungarian Diplomatic Academy, which was intended to train 50 experts by the Hungarian diplomatic service, was abruptly suspended by Bosnia in May 2025 because Hungary voted against the EU resolution recognising the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. The matter was later resolved.[57]

At the beginning of 2025, it became known that Orbán had sent the Hungarian Anti-Terrorist Unit (TEK) to Republika Srpska to protect Dodik. The TEK force, up to 70 strong, entered Bos-

[49] Hungary Today, "Being Good Neighbors Is a Policy Shared by Budapest and Sarajevo", *Hungary Today* (June 23, 2023), https://hungarytoday.hu/being-good-neighbors-is-a-policy-shared-by-budapest-and-sarajevo/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[50] Euro News, "Hungary using World Athletics Championships to boost ties but EU and NATO leaders not invited", *Euro News* (August 19, 2023). https://www.euronews.com/2023/08/19/hungary-using-world-athletics-championships-to-boost-ties-but-eu-and-nato-leaders-not-invi (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[51] About Hungary, "PM Orbán: Bosnia's Serb community can rely on Hungary's continued support", *News in brief,* (April 8, 2024). https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/pm-orban-bosnia-s-serb-community-can-rely-on-hungary-s-continued-support (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[52] Jasmin Mujanovic, "Hungary's Orban: Investing in the Destruction", *BalkanInsight* (January 5, 2022) https://balkaninsight.com/2022/01/05/hungarys-orban-investing-in-the-destruction-of-bosnia/bi/ (accessed on May 2, 2026); Inotai, Edit, "Orbán: Hungary gives €100 Million Support To Bosnian Serbs", Reporting Democracy, BIRN, *BalkanInsight* (December 21, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs/rd/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[53] RFE/RL's Balkan Service, "Republika Srpska Signs Loan Agreement With Hungary's State EXIM Bank", *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty,* (December 19, 2022). https://www.rferl.org/a/bosnia-srpska-hungary-loand-orban-dodik/32183392.html (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[54] Edit Inotai, "Orban: Hungary gives €100 Million support to Bosnian Serbs", *BalkanInsight* (December 21, 2021). https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs/ ((accessed on May 2, 2026); Azem Kurtic,"Bosnia's Serb entity welcomes Hungary's 35 Million euros in Aid", *BalkanInsight* (July 1, 2022). https://balkaninsight.com/2022/07/01/bosnias-serb-entity-welcomes-hungarys-35-million-euros-in-aid/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[55] Edit Inotai, "Hungary announces millions more in grants for Bosnia's Republika Srpska", *BalkanInsight* (May 26, 2023) https://balkaninsight.com/2023/05/26/hungary-announces-millions-more-in-grants-for-bosnias-republika-srpska/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[56] Daria Sito-Sucic, "Hungary to help with $156 mln energy projects in Bosnia´s Serb region", *Reuters* (April 5, 2024). https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-help-with-156-mln-energy-projects-bosnias-serb-region-2024-04-05/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).
[57] Edit, Inotai, "Hungary throws diplomatic weight behind Bosnian Serbs during Dodik visit", Reporting Democracy, *BalkanInsight* (May 15, 2024). https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/15/hungary-throws-diplomatic-weight-behind-bosnian-serbs-during-dodik-visit/ (accessed on May 2, 2026); Gyurkovics Virág, "Hungary's Neighbour of Honour: Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Átlátszó Vajdaság,* (February 6, 2025). https://atlatszo.rs/en/2025/02/06/hungarys-neighbour-of-honour-bosnia-and-herzegovina/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

nia-Herzegovina in civilian clothes and apparently had orders to remove Dodik from the country in case of an arrest. Dodik had been convicted by a Bosnian court of disobeying the orders of the High Representative. Once the operation became publicly known, the Hungarian side declared it a police exercise.[58] As a consequence of Dodik's conviction, he became barred from holding political office for a total of six years, which is the reason why elections had to be held and Dodik's party colleague, Siniša Karan, was elected President of Republika Srpska in February 2026. In January 2026, shortly before the presidential election in Republika Srpska, in which Dodik was no longer eligible to run, he travelled to Budapest with his deputy, Ana Trišić Babić, to hold talks with Orbán.[59] This indicates that Dodik still holds informal power in Republika Srpska and wanted to guarantee that Orbán would continue the cooperation.

