

HUNGARY AND BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA: CONTEXTS, DRIVERS, AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Hungary's post-2010 Western Balkans (WB) policy has become more activist, with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) increasingly visible behind Croatia and Serbia. We situate this turn of events in three contexts: (1) a divided Balkans with renewed great-power competition, where the European Union's internal crises and periodic enlargement fatigue created space for China, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, among others, to assert their interests; (2) a divided BiH whose Dayton-era power-sharing and international oversight enable external influence; and (3) a domestic sovereigntist turn in Hungary that favours regional power projection. We map the instruments across security deployments, economic statecraft, and political relations, and argue that BiH has a growing importance in Hungarian diplomacy that fits into the broader Hungarian–WB strategy. Hungary applies a multi-scalar, multi-faceted policy that combines security leadership, ideational projection, economic ties, and political support.

Key words: Western Balkans; Bosnia and Herzegovina; Hungary; security; soft power.

INTRODUCTION

Hungary's Western Balkans policy sharpened in the mid-2010s. Public and elite discourse on the region expanded, and media coverage increasingly focused on actors and events in the Western Balkans. Initially, Croatia and Serbia took the lead, but later Bosnia and Herzegovina appeared more frequently in elite discourses and in diplomatic scheduling. The media reported an increasing number of high-level meetings, and Bosnia and Herzegovina featured more often in the news. A symbolic moment occurred in 2018, when a photograph circulated first in the Hungarian and later in the international press that showed, during an international meeting in the prime minister's office, an ethnic map of Bosnia and Herzegovina hanging on the wall (Karčić 2022).

This paper asks two questions: What contextual factors shape the uptick in Hungarian–Western Balkans engagement in general and in Hungarian–Bosnia and Herzegovina relations in particular? What drivers best explain Hungary's regional and BiH policy instruments and narratives? To that end, we primarily examined narratives in Hungary, supplemented by reports from international organisations and the media, as well as official economic data.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the last decade, few academic publications dealt with the Hungary–BiH relations, which is not surprising given that bilateral ties are rather weak (Đogo et al. 2024). Csaplár-Degovics (2022) provides a detailed analysis of Hungarian ambitions concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina in the aftermath of the annexation. A few papers examine Hungary's activity in the Balkans; e.g. Reményi et al. (2021) argued that great-power rivalry in the region helped Hungary to increase its activity in the region. Grey literature has also discussed Hungary's engagement with the Balkans (e.g., think-tanks like the

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Hungarian Institute of International Affairs), usually addressing only briefly the Bosnian–Hungarian relations, but clearly maintaining a Hungarian perspective (Ármás–Németh 2022; Erokhin 2024; Orosz 2023).

International commentators tend to be more critical, focusing on the controversial aspects of Hungary’s political engagement in the region (Cvijić et al. 2023). Hungarian sources and economic analyses like to examine BiH’s economic potential. Kromják (2021) assesses BiH’s macroeconomic situation focusing on structural problems and historical legacies. Dogo et al. (2024) analyse trade relations using the gravity model, based on which they argue that bilateral economic ties are weaker than they could be. Ármás and Németh (2022) highlight Hungary’s potential mediating role between the EU and the Balkans.

THREE INTERLOCKING CONTEXTS

We’d like to draw attention to three interlocking contextual factors. In our view, these amount to preconditions for the rise in Hungarian activity in the region. First, a politically and geographically fragmented Western Balkans without a clear hegemon offers room for a small-to-medium-sized state (like Hungary) to pursue its goals effectively. Second, Bosnia and Herzegovina is itself fragmented, which—through its internal divisions—facilitates the expansion of influence within the state, including the application of various soft-power tools. Finally, Hungary’s domestic political transformation after 2010 brought to power a supermajority-backed, sovereigntist government that articulates national (or nationally labeled party-, elite-, various group-) interests more overtly. Successive administrations led by FIDESZ party, enjoying strong domestic legitimacy and room for manoeuvre, were able and willing to enact radical changes in foreign policy.

A divided Balkans and renewed competition

The Western Balkans remains a region of small states located at the overlap of spheres of influence, historically situated ‘in-between’ major blocs. This condition of being ‘between empires’ is hardly new: the region has repeatedly served as a theatre of competition and a buffer zone among greater powers. Small-state status and a fragmented political-geographical structure are the outcomes of multiple, intense waves of state formation and border changes. Interstate antagonisms within the region—and the frequent inability to resolve them—together with resource constraints intrinsic to small states, create ideal conditions for external intervention, which is itself hardly foreign to the region (Jano 2008; Reményi et al. 2021).

