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## **The Hungarian–Serbian borderland in the context of current bilateral relations between Hungary and Serbia**

### **Pogranicze węgiersko-serbskie w kontekście obecnych relacji dwustronnych między Węgrami a Serbią**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

For years, relations between Serbia (or the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia) and Hungary remained tense, primarily due to Budapest's claims to Vojvodina, which was incorporated into the South Slavic state after World War I, and the events of 1941–1945 still evoke negative emotions. Meanwhile, the rapprochement between Serbia and Hungary, under the rule of Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić, has resulted in the building of good neighbourly relations. However, trust-building and investments in the borderland have not led to dynamic economic development, causing a steady outflow of population.

#### **KEYWORDS:**

*Borderland, Serbia, Hungary, Vojvodina, Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić*

#### **STRESZCZENIE:**

Przez lata stosunki pomiędzy Serbią (lub Królestwem SHS/Jugosławią) a Węgrami pozostawały napięte, przede wszystkim ze względu na roszczenia Budapesztu wobec Wojwodiny, włączonej po I wojnie światowej do państwa Słowian Południowych. Negatywne emocje do dziś wzbudzają wydarzenia z lat 1941–1945. Tymczasem zbliżenie Serbii i Węgier pod rządami Viktora Orbána i Aleksandra Vučića przełożyło

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się na budowę relacji dobrosąsiedzkich. Budowa zaufania i inwestycje na pograniczu nie idą w parze z dynamicznym rozwojem gospodarczym, a to prowadzi do stałego odpływu ludności.

#### SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

*pogranicze, Serbia, Węgry, Wojwodina, Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić*

## Introduction

The term “borderland” has been enjoying growing interest among researchers from various social sciences and humanities for years, resulting in diverse definitions, approaches, and interpretations<sup>1</sup>. According to the traditional understanding, the borderland is a transitional zone between frontiers. Krzysztof Czyżewski defined it as a zone of “the intermingling and coexistence” of different ideas, lifestyles, and value systems<sup>2</sup>. This approach values the province positively as an area of cultural and identity pluralism, despite its peripheral character. Considering the truism that borders have often changed over the centuries, borderlands do not necessarily have to be located along national borders. Moreover, in the era of globalisation, migration, and cultural diffusion, the atmosphere of the borderland is present regardless of the proximity of physical borders. Following this line of thought, it is not difficult to see that we live in a world of borderlands, which naturally opens up the field for multifaceted scientific reflection. However, it should be remembered that cultural pluralism in Central and Eastern Europe has for years inspired artists, especially literature enthusiasts, fascinated by the intermingling of different traditions in literary works. In recent years, however, we have seen the metaphor of the borderland being used more and more often in various situations where different axio-normative orders intermingle. The borderland can also be understood negatively, precisely because of its multiculturalism, which triggers ethnic tensions and conflicts. Nebojša Popov once explained that “borderlands are the misfortune of Yugoslavia”<sup>3</sup>.

This text is devoted to the traditionally understood borderland – territories lying on both sides of the Serbian-Hungarian border, established only after

<sup>1</sup> H. Donnan, T.M. Wilson, *Granice tożsamości, narodu, państwa*, Cracow 2007, pp. 16–30.

<sup>2</sup> K. Czyżewski, *Małe centrum świata. Zapiski praktyka idei*, Sejny 2024, p. 169.

<sup>3</sup> D. Warszawski, *Obrona poczty sarajewskiej*, Warsaw 1995, p. 180.

World War I, and thus an area that once constituted a single whole. According to the results of the 2022 censuses, 2.77% of Serbia's population is Hungarian (10.7% in Vojvodina)<sup>4</sup>, while only 4,500 Serbs live in Hungary<sup>5</sup>. Both studies showed a clear decline in the share of minorities in the Serbian and Hungarian populations. Compared to previous censuses, Serbia lost about 70,000 Hungarians, and Hungary lost over 3,000 Serbs (i.e., about 40%!). This demographic disaster is unfolding against the backdrop of closer cooperation between the two countries. As is well known, relations between Budapest and Belgrade have been tense for years, but the cooperation between Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić has given them a new dynamic. Hungary is trying to play the role of a regional leader in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans, primarily by building alliances with populist regimes with authoritarian tendencies, while pursuing the goals of the Russian Federation, and cooperation with Serbia is one of the strongest pillars of this policy.