Hungary's relationship with Republika Srpska was based on economic advantages and similar personal interests. The funding provided to Republika Srpska was only available for the Serbian entity of Bosnia-Herzegovina and was not earmarked for reforms required for EU accession. The Hungarian Government provided money to Dodik to avoid state bankruptcy and assisted smaller companies to buy Hungarian machinery from their own funds. Connected with these financial arrangements comes a dependence and certain expectations, which can be described as clientelist. Reasons explaining Orbán's behaviour in the relationship with Dodik are that he wanted to be accepted as a regional leader and was willing to pay for it, and that he with the help of the clientelist network benefited from the financial transactions and the business arrangements. On the other hand, Dodik had a friend in the EU, which averted EU sanctions, politically supported him and provided funding, when needed. Although Orbán was actually in a stronger position, because Hungary is an EU and NATO member, Dodik was able to gain more out of this relationship. For both sides, clientelism and corruption must have played an additional role to be willing to maintain the contacts.

With the new Hungarian Prime Minister Péter Magyar the special relations with Republika Srpska are likely to end and contacts to Sarajevo strengthened. What can be expected is that Hungary reconfigures its foreign policy approach towards Bosnia-Herzegovina, continuing its constructive assistance of the country's EU accession, but ends the toxic political situation in the Republika Srpska. Magyar might consider launching an investigation into the funds provided by Hungary to the Republika Srpska.

Kosovo: In the shadow of Serbia

Kosovo is discussed in the context of Serbia's influence on the country, as Serbia is in the position to block any political development in the area of regional cooperation and the EU integration process. Kosovo is in a vulnerable position opposite to Serbia. Hungary's close relations with Serbia meant that it was politically siding with Serbia at the European and international level and has not been a trustworthy partner for Kosovo.

Hungary's recognition of Kosovo in 2008, occurred before Orbán took office in 2010, and happened shortly after Kosovo's declaration of independence. Hungary opened a Liaison Office

[58] Szabolcs Panyi, "Orbán's covert Bosnia Operation: Special Forces stood ready to extract Dodik", *VSquare* (March 6, 2025) https://vsquare.org/viktor-orban-tek-special-police-forces-bosnia-banja-luka-milorad-dodik-extraction-us-tensions/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

[59] Prime Minister Viktor Orbán / MIT, "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had talks with President of Republika Srpska", Homepage of *Viktor Orbán* (January 31, 2026). https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/prime-minister-viktor-orban-had-talks-with-president-of-republika-srpska-2026-01-31/ (accessed on May 2, 2026).