The European Union would be the ‘natural’ great power in the region, but successive EU crises (sovereign-debt crisis, Brexit, COVID-19, etc.) and periodic enlargement fatigue have diluted Brussels’s leverage from time to time, opening space for other external actors (Chrzová et al. 2019). In the mid-2010s, amid EU hesitation, China increased its presence primarily through economic and financial tools and infrastructure development (Csapó–Reményi 2018; Shopov 2021). Until the war in Ukraine, Russia exerted influence mainly via energy, (security) politics and the media (Bechev 2017). The United States prioritised security and stability—largely through NATO—later adding the balancing of an expanding China and Russia to its aims (Vuksanović 2021). Turkey focused chiefly on soft power and cultural diplomacy. In the absence of strong European leverage and in the presence of these increasingly consequential actors, no clear hegemon emerged in the region, creating wider room for entrepreneurial middle powers (including EU members) to project influence. Hungary belongs among these states, and its Balkans policy has strengthened markedly since the mid-2010s (Reményi et al. 2021).

A divided Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina’s post-Dayton ethno-territorial structures reproduce this political-territorial fragmentation one scale lower, at the level of the state. BiH’s post-Dayton architecture institutionalises two entities and three constituent peoples under a complex, consociational design with international

oversight (the Office of the High Representative's 'Bonn powers'). This institutional fragmentation and internationalised governance both constrain central coherence and invite selective external engagement. Just as a politically and territorially fragmented Balkans is an ideal arena for external interventions, so too does a similarly divided Bosnia and Herzegovina ease external actors' activities inside the country. In Hungary's Bosnia policy, selective steps tied to particular domestic actors exemplify this pattern. Senior Hungarian politicians meet counterparts within Republika Srpska (RS) considerably more frequently, and a larger share of Hungarian financial instruments has been directed toward that entity. Political backing for the RS leadership is likewise made possible by the state's divisions rooted in the Dayton structure.

Hungary's sovereigntist turn

Since 2010, with FIDESZ's rise to power, a supermajority-backed, sovereignty-centred agenda has articulated national interests more vocally. We do not aim to analyse power structures within the FIDESZ governments or individual policy domains; rather, we highlight how this new political orientation has influenced policies concerning the Balkans.

Hungary's foreign-policy reorientation has, at least in narrative terms, cast the EU as an opponent and later an adversary. Alliances have been formed along party-political lines (see Hungarian–Serbian relations). With the so-called Eastern, then Southern Opening, and, ultimately, a connectivity-branded grand strategy, Hungary has sought to loosen exclusively European ties and build alternative partnerships. The strengthening of relations with the Balkans fits this pattern.

Ideological and domestic political orientations have also strongly shaped foreign-policy moves. Examples include anti-migration stances—culminating in the construction of border fences (Pap–Reményi 2017)—and the embrace of illiberalism and Christian-conservative values, which facilitated the development of excellent ties with Serbia and, indirectly, contributed to increased activism in Bosnia. Similarly domestic in origin was the effort to prioritise outward foreign direct investment by Hungarian firms and, more generally, to strengthen external economic relations (Endrődi-Kovács–Goreczky 2020; Ármás–Németh 2022). Southeastern Europe is a natural arena for these aims, where Hungarian economic actors enjoy comparative advantages.

The Hungarian government—and particularly its prime minister—also strives to present itself as an influential actor in international politics. Relations with great-power leaders and activism at the EU level point in this direction, as does activist foreign policy toward the Western Balkans. These domestic frames support niche power projection where relative capabilities are favourable (The Budapest Times 2024).

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF HISTORICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN HUNGARY AND BIH

Bosnia and Herzegovina has long been on the Hungarian strategic horizon, although it has rarely been a top priority of Hungarian geopolitics. In the medieval and early modern periods, the area was largely viewed from Hungary as a territory to be conquered and ruled, with the primary function of serving as a buffer. Crusades launched by Hungarian kings, as well as Bosnia's key geostrategic position in the fight against the Ottomans, embedded Bosnia in mainstream Hungarian geopolitical thinking. The Austro-Hungarian occupation and subsequent annexation created a 'quasi-colonial' situation in which Hungarian economic and political interests were present, even though a broad-based colonial consciousness has not taken root in Hungary (Csaplár-Degovics 2022). Prior to the Sarajevo assassination, Bosnia also entered Hungarian cultural memory through works of art, notably the paintings of Csontváry.