One of the consequences of the Serbian-Hungarian alliance is the development of cross-border cooperation, which cannot be fully understood without a broader perspective on the bilateral relations between Belgrade and Budapest. The article is based primarily on the constructivist paradigm and the method of explanation (integral explanation). The author used existing data (scientific publications, online materials, social media, and government websites) and conducted fieldwork on the Serbian-Hungarian borderland (2024), as well as a series of visits to Budapest (2024), Belgrade (2022–2025), and Novi Sad (2022–2025), during which she conducted several interviews with experts as well as participatory observations, and took part in cultural and sports events (e.g., a football game between Partisan Belgrade and FK TSC Bačka Topola). The results of the research, conducted from an outsider's perspective, were consulted with political scientists and sociologists from Budapest, Subotica, and Novi Sad, who represent insider perspectives.

The author thereby puts forward the following hypotheses:

- H1: The alliance between V. Orbán and A. Vučić is conducive to building an atmosphere of reconciliation on the Serbian-Hungarian borderland.

<sup>4</sup> Šokantni podaci, <https://www.magjarszo.rs/vesti/na/srpskom/a.10095/Sokantni-podaci> [15.04.2025].

<sup>5</sup> D. Molnár, *Disappearing ethnic Romanians, multiplying degree-holders and masses living alone – just a few things revealed by the 2022 Hungarian census*, <https://24.hu/belfold/2023/11/20/2022-census-nationalities-education-levels-unemployment> [15.04.2025].

- H2: The policies of the Hungarian and Serbian regimes are not conducive to dynamic economic development in the Serbian-Hungarian borderland, resulting in its depopulation.

## 1. Historical background

Since the mid-19th century, relations between Hungary and Serbia have been fraught with tensions, primarily due to mutual claims to Vojvodina and its capital, Novi Sad, as well as rivalry between the Catholic and Orthodox churches. The World War I, triggered by the assassination in Sarajevo, began with an Austro-Hungarian attack on Serbia. After 1918, when the region was incorporated into the Kingdom of SHS and then Yugoslavia, the Hungarians dreamed of regaining it. One of the strategies for achieving this goal was to support the Croatian separatist movement, which had been forming since 1929, known as the Ustasha (Ustaše)<sup>6</sup>.

Hungarian ambitions were partially fulfilled when, in 1941, they succeeded in annexing Bačka. The Hungarian occupation was marked by tragic events, with mutual relations overshadowed by, among other things, brutal Magyarization and the massacre in Hungarian-controlled Novi Sad in January 1942, during which approximately 3,000–4,000 people were murdered, including over 1,200 residents of Novi Sad<sup>7</sup>, and their bodies were thrown into the frozen Danube. The total number of victims of the Hungarian occupation (1941–1945) is estimated at 10,000 people<sup>8</sup>. The tragedy of 1942, known as the cold days (*hladni dani*), the raid (*racija*), or the Novi Sad massacre (*novosadski pokolj*), was followed by reprisals for which the non-Serbian inhabitants of Vojvodina, Hungarians and Germans, paid the price. Researchers studying Central Europe consider these horrific events,

<sup>6</sup> J. Paszkiewicz, *Węgry w działalności chorwackiego ruchu ustaszy (1929–1934)*, "Historia Slavorum Occidentis" 2021, no. 4, pp. 131–145.

<sup>7</sup> M. Bukwałt, *An der schönen blauen Donau... Obraz rzezi novosadzkiej we współczesnej literaturze serbskiej*, "Slavia Meridionalis" 2028, no. 18, pp. 2–5; N. Šinković, D. Komarčević, *U Novom Sadu otpor kontroverznom spomeniku 'nevinim žrtvama'*, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-novi-sad-spomenik-nevinim-zrtvama-1944-1945/32194340.html> [15.04.2025].