in Pristina already in 2005.[60] From 2008 until 2012 Hungarian diplomats were part of the International Steering Group (ISG), which was established to observe Kosovo's implementation of independence, and the International Civilian Office.[61] In 1999 Hungary participated to a limited extent in the NATO mission against Serbia. While it made available its airspace and military bases, it did not participate in combat operations for the fear of reprisals against the Hungarian minority in Serbia. Since 1999, Hungary has been sending military personnel to KFOR in Kosovo. Hungary also assisted in the European Union Rule of Law Mission, the EULEX programme.[62] Even prior to the start of Orbán's second government in 2010, Hungary was administratively active and engaged in Kosovo. Although Orbán's government officially declared to support all the countries of the Western Balkan on their path to EU membership, a preferential policy towards Serbia became obvious by its activities. During Orbán's premiership maintaining good relations with Serbia was a priority, but at the same time it had to fulfil its obligations within NATO and the EU. Hungarian KFOR soldiers have been stationed in northern Kosovo to help maintain peace between Serb communities and the Kosovo authorities. Unfortunately, an incident happened in May 2023, whereby Hungarian KFOR soldiers were attacked and severely injured by Serbian protesters. The Hungarian government remained silent, not to damage the relationship with the Serbian President Vučić. Only the then Hungarian president Novák visited the soldiers in hospital, once they had been transported back to Hungary.[63] In the same year three Kosovar policemen were abducted from Serbian police by asserting that they had crossed over onto Serbian territory, which was disputed by Kosovo. Orbán officially asked Vučić to release the three policemen, and Vučić complied with. This was presented as a success of Orbán, despite the EU's parallel efforts to convince Vučić to hand over the policemen to Kosovo. In January 2023 Hungary voted against Kosovo's admission to the Council of Europe with the argument that a solution between Serbia and Kosovo in relation to the Serb minority in Kosovo needs to be found, before the membership.[64]

Although talks between Vučić and Kosovar Prime Minister Kurti took place in Ohrid in March 2023, Vučić refused to sign the reached agreement. In March 2024, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) voted in favour of Kosovo's admission, but Kurti opposed to agree on the statutes of the Association of Serbian-Majority Municipalities (ASMM).

Although Hungary officially maintains good diplomatic relations with Kosovo, Orbán would have sacrificed these to ensure he did not offend Serbia. Although economic relations between Kosovo and Hungary have improved in recent years, Serbia remains a key partner.[65] Diplomatic visits between the two coun-

[60] Alejandro Esteso Pérez , "A triangle of (mis)trust: Hungary's Enlargement Stakes in Serbia and Kosovo", *BiEPAG Policy Brief,* (2024), p. 15, https://www.biepag.eu/publication/policy-brief-a-triangle-of-mistrust-hungarys-enlargement-stakes-in-serbia-and-kosovopdf (accessed on May 6, 2026).

[61] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo, a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024) pp. 76-100, here p. 77, p. 89.

[62] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo, a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024), pp. 76-11, here p. 77.

[63] Gergely Nyilas, "Why it's a failure of Hungarian foreign policy if Hungarian peacekeepers in Kosovo were attacked with Belgrade's prior knowledge", *Telex.hu,* (June 5, 2023) https://telex.hu/english/2023/06/05/why-its-a-failure-of-hungarian-foreign-policy-if-hungarian-peacekeepers-in-kosovo-were-attacked-with-belgrades-prior-knowledge (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[64] Hanga Zsófia Aradi, "Szijjártó: Hungary will vote against Kosovo's admission into European organizations", *Telex.hu,* (January 10, 2023). https://telex.hu/english/2023/01/10/szijjarto-hungary-will-vote-against-kosovos-admission-into-europe-an-organizations (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[65] Alejandro Esteso Pérez, "Orban will sacrifice Kosovo to keep Serbian Ally Sweet", Reporting Democracy, *BalkanInsight* (May 16, 2024), https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/16/orban-will-sacrifice-kosovo-to-keep-serbian-ally-sweet/rd/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

tries were not actively pursued, although at the time Presidents Vjosa Osmani and Katalin Novák met for an official meeting in 2022. The former President Osmani attended the European Political Community (EPC) summit in Budapest in November 2024, where she met with then Prime Minister Orbán. In June 2025, Osmani visited Hungarian President Tamás Sulyok in Hungary, who returned the visit to Prishtina the same year in December.[66]

Economic relations have intensified and increased, especially since 2015, where the main sectors of Hungarian investment are telecommunication (4iG), banking (OTP), transport (WizzAir) and energy (MOL). Hungary signed an Agreement of Economic Cooperation with Kosovo in 2015 and established the Hungarian–Kosovar Joint Economic Commission in 2016. A Hungarian loan agreement in 2020 of €62 million with Kosovo for infrastructure projects, failed to materialise, due to problems of implementation and slipped deadlines.[67]

Contacts between the two countries tend to take place on representative or technical level, particularly in relation to the Hungarian KFOR troops stationed in Kosovo. For Orbán, the balancing act between Kosovo and Serbia proved to be difficult, as Hungary's priority was to maintain its excellent relations with Serbia, while fulfilling their international obligation within NATO and its commitment of supporting Kosovo's enlargement efforts. Kosovo was also of economic interest to the Orbán government.