Within the socialist federation, direct Hungary–BiH relations were mediated at the federal level of Yugoslavia, leaving no room for direct cooperation. This was also a period of inward-looking policies for Hungary with limited sovereignty in international relations. After the transition in Hungary and the

violent dissolution of Yugoslavia, Hungarian–Bosnian relations re-emerged. Hungary was among the first to recognise BiH's independence in April 1992 and subsequently contributed to peacekeeping forces. Hungarian engineering corps were a core unit in the reconstruction of the Old Bridge of Mostar—a symbolic event in multiple ways. After decades of low-intensity relations, in the mid-2010s Hungarian politics refreshed its interest in the country, to the extent of labelling it an 'honorary neighbour' in 2024, despite the absence of a shared border. This renewed regional activism has employed multiple means, some of which we briefly outline below.

INSTRUMENTS OF SOFT POWER

We group the instruments of Hungarian interest representation in the Western Balkans—and within it in Bosnia and Herzegovina—into three broad categories. Other typologies are possible, but we consider the following to be the most important domains. As noted earlier, for Hungary the region has traditionally—and in the recent past as well—appeared above all as a security question. At times the region itself posed a security risk (the Yugoslav wars), while at other times a transit/buffer function dominated discussions of security (the Ottoman expansion, the 'migration crisis'). The second domain is economic relations, which can likewise be interpreted in historical perspective. From at least the nineteenth century, Hungary's relative economic development granted economic actors from the Carpathian Basin comparative advantages in the Balkans. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, these developmental differences re-emerged in some bilateral relations. Third, we should mention the political field, where Hungarian involvement in Balkan affairs also has a long pedigree—dating back to the Middle Ages—and which regained momentum with the region's re-fragmentation into small states.

Security deployments and border governance

Hungary is not a military great power, yet within the region—including in Bosnia and Herzegovina—it can be considered a significant security actor. Since the 1990s, security has remained a central element of Hungary's Balkans policy. Initially this was due to the armed conflicts accompanying the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and later the migration crisis generated a new security environment. In both contexts, the Hungarian government undertook substantial tasks.

In peacekeeping, sizeable Hungarian contingents have been serving in both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo as part of international forces, consistent with the region's role in Hungarian security perceptions. In 2025, roughly one-third of EUFOR Althea troops deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina were from Hungary, and in Kosovo's KFOR mission Hungary ranked a distinguished third/fourth by troop numbers. From the early 2020s, Hungary's role has been visible not only in troop contributions but also in mission leadership, which the Hungarian government has framed as a desirable, strategically significant objective. Hungary has leveraged visible command roles and troop contributions to cultivate influence and access. In Kosovo, a Hungarian major general commanded KFOR between October 2021 and October 2022—the mission's first Hungarian commander—supported by sustained Hungarian contributions (About Hungary 2021). In BiH, Hungary led EUFOR Althea in 2024—a high-profile year noted by the Hungarian Ministry of Defence and international/official outlets—with follow-on senior posts (Chief of Staff in 2025; Deputy Commander from 2026) also signalled (About Hungary 2025).

Following the 2015 'migration crisis', the question of irregular migration has occupied a central place in Hungarian politics, extending well beyond narrowly defined security policy. The defence of Hungary's southern border and the associated narratives have been everyday experiences in Hungary over the past decade (Pap–Reményi 2017). Because the migration wave reached Hungary from Southeastern Europe, the region also became an important theatre in the fight against irregular migration. Hungary has supported regional physical border securitisation (e.g., provision of barbed wire) and joint border patrols, aligning with domestic security narratives and cultivating ties with like-minded governments (for example, in North Macedonia and Serbia) (About Hungary 2019; Hungary Today 2021).

These security instruments provide agenda-setting visibility disproportionate to aggregate military power and align with the Hungarian government's internal emphasis on order and sovereignty. At the same time, Hungary's significant role—particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina—has also provoked negative reactions, especially as selectivity and a preference for the Serb entity over the Federation of BiH or the state-level government have become more evident in Hungarian Bosnia policy (Klix 2025).