<sup>8</sup> L. Klajn, *The Past in Present Times. The Yugoslav Saga*, Lanham 2007, p. 136.

like other crimes committed during World War II by neighbours against neighbours, as a borderland effect<sup>9</sup>.

After World War II, the communist regimes of Hungary and Yugoslavia attempted to make the difficult past taboo, although memories of it remained alive in Novi Sad and throughout Vojvodina.

The issue of the Novi Sad tragedy was revisited in the 1960s (when a political thaw began in Hungary and Yugoslavia), partly thanks to literature. In 1961, the novel *Novosadski pokolj* (*Novi Sad Massacre*) by Erih Koš was published, although excerpts from it had already been published in 1949<sup>10</sup>. Three years later, on the Hungarian side, Tibor Creses published the novel *Hideg napok* (*Cold Days*). In the years that followed, writers on both sides of the border frequently referenced this theme in their works<sup>11</sup>, and scientific publications were also issued<sup>12</sup>.

In 1971, a monument called Porodica (Family) was erected on the Danube opposite the Petrovaradin Fortress, dedicated to that tragedy (also known as the raid monument), designed by the famous Novi Sad sculptor Jovan Soldatović, which became one of the most important symbols of Novi Sad<sup>13</sup>. The promenade leading from it to the city bathing area (Štrand), where most people were shot, is called the Promenade of the Victims of the Raid (Kej žrtava racije).

Shortly after 1945, the situation of the Hungarian minority in Vojvodina (numbering about half a million people) was difficult. On the one hand, the Hungarians fit into the concept of the Yugoslav cultural mosaic, but on the other hand, the Slavic population of Vojvodina, especially the Serbs, remembered the events of World War II, mainly thanks to individual, autobiographical memories passed down to subsequent generations. After Yugoslavia was expelled from the Cominform in 1948, a significant number of Hungarian communists were accused of Stalinist views and sentenced to time in labour

<sup>9</sup> Á. von Klimó, *Remembering Cold Days: The 1942 Massacre of Novi Sad and Hungarian Politics and Society, 1942–1989*, Pittsburgh 2018, pp. 18–21.

<sup>10</sup> *Novosadski pokolj*, <https://www.jevrejskadigitalnabiblioteka.rs/handle/123456789/1018> [15.04.2025].

<sup>11</sup> M. Robert, *Rzeki, których nie ma*, Wołowiec 2023, pp. 275–278.

<sup>12</sup> Á. von Klimó, op. cit., pp. 27–28, 145–146.

<sup>13</sup> *Novi Sad*, <https://www.spomenikdatabase.org/novi-sad> [20.05.2025].

camps<sup>14</sup>. Fearing intervention by the USSR, Belgrade concentrated almost half of its army on the borders with Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.

The hostilities in Vojvodina were fuelled by Radio Kossúth, broadcasting from Budapest, which also emitted programs in Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian. In response to these activities, the Yugoslav authorities established the Hungarian Újvidéki Rádío<sup>15</sup> in Novi Sad in 1949. Thanks to both stations, the Hungarian-Yugoslav border region became an arena for the clash of two antagonistic communist propaganda narratives. In the 1960s, tensions on both sides of the border began to ease as the Hungarians gradually opened their borders. From 1977, the Hungarian red passport allowed travel to Yugoslavia (the blue one, much more difficult to obtain, allowed travel to the West)<sup>16</sup>.

Hungarians, like Albanians, Roma, and Jews, felt undervalued or even stigmatised as a non-Slavic minority in Yugoslavia, a federation of South Slavs that emphasised Slavic identity. This feeling was not altered by the autonomy guaranteed by the new constitution of 1974 to Vojvodina and Kosovo. Despite this, the Hungarians did not show separatist tendencies like the Albanians living in Kosovo. Nevertheless, growing tensions in Kosovo translated into demands for the centralisation of Serbia and the revocation of autonomy for both Kosovo and Vojvodina. Michał Jerzy Zacharias notes that Slobodan Milošević's anti-bureaucratic revolution (aimed at replacing communist leaders at various levels with people loyal to him) began in Vojvodina, because in that province (unlike Kosovo), Serbs had a numerical advantage, and spectacular success was to facilitate the change of power in other parts of Yugoslavia<sup>17</sup>.