A change of government in Budapest might have a positive impact on relations with Kosovo, if Hungary reconsiders its position and starts treating both countries – Kosovo and Serbia – on an equal basis. Kosovo could certainly use a true honest broker.

North Macedonia: The ideological partner

The connections to North Macedonia were built on party contacts, with Orbán's objective of supporting the conservative VMRO–DPMNE, in government but also during their time in opposition. Overall, Hungary consistently supported the EU accession of North Macedonia and provided administrative assistance for facilitating the implementation of reforms. Orbán's Fidesz strengthened the bilateral relations with the ideologically aligned conservative VMRO–DPMNE, which was in government from 2006 until 2017. When in 2018 Orbán's government granted political asylum to former Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski of the VMRO–DPMNE, relations with North Macedonia were for some time dampened. Orbán was facilitating Gruevski's escape from the then Republic of Macedonia with the help of the Hungarian embassy in Tirana and quickly secured a residence permit for his political ally in Hungary. Gruevski, who ruled autocratically, ultimately had to resign as Prime Minister under pressure from a broad section of society and the EU in January 2016, and was later charged and convicted in connection on corruption cases. While he was in office, close links were established between Budapest and Skopje and personal relationships were fostered between Orbán and Gruevski. Hungary has supported North Macedonia during the migration crisis in 2015 and acted as a strong advocate for EU membership for the country. Moreover, Hungary and North Macedonia cooperate on economic matters within the framework of the Hungarian-Macedonian Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation (JEC), which was set up in 2015. At its fourth meeting of the JEC

[66] President of the Republic of Kosovo, "Dr. Vjosa Osmani Sadriu, International Visits". https://president-ksgov.net/en/?s=Hungary&lang=en (accessed on May 5, 2026).
[67] Mehdi Sejdiu, "Hungary and Kosovo, a Cautiously Active Relationship", in: *Hungary in/and the Western Balkans, eds.* Hungarian Institute for International Affairs, *Foreign Policy Review* Vol. 17, No. 1, (Budapest 2024) pp. 76-11, here pp. 85-88.

in 2022 an Economic Cooperation Agreement was signed and put a focus on energy, infrastructure and innovation at the fifth meeting.[68] Hungarian Foreign Minister Szijjártó stated in 2017 that the Hungarian-North Macedonian cooperation is of importance for Hungary, due to the migration issue, EU and NATO enlargements and because of economic reasons.[69] That quote demonstrates that Hungary had an interest in maintaining the relationship with North Macedonia's social democratic government, even after Gruevski's departure. Still, Orbán continued financial support for the then oppositional VMRO–DPMNE party. Rumours believe that Orbán funded the VMRO–DPMNE, because he saw the party as a strong political ally and partner in the region.[70] Close contacts to the VMRO-DPMNE during their time in opposition were maintained by both sides. Personal meetings continued between Orbán and the chairman of the VMRO–DPMNE party, Hristijan Mickoski, as well as his deputy, Aleksandar Nikoloski in September 2021.[71] Mickoski attended Orbán's victory celebration in Budapest after the parliamentary elections in April 2022.[72] These frequent visits demonstrated Orbán's close ties to the VMRO–DPMNE leadership.

With their return to government, after VMRO–DPMNE's election win in May 2024, the issue of Gruevski's asylum status no longer seemed to be a sensitive issue between the two countries. However, with the ousting of Viktor Orbán and the election of Magyar as Hungarian Prime Minister, it seems that Gruevski's asylum will be ending.