Economic relations

Hungary's economic presence in the Western Balkans has steadily strengthened over the past decade. Bilateral trade data—based on figures from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office³—show significant growth. In the early 2020s, Hungary was the region's fourth largest EU trading partner (Eurostat 2021). Aggregating the Western Balkan countries together with Croatia, the region would rank as Hungary's tenth most important trading partner, ahead of France. Hungary's external trade moreover shows a substantial surplus. Serbia stands out among partners, but the volume of trade has been growing with all countries in the region. This is also true for Bosnia and Herzegovina, although the base was extremely low. Hungary ranks among notable partners for both imports and exports, but BiH's share in Hungarian exports remains small. In 2024, Hungary was the tenth largest importer to, and the twelfth most important export market for, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Conversely, for Hungary, Bosnia is only the 37th largest export market—an asymmetry indicating that, in purely economic terms, the relationship is more significant for BiH. Foreign direct investment remains comparatively limited, further strengthening the inference that politico-strategic rather than purely commercial-economic motives drive the high-salience engagement.

Hungary has also built institutional channels for economic engagement across the Western Balkans, supporting export promotion and investment. One of the few regional offices of the Hungarian Export Promotion Agency was opened in Belgrade, reflecting the importance of the region in Hungarian trade policy. The agency helps to increase Hungary's growing investment activity in the region. This trend extends to Bosnia and Herzegovina, even if Hungary's FDI stock in BiH remains modest relative to Serbia and Croatia.

Crucially for BiH, Hungary launched a €35 million SME support scheme in Republika Srpska in 2022 (with grants of up to €25,000 for Hungarian-produced equipment), later reported as extended/expanded, and combined this with a state-backed Eximbank loan of around €110 million to the RS at the end of 2022 (N1 2022; Joób 2022). While this instrument signals Hungarian interest representation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it openly focuses on one entity—raising sensitive questions in a post-war state. The programme has a precedent in Vojvodina, where the allocation of funds prominently involved ties to the Hungarian nation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, there is no significant Hungarian minority, so the linkage between economic incentives and ethnic kin policy does not apply. This makes Hungary's Bosnia policy somewhat different from its approaches to other neighbouring states (from Slovenia to Romania), where ethnic Hungarians simultaneously constitute an important goal and instrument of bilateral relations.

³ https://www.ksh.hu/stadat_files/kkr/en/kkr0007.html

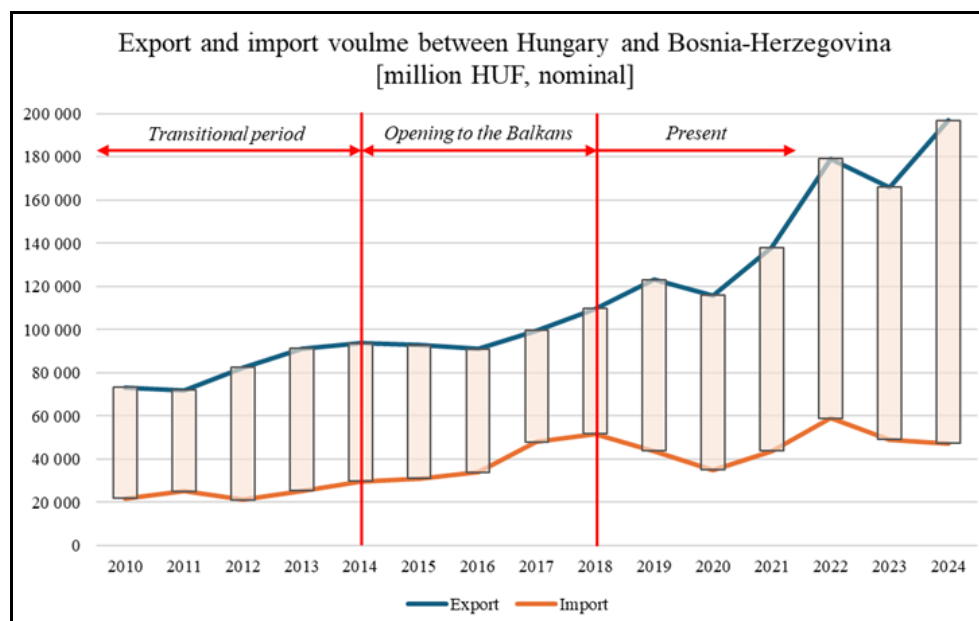


Figure 1: Trade relations of Hungary and Bosnia and Herzegovina compared to the basic changes in Hungarian Balkans policy (edited by the authors).

Political links

Hungary pairs advocacy for EU enlargement with close ties to regional leaders (e.g., in RS and Serbia) and with other like-minded politicians and parties in North Macedonia and Slovenia. The opening act for excellent relations was the settling of historical antagonisms between Hungary and Serbia; following Vučić's rise to power in 2014, two like-minded leaders elevated bilateral ties to unprecedented levels (Drajić 2020).