During the turbulent months of Yugoslavia's collapse, the new Hungarian democratic authorities returned to old geopolitical narratives, claiming that Hungary was closer to Catholic Slovenians and Croats than to Orthodox Serbs. The words of Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky, who said that Hungary would seek friendly relations with Slovenia and Croatia and correct

<sup>14</sup> B. Jezernik, *Naga Wyspa. Gulag Tiity*, Wołowiec 2013, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> Á. von Klimó, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>16</sup> F.N. Schubert, *Hungarian Borderlands. From the Habsburg Empire to the Axis Alliance, the Warsaw Pact and the European Union*, London–New York 2011, pp. 79–80.

<sup>17</sup> M.J. Zacharias, *Komunizm – federacja – nacjonalizmy. System władzy w Jugosławii 1943–1991. Powstanie, przekształcenia, rozkład*, Warsaw 2004, p. 451.

relations with Serbia<sup>18</sup>, are symptomatic here. This policy was confirmed by the transfer of part of Hungary's weapons stockpile to Croatia, which was negatively interpreted by Belgrade.

The significant restriction of the autonomy of Vojvodina and Kosovo by Slobodan Milošević in 1989 resulted in the mass departure of the Hungarian minority to their homeland (and possibly further west) – men feared conscription into the army and being sent to the front, and besides, the realities of life in a country under sanctions were not encouraging, to say the least. On the other hand, Serbs fleeing Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo were pouring into Vojvodina. The ethnic composition began to change to the detriment of the Hungarians, and this was only the beginning of their demographic catastrophe.

On 12 March 1999, Hungary became a member of NATO, and shortly thereafter, Operation Allied Force commenced, a campaign that Vučić now frequently references to perpetuate anti-Western narratives. It is worth noting that Viktor Orbán was Prime Minister of Hungary at the time (1998–2002), and his pro-Western policy was in opposition to that of Slobodan Milošević's Yugoslavia, where Aleksandar Vučić was Minister of Information from 1998 to 2000. Despite concerns about the fate of their compatriots in Vojvodina, most Hungarians initially supported the intervention, but the attitude shifted when the government made the Taszár military base available to its NATO allies<sup>19</sup>.

In 2022, the Serbian president, most likely aware of the fact that older generations remember Orbán's involvement on the side of NATO, created a narrative about the Hungarian prime minister's alleged saving of Yugoslavia. He claimed that Orbán had confessed to him that Bill Clinton and Tony Blair had insisted that Hungarian troops attack Serbia from the north, but that he had managed to dissuade the Anglo-Saxon leaders from this idea with the support of Gerhard Schröder<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> I. Halász, *The Hungarian Republic and the Western Balkans: A Short Comparison of Perspectives and Opportunities for Hungarian and Slovak Policies*, "International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs" 2008, vol. 17, no. 3, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> J.M. Arnold, *Responsibilities of Alliance: Czech, Hungarian, and Polish Contributions During and After NATO's Kosovo Intervention*, [in:] D.S. Hamilton, K. Spohr (eds.), *Open Door: NATO and Euro-Atlantic Security After the Cold War*, Washington 2019, pp. 572–573.

<sup>20</sup> A. Nastevski, *Vučić otkrio šta mu je Orban rekao: Mađarska trebalo da napadne Srbiju 1999. godine*, <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-otkrio-sta-mu-je-orban-rekao-madjar-ska-trebalo-da-napadne-srbiju-1999-godine/> [4.10.2025].