In 2024 Orbán visited North Macedonia and offered the new Prime Minister, Mickoski, his assistance in resolving the bilateral conflict with Bulgaria. Furthermore, an intergovernmental loan of €500 million was provided as financial support.[73] With a new VMRO–DPMNE government, Hungary hoped to further expand economic relations. While Hungary is an important trading partner, it is not among the country's major investors. Plans were in place to increase Hungarian investment, as several opportunities have been identified in the field of telecommunications, agriculture, and the energy sector.[74] Hungarian investments in media in North Macedonia were interpreted as attempts by Orbán to control some media outlets and to disseminate illiberal political narratives.[75] Moreover, it appears that the Hungarian

[68] Bisera Altiparmakova-Marusic, "Macedonia and Hungary strengthen strategic energy cooperation", *Media Information Agency* (November 15, 2025) https://mia.mk/en/story/macedonia-and-hungary-strenghten-strategic-energy-cooperation (accessed on May 5, 2026); Magyarország Kormánya, "Co-Chair's meeting of the Hungarian-Macedonian Joint commission on Economic Cooperation", (October 15, 2023), https://kormany.hu/hirek/co-chairs-meeting-of-the-hungarian-macedonian-joint-commission-on-economic-cooperation (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[69] Website of the Hungarian Government, "Hungarian-Macedonian cooperation is also crucial from viewpoints of security and the economy", (December 19, 2017) https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/hungarian-macedonian-cooperation-is-also-crucial-from-viewpoints-of-security-and-the-economy (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[70] Tzimas Stavros, "As Zaev exits, Orban's specter lurks", *eKathimerini.com,* January 19, 2022, https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/1175668/as-zaev-exits-orbans-specter-lurks/ (accessed on May 4, 2026).

[71] Cabinet Office Of the Prime Minister / MTI, "Hungary supports North Macedonia's EU membership" (September 21, 2021). https://2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/hungary-supports-north-macedonias-eu-membership/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[72] Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "North Macedonia Opposition Leader Attends Orban's Victory Party" *BalkanInsight,* (April 4, 2022). https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/04/north-macedonia-opposition-leader-attends-orbans-victory-party/bi/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[73] Centre for Western Balkan Studies, "Hungarian-Macedonian friendship and its consequences", Budva (September 30, 2024) https://cfwbs.org/hungarian-macedonian-friendship-and-its-consequences/ (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[74] Viola Cintia, Anna Orosz and Julianna Ármás, "North Macedonia as a growing strategic partner for Hungary" Position paper, *Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, HIIA,* (Budapest, September 27, 2024), p. 2, https://hiia.hu/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/0927_North-Macedonia.pdf (accessed on May 5, 2026).

[75] Dimitar Keranov, "Hungary's Power Play in North Macedonia", *German Marshall Fund* (March 20, 2025), https://www.gmfus.org/news/hungarys-power-play-north-macedonia (accessed on May 5, 2026).

loan to the Macedonian government is intended to help boosting trade with Hungary and attract further investments. North Macedonia's Prime Minister Mickoski visited Budapest at the end of March 2026 and gave a lecture on the strategic Hungarian-Macedonian partnership at the Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC).[76]

Orbán's removal from office is a significant loss of a loyal partner for VMRO–DPMNE. The loyalty between Orbán's Fidesz and the VMRO–DPMNE was based on a similar ideological outlook of both parties, Orbán's ambitions to be accepted as a respected partner in North Macedonia (and the region), VMRO–DPMNE's financial support by Hungary and Hungary's political support for North Macedonia in relation to EU accession. The relationship can be best described as a form of loyalism. The money provided for VMRO–DPMNE was an attempt by Orbán to buy another partner in the region and to influence politics and economy in North Macedonia.

After Orbán's departure from office, it is very likely that the economic cooperation will continue, but no non-transparent loans are going to be provided by Hungary for specific parties. The support for North Macedonia's EU accession will remain a policy priority under the new Hungarian government, but without promoting Orbán's illiberalism and anti-EU narratives.