Bosnia and Herzegovina, both economically and politically, long remained below the radar for Hungarian policy. From the late 2010s, it appeared more frequently in the news, and from the early 2020s the intensity of bilateral relations perceptibly increased: the number of official meetings slowly grew, and Hungarian politicians commented on the country more often. Selectivity has also been observable since the early 2020s. Statements regarding Bosnian Serbs are predominantly positive, whereas references to Bosniak actors are often negative. One notable episode was in December 2021, when rhetorical controversies generated frictions in BiH: remarks about 'two million Muslims' by the Hungarian PM triggered cross-party and religious objection in Bosnia and Herzegovina resulting in the cancellation of the already scheduled visit of the Hungarian PM to Sarajevo (Al Jazeera 2021).

Hungary projects conservatism/Christianity/illiberalism as identity pillars in Western Balkans debates, often opposing sanctions and privileging dialogue with contested actors (e.g., former Macedonian prime minister Gruevski or the RS leadership). The approach plays to dual audiences: sympathetic regional elites and EU counterparts observing Hungary's claims to regional brokerage. Financial and political support for Republika Srpska has stood out among the political links in recent years.

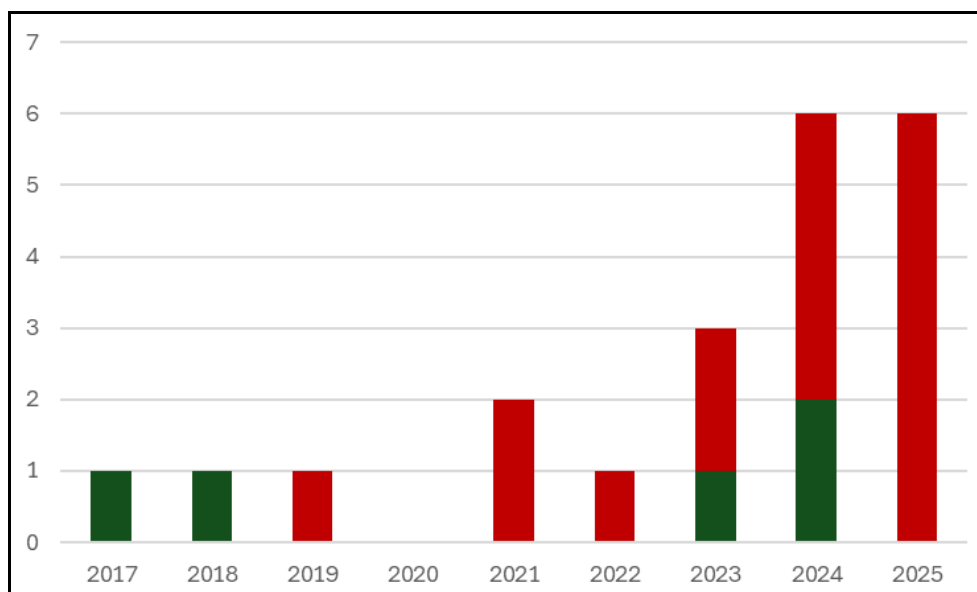


Figure 2: High-level meetings of Hungarian and Bosnia and Herzegovina politicians based on media reports. Green: non-RS politicians; red: RS politicians.

CONCLUSION

Hungary's BiH posture spans supranational roles (EUFOR command; Commissioner portfolios 2019–2024, loud advocacy of enlargement), bilateral high-level visits and meetings (e.g., with RS leadership), and the level of business entities, all scales experiencing increase in recent years.

The most visible strengthening of ties has occurred in the political field, where regular and increasing numbers of meetings serve as good indicators. In addition, trade relations point to growing activity by Hungarian firms. All of this is framed at the supranational level by security policy activism—the most stable articulation of Hungarian interests related to the region.

Hungary's BiH policy coheres with its broader Western Balkans strategy but differs in lacking ethno-national anchors and deep investment logics. Hungary's Carpathian Basin policies are often read through a kin-state/ethnic-minority lens (Transylvania, Vojvodina, etc.). In BiH, the absence of co-ethnic stakes and modest FDI suggest a different logic: status-seeking and preference-shaping through security leadership, selective finance and ideational narratives, rather than territorial or ethnic tropes. In a region without a clear hegemon, Hungary—a small/medium-sized state—deploys security leadership, targeted finance and identity narratives to perform regional power roles.

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