## 1. Cooperation between Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić

Serbian-Hungarian relations have gained new momentum under the rule of autocratic leaders: Viktor Orbán (since 2010) and Aleksandar Vučić (since 2014)<sup>21</sup>. Both politicians share a similar vision of domestic policy (nationalist-populist ideology, consistent violation of democratic procedures, control of the media market) and foreign policy (close relations with Russia and China). Budapest regularly underlines that it is the greatest advocate of Serbia's membership in the European Union<sup>22</sup>. Although this narrative may seem humorous to many, given the reputation of Orbán's regime in Brussels, such declarations are of significant importance to Serbia – Vučić can use them as proof of the success of his multi-vector policy.

It is worth noting that Hungary's policy of friendship with Serbia is part of Budapest's broader strategy of supporting political forces in the Western Balkans that are ideologically close to Fidesz. In this context, the rapprochement with North Macedonia, which has been ruled since 2024 by the VMRO-DPMNE, and the constant and growing involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as evidenced by numerous declarations from Hungarian politicians, have manifested in Hungary's potential alignment with the Republika Srpska in the event of a possible conflict. For several months, the Bosnian media have been speculating about the possibility of asylum in Budapest for RS President Milorad Dodik, citing the fact that in 2018, the former Prime Minister of Macedonia (the official name of the country at the time), Nikola Gruevski, enjoyed this privilege.

Viktor Orbán's involvement in supporting populist political groups should be seen as a significantly modified vision of Hungary's foreign policy towards

<sup>21</sup> Aleksandar Vučić served as Deputy Prime Minister in Ivica Dačić's coalition cabinet from 2012 to 2014. In 2014, he became Prime Minister, which allowed him to consolidate his autocratic system of government and strengthen relations with Hungary.

<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, in 2011, during Viktor Orbán's rule but before Aleksandar Vučić came to power, the Serbian parliament passed a law on the restitution of property confiscated by the communists after World War II, from which representatives of the Hungarian minority who served in the Hungarian army during World War II were to be excluded. The law was met with a tough response from Budapest, including blackmail about blocking Belgrade's accession to the EU. See *Węgry grożą wycofaniem poparcia dla członkostwa Serbii w UE*, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/552822,wegry-groza-wycofaniem-poparcia-dla-czlonkostwa-serbii-w-ue.html> [15.06.2025].

the region. Since 1991, democratic Hungary has returned to the geopolitical narratives of the Habsburg monarchy and the interwar period, which emphasised the need for an active policy in the region, especially towards territories that were once part of Austria-Hungary. Orbán's idea of cooperation with Balkan (and Central European) populists is intended to be a response to the collective trauma of Hungarians after the Treaty of Trianon. It has become the fulfilment of the neo-imperial, silent dreams of a significant part of society about a return to the days of glory.

Aleksandar Vučić similarly exploited collective emotions, imitating Tito's superpower foreign policy (a policy of multivectorism as a strategy for balancing between different powers) and applying a soft version of Greater Serbian policy towards the countries of the former Yugoslavia.

The importance of friendship with Viktor Orbán is also significant for Vučić, given that Hungary recognises Kosovo (which happened even before Orbán came to power)<sup>23</sup>. Of course, today, Budapest is primarily Belgrade's voice on the international stage<sup>24</sup>, but during the ever-increasing tensions, the Kosovo authorities also ask Hungary to mediate in resolving them<sup>25</sup>. While the EU is usually actively involved in resolving disputes between Serbia and Kosovo, the Hungarian flank is a secondary alternative.

## **2. Hungary's involvement in Serbia**

In November 2024, the media reported that one of Hungary's richest men, Viktor Orbán's son-in-law, István Tiborcz, had purchased 11 office buildings in Belgrade, built by the Hungarian real estate company Indotek<sup>26</sup>. This is only a small piece of Hungarian investments, which are usually made under non-transparent circumstances. Contracts are awarded to companies

<sup>23</sup> I. Halász, op. cit., pp. 36–37.

<sup>24</sup> *Budapest between Belgrade and Pristina – How realistic is it that Hungary might withdraw its recognition of Kosovo?*, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/analysis/budapest-between-belgrade-and-pristina-how-realistic-it-hungary-might-withdraw-its> [1.07.2025].