Hungary's relations with Albania and Montenegro

Orbán fostered the personal relations with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, who both got along well. Montenegro was economically of interest, as well, because of its status as soon to be new EU member state.

Viktor Orbán was a great supporter of his Albanian counterpart Edi Rama, despite their different party backgrounds. Over the past few years, the two have cultivated good personal relationships, and Hungary has provided not only technical support for Albania's EU preparations but also funding.[77] Intensification of relations started from 2021 onwards, when Edi Rama started his third period as Prime Minister. The year 2021 became a particularly active one for Albanian–Hungarian relations, when a number of respective official visits between the countries took place. The Hungarian-Albanian Intergovernmental Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation (JCEC) facilitated the negotiations on strengthening the cooperation between the two countries.[78] In June 2023, another bilateral agreement was signed to strengthen cooperation in water management and Albania's accession process.[79] Both sides consider the relationship positive and actively maintained it.

For Hungary, the investment opportunities in Albania are of major interest, hence close economic cooperation was a priority for the Orbán government. Hungary currently is an important investor in the banking sector (OTP), telecommunications (4iG PLC), and tourism (Wizz Air).[80]

[76] Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC), "Shared Values, Stronger Ties: Hungarian-Macedonian Strategic Partnership - Event with H.E. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski" (Budapest March 30, 2026). https://mcc.hu/en/event-registration/2026-03-30-shared-values-stronger-ties-hungarian-macedonian-strategic-partnership-event-with-h-e-prime-minister-hristijan-mickoski-1 (accessed on May 10, 2026).

[77] Loran Koçollari, Renata Ryoko Drávucz, "Albania-Hungary: where do the stand now?", *Tirana Observatory,* (July 16, 2022). https://tiranaobservatory.com/2022/07/26/albania-hungary-where-do-they-stand-now/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

[78] Magyarország Kormánya, "The third session of the Hungarian–Albanian Intergovernmental Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation took place in Budapest", *Magyarország Kormánya* (November 16, 2021). https://kormany.hu/hirek/the-third-session-of-the-hungarianalbanian-intergovernmental-joint-commission-on-economic-cooperation-took-place-in-budapest (accessed on May 9, 2026).

[79] About Hungary, "Hungary and Albania sign agreements on water management and European integration process", *About Hungary* (June 19, 2023). https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/hungary-and-albania-sign-agreements-on-water-management-and-european-integration-process (accessed on May 2, 2026).

[80] Loren Koçollari; Renata Ryoko Drávucz, "Albania-Hungary: where do the stand now?" *Tirana Observatory* (July 26, 2022). https://tiranaobservatory.com/2022/07/26/albania-hungary-where-do-they-stand-now/ (accessed on May 1, 2026).

Even though close relationships between Orbán and Rama existed, the policy of Edi Rama remained pro-EU. Rama sought Hungarian investment in Albania and maintained good relations with Orbán, but he was not influenced by Orbán's EU-critical policies. Rama kept Orbán out of internal affairs, but was content to work with him. Still, Orbán provided the funds, assistance and investments for Albania. This suggests that Rama benefited more from Orbán than the other way around.

What can be expected is that even with the new Tisza government in Budapest, the existing strong economic cooperation is likely to continue, as Prime Minister Magyar has an interest in the expansion of economic relations in the countries of the Balkans.[81]

Hungary has maintained very good relations with Montenegro since its independence in 2006. However, meetings with Montenegrin politicians were not that frequent. In recent years, Orbán met Duško Marković in February 2017 and in July 2018.[82] In October 2024, Prime Minister Milojko Spajić visited Budapest for talks with Orbán,[83] and in July 2025, the two governments signed an intergovernmental agreement to support the modernisation of Montenegrin infrastructure, including the railway, and to provide administrative assistance with reforms.[84] Economic cooperation is also being intensified, as Hungarian companies have made significant investments in Montenegro in the IT, telecommunications, and financial sectors.[85]

There are no political issues of contention between Hungary and Montenegro, and economic cooperation is proving beneficial for both sides. Under the new Hungarian Prime Minister relations with Montenegro would essentially remain unchanged. Prime Minister Magyar considers the strengthening and expansion of economic relations with the Western Balkan states to be a foreign policy priority. Hungary continues to welcome the possibility of Montenegro joining the EU in the near future.