<sup>25</sup> See M.T. Öztürk, *Hungarian premier urges Serbia to release Kosovo police officers*, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/hungarian-premier-urges-serbia-to-release-kosovo-police-officers/2927113> [1.07.2025].

<sup>26</sup> S. Rakic, *Viktor Orbán's son-in-law buys 11 office buildings in Belgrade*, <https://www.serbianmonitor.com/en/viktor-orbans-son-in-law-buys-11-office-buildings-in-belgrade/> [1.07.2025].

linked to Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić, and oligarchs closely associated with them<sup>27</sup>.

One of the consequences of Hungarian-Serbian friendship is the expansion of Hungarian capital into poorer and less developed Serbia. This fact, however, bears the hallmarks of neo-colonial practices – richer Hungary is actively operating in the poor Serbian market, holding political connections and a dominant position over local companies.

Closer cooperation goes hand in hand with infrastructure projects. One of these is the modernisation of the Budapest-Belgrade railway line, undertaken by China as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, with which both Hungary and Serbia maintain close relations. According to Beijing, the project is part of a broader initiative to build a high-speed railway from Central Europe to Piraeus. A letter of intent on this modern connection from Budapest to Belgrade was signed in 2015, optimistically assuming that its implementation would take two years<sup>28</sup>. The work has not been completed yet, and the currently announced opening date is 2026. From the outset, the project has been the subject of numerous controversies on both the Serbian and Hungarian sides for reasons such as a lack of transparency and respect for the natural environment and cultural heritage. The disaster at the railway station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024, which sparked a wave of public protests in Serbia, became a symbol of the dark side of this investment.

Another flagship project is the construction of a new oil pipeline. It should be noted that one of the consequences of the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine was the Ukrainian side stopping the transit of Russian gas to Hungary. A. Vučić subsequently lent a helping hand to Budapest by ensuring the supply of Russian gas from Serbian territory. In turn, Russian oil flows in the opposite direction, from Hungary to Serbia. The construction of a new pipeline connecting the old Druzhba pipeline with Novi Sad is intended to improve the flow of energy resources and most likely will be financed by the Kremlin<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> A. Curic, B. Zöldi, *Illumination of Serbia, Hungarian Style*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/06/26/illumination-of-serbia-hungarian-style/> [5.07.2025].

<sup>28</sup> *Izgradnja pruge Beograd – Budimpešta počinje krajem godine*, <https://n1info.rs/biznis/a27446-Potpisan-plan-za-prugu-Beograd-Budimpesta/> [5.07.2025].

<sup>29</sup> *Hungary could meet Serbia's oil needs with new pipeline from 2028, minister says*, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/hungary-could-meet-serbias-oil-needs-with-new->

On 1 April 2025, Hungary and Serbia signed a military cooperation agreement, concretising the 2023 contract on defence collaboration. Without further analysis of this issue, let us just note another area of closer cooperation based on anti-Western, pro-Russian, and pro-Chinese elements.

### **3. Hungary's involvement in Vojvodina**

The overwhelming majority of the Hungarian projects mentioned above are being implemented in Vojvodina. It should be remembered that Viktor Orbán's key policy objective remains offering support for the Hungarian minority in neighbouring states. Such actions, which appeal to emotional factors (helping compatriots living abroad), are based on pragmatic reasons, as the minority representatives subsidised by Budapest remain loyal to the regime, which, combined with simplified citizenship acquisition procedures, increases Fidesz's electorate<sup>30</sup>.

The colonisation of the hearts and minds of the Vojvodina Magyars happens on many levels, and government funds are primarily channelled through the Bethlen Gábor Foundation.