Conclusion

Hungarian foreign policy under Viktor Orbán proclaimed to adopt interest–based policies to strengthen state sovereignty, it had been critical of the EU, but supported EU enlargement for the Western Balkans and publicly promoted contacts with autocratic countries. The aim was to reject the liberal values of the EU and to replace it with Orbán's concept of an "iliberal state". Orbán framed his leadership role around the idea that he can offer an alternative to the EU, or rather he was ready to take over the EU and change it internally. To achieve this, he needed more like-minded political actors within the EU. Of

[81] Tisztelet és Szabadság Párt [Respect and Freedom Party], "A Működő és Emberséges Magyarország Alapjai" [The foundations of a functional and humane Hungary], (Eger, 2026) https://mukodoorszagot.hu/#program-pontok (accessed on March 31, 2026).
[82] Government of Montenegro, "PMs Marković, Orban: Montenegrin-Hungarian relations are at highest level characterised by alliance in NATO, EU integration cooperation", (July 24, 2018). https://www.gov.me/en/article/189375--pms-markovic-orban-montenegro-hungary-relations-are-at-highest-level-characterised-by-alliance-in-nato-cooperation-in-eu-integra, (accessed on May 4, 2026); Government of Montenegro, "Budapest: Excellent relations, Montenegro's place is within EU, NATO, PMs Marković and Orban say", (February 24, 2017) https://www.gov.me/en/article/169-753--budapest-markovic-and-orb-n-relations-are-excellent-montenegro-place-in-the-eu-and-nato (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[83] About Hungary, "Press statement by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán following his meeting with Milojko Spajić, the Prime Minister of Montenegro", *About Hungary* (October 24, 2024). https://abouthungary.hu/speeches-and-remarks/press-statement-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-following-his-meeting-with-milojko-spaji-the-prime-minister-of-montenegro (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[84] Government of Montenegro, "Spajić and Orbán sign agreements: Hungary to support Montenegro's infrastructure development, railway modernization and administrative reform", (July 1, 2025) https://www.gov.me/en/article/spajic-and-orban-sign-agreements-hungary-to-support-montenegros-infrastructure-development-railway-modernization-and-administrative-reform (accessed on May 4, 2026).
[85] Government of Montenegro, "Gjeloshaj, Szijjarto announce signing of intergovernmental G2G agreement on infrastructure, data centre construction", (June 18, 2025). https://www.gov.me/en/article/gjeloshaj-szijjarto-announce-signing-of-intergovernmental-g2g-agreement-on-infrastructure-data-centre-construction (accessed on May 4, 2026).

course, he was meant to be in the leading position. Although Orbán was politically in a stronger position, the bilateral relationships with some of his Western Balkan partners seemed to be more favourable for them rather than for Orbán. In a certain way Orbán was accepted and welcomed as an important political actor in the region, but on the other hand, he used money to maintain these relationships. Because, the relationships were based on a certain level of personal loyalty and an existing political asymmetry between an EU member state and EU candidate countries, this set-up actually should have benefited Orbán. But still, all these contacts and networks had been substantiated by funding. Although Orbán believed that he took on a leadership role, he paid for his acceptance by financial and political deeds.

The relationship with Albania was well established with Rama, but there was limited political influence by Orbán, because Rama kept a strict pro-EU approach, despite occasional criticism. The Albanian and Hungarian relations developed well in the area of business investments.