The Hungarian government maintains and thus controls local media (including TV Pannon, Pannon Radio, Szabadkai Magyar Rádió, Panon-RTV, Magyar Szo, Het Nap, and Express TV), which, in addition to promoting Viktor Orbán's politics, spread disinformation, for example, about immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa<sup>31</sup>. Funds also flow into the Hungarian church operating on the Serbian side, in exchange for which priests urge the faithful to vote for Fidesz<sup>32</sup>. Cultural, educational, and pub-

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pipeline-2028-minister-says-2025-04-02/ [5.07.2025]; E. Kielak, *Węgry przechytrzyły UE? Oto plan Viktora Orbana dot. rosyjskiej ropy*. „Seria błędów Brukseli”, <https://next.gazeta.pl/next/7,151003,32119582,wegry-przechytrzyly-ue-oto-plan-viktora-orbana-na-odejscie.html> [22.07.2025]; *Region: Serbia approves oil pipeline to Hungary amid energy diversification efforts*, <https://serbia-energy.eu/region-serbia-approves-oil-pipeline-to-hungary-amid-energy-diversification-efforts/> [22.07.2025].

<sup>30</sup> T. Orbán, *Citizenship and Voting Rights in the Hungarian Diaspora*, [https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture\\_society/citizenship-and-voting-rights-in-the-hungarian-diaspora/](https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/culture_society/citizenship-and-voting-rights-in-the-hungarian-diaspora/) [22.07.2025].

<sup>31</sup> S. Marković, *Orban „kupuje” uticaj u Srbiji preko vojvodanskih medija*, <https://www.cins.rs/orban-kupuje-uticaj-u-srbiji-preko-vojvodanskih-medija/> [22.07.2025].

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

lishing activities are subsidised, scholarships are offered to young people, and initiatives promoting the Hungarian language and heritage can count on support<sup>33</sup>.

The Hungarian government and the Hungarian Football Federation support the TSC Bačka Topola football club, which plays in the Serbian Super League, as part of Viktor Orbán's broader sports policy. Without going into an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon, it is worth noting that sport (primarily soccer, but not exclusively) plays an important role in the Hungarian prime minister's domestic and foreign policy. One of its key aspects is the support of football clubs and academies, as well as the construction and modernisation of stadiums and training grounds in cities with Hungarian diaspora<sup>34</sup>.

Subotica is home to the headquarters of the Prosperitati Foundation (its branches are located in eight other cities in Vojvodina: Sombor, Bačka Topola, Kanjiža, Senta, Bečej, and Zrenjanin), which aims to support Hungarian farmers and small entrepreneurs. Since 2016, regular competitions have been held to co-finance small projects aimed at modernising and mechanising rural areas, stimulating family businesses, and developing tourism and agritourism<sup>35</sup>. Such subsidies are important because Hungarian farmers in Vojvodina cannot count on EU subsidies. On the other hand, the development of tourism on the Serbian side of the border (primarily Palić, Fruška Gora, wine tourism) helps to even out the existing disparities between the tourist infrastructure in the provinces of Hungary and Serbia<sup>36</sup>.

The implementation of all the above-mentioned initiatives is facilitated by good Hungarian-Serbian relations. The most important Hungarian minority group, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (Savez Vojvođanskih Mađara, SVM), a sister party of Fidesz, is a coalition partner of Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party. The Serbian president has repeatedly called the SVM a bridge of friendship between Serbia and Hungary. It is worth noting

<sup>33</sup> *Our objectives*, <https://bethlengabor.eu/en/our-foundation/our-objectives/> [22.07.2025].

<sup>34</sup> See B. Garamvölgyi, T. Dóczi, *Sport as a tool for public diplomacy in Hungary*, "Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and research" 2021, no. 90, pp. 39–49.

<sup>35</sup> I. Gabrić Molnar, K. Teréz, *Support to the economic development of Vojvodina from Hungary*, "Anali Ekonomskog Fakulteta u Subotici" 2019, vol. 55, no. 41, pp. 3–15; N. Šinković, *Orbanove snage u Vojvodini jačaju pozicije*, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/orbanove-snage-u-vojvodini-jacaju-pozicije/30758801.html> [22.07.2025].

<sup>36</sup> D. Demirović, K. Košić, S. Stjepanović, *Competitiveness in rural tourism between Serbia and Hungary*, "R\_Economy" 2018, vol. 2, no. 4, pp. 59–66.

that many Hungarians in Vojvodina hold dual citizenship and are eligible to vote in elections in both states.

#### **4. Cross-border cooperation**

In 2023, a modernised railway line connecting Szeged with Subotica (part of the Budapest-Belgrade route currently under construction) was put into service, significantly improving transport links on both sides of the border. Hungary has been an attractive destination for Serbian tourists for years, mainly due to its geographical proximity and higher level of development. Other reasons include the desire to explore the traces and remnants of Serbian culture in Hungary (Szentendre, Szeged, or Serbian Orthodox churches) or to visit relatives, given the constant outflow of the Hungarian minority from Vojvodina.

The Consulate General of Hungary in Subotica receives several thousand applications for Hungarian citizenship each year. According to interviews conducted by the author, many of these people do not feel any Hungarian identity (e.g., one of their grandparents was of Hungarian origin) but consider obtaining a second citizenship as an opportunity to become citizens of the European Union, which is particularly important in the context of Serbia distancing itself from the West.

Serbs are filling the demographic gap in Szeged and throughout Hungary. The economic crisis and Viktor Orbán's authoritarian system of government are encouraging young, enterprising people to emigrate to the capital or the West. Hungarian universities offer a scholarship system for the diaspora, and for many, the University of Szeged is an attractive option due to its location. Serbian is often heard on the streets of this city, and local restaurants frequently offer menus in this language as well. As mentioned, efforts are being made to promote tourism in the other direction as well.

EU funds are being used to finance numerous cross-border projects aimed at residents on both sides of the Serbian-Hungarian border in areas including agriculture, agritourism, sports and recreation, health tourism, ecology, education, and combating the effects of global warming<sup>37</sup>. These funds are used to build flood protection infrastructure and bicycle paths,

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<sup>37</sup> *Projects*, <https://hungary-serbia.eu/projects> [25.07.2025].

organise camps and sports competitions, cultural events, tree planting initiatives, etc. In 2023, the Council for Strategic Cooperation (Strateški savet saradnje) was established in Subotica, and its subsequent meetings became an opportunity to sign further agreements. In 2024, Hungary and Serbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Green Lanes project between the EU and the Western Balkan countries, aimed at improving the flow of goods across borders<sup>38</sup>.

## 5. Controversies

Although the Serbian-Hungarian border region benefits from the friendship between Aleksandar Vučić and Viktor Orbán, the situation is not without controversy. It is argued that subsidies from Budapest are not awarded based on fair competition but are given to members of the SVM<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Hungarian investments are sometimes tainted by corruption, with tenders strangely won by businessmen linked to V. Orbán. This raises the question of whether the region would not benefit more from transparent cooperation based on democratic principles. Furthermore, the atmosphere of cooperation and friendship promoted in official media does not always correlate with reality. During her stay in Subotica, the author encountered several negative comments from Serbs about their Hungarian neighbours. The accusations mainly concerned poor knowledge of the Serbian language (especially outside cities) and, as a result, alienation. The interlocutors emphasised that of all the minorities living in Vojvodina, Hungarians are the least proficient in Serbian.

It is difficult not to notice that cooperation between Serbia and Hungary is primarily an expression of the will of dictators, that it is top-down in nature and, therefore, cannot be considered real reconciliation.

Hungarian attempts to commemorate Miklós Horthy, whom Serbs consider responsible for crimes committed in Vojvodina during World War II,

<sup>38</sup> *Hungary and Serbia sign a Memorandum of Understanding on Green Lanes Initiative*, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2024/10/08/hungary-and-serbia-sign-a-memorandum-of-understanding-on-green-lanes-initiative/> [22.07.2025].

<sup>39</sup> N. Bogdanović, N. Jakovljević, *Savez vojvodanskih Mađara, bliski Orbanu, u savezu sa naprednjacima*, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/savez-vojvodjanskih-madjara-na-prednjaci-orban/32742098.html> [25.07.2025].

have been met with negative reactions in Novi Sad<