The relationship with the Republika Srpska can be described as a clientelist and "state capture" scenario. The Serbian entity of the Bosnian state was dependent on funding coming from Hungary. Despite the clientelist set-up and the lack of transparency in the loan structures of the funding, it remains unclear whether Orbán actually gained anything from it. Dodik had a strong political protector in Orbán, who was even willing to help Dodik avert arrest and to give him political asylum. The similar political outlook and worldview kept the relationship on a good basis. The official relationship to Sarajevo suffered due to Orbán's close connection to Dodik.

The same can be said about North Macedonia's VMRO–DPMNE party, which is ideologically close to Orbán's Fidesz and worked closely with Orbán while in government and was continued even when VMRO–DPMNE had to go into opposition from 2017. Again, funding was provided by Orbán, which went directly to the party. This might have helped to open up the business environment for Hungarian companies and maybe Orbán gained some political influence, but overall, the idea was to get VMRO–DPMNE in power and to keep them there.

The Serbian case is special due to the interwoven nature of the relationships, which can be interpreted as a regional clientelist network, where the VMSZ took a central place. The bilateral cooperation between Hungary and Serbia was built upon the personal loyalties between Orbán and Vučić, their ideological alignment, their joint interests in economic cooperation and political alliances with China, Russia and maybe some other autocratic regimes. The Hungarian minority party, VMSZ, was well placed to become an interlocutor of the various interests. Orbán could transfer funding to the Vojvodina, which ended up with the VMSZ. The VMSZ dominated the local structure of the region and made sure the local media was promoting the Fidesz party among the Hungarians in Serbia. Orbán controlled the VMSZ and the VMSZ controlled the local institutions. Moreover, VMSZ backed the Vučić government in Belgrade and the local government in Vojvodina. A perfect network of loyal actors, fostering cross-border corruption and expanding parts of the Hungarian "state capture" system to the Vojvodina, which was unofficially accepted by Vučić, as he can rely on the VMSZ's political support. Moreover, on the international level Orbán was fighting Vučić's cause in relation to EU enlargement and issues with Kosovo.

Kosovo had to accept that Orbán would take Serbia's side in regard to the normalisation process between Belgrade and Pristi-

na. Although officially, Hungary would establish contacts to all countries on a similar basis and had supported EU enlargement for all the Western Balkan countries, with time Serbia gained a special place for Hungary in the Western Balkans. Kosovo still received administrative assistance from Hungary and would establish economic relationships, but politically there was not much support coming from Orbán. Overall, Kosovo was not an economically important partner, hence the influence of Orbán remained limited.

The same can be said about Montenegro, which established sound political and economic relations, but after Milo Đukanović was gone, there was no equivalent decisive political leader Orbán could or would work with. Therefore, some official meetings took place, Hungary provided administrative support for Montenegro's EU accession, and it built up good economic investment opportunities. Otherwise, these relations can be defined as regular bilateral relations.

Not all the countries of the Western Balkans were closely involved in the Orbán's sphere, but he was a personality, who strived for being accepted as a regional leader and he provided funds to require this status. The regional corruption and clientelist structures were present in the relations with the Republika Srpska and Serbia. The question is whether these networks were underpinned by Russian interests. Other countries were just ideological aligned with Orbán's Fidesz party, such as the VMRO–DPMNE in North Macedonia, and the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). Dodik's The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD).And personal sympathy played a role with Albania's Edi Rama, as well as Dodik and Vučić. Overall, the relationship with Orbán can be categorised as a low intensity of just personal sympathy, the more strategic relationship of ideological alignment and the final stage, which brings everything together and feeds into clientelist networks.

Orbán's drive for acceptance and clientelist approach to establishing and maintaining political relations in the region contributed to weakening of democratic processes in the countries. Orbán's role, policies, narratives and influence reduced the chances of the Western Balkan countries to move forward on the EU path. Instead of supporting the EU enlargement in the region, Orbán delayed that process.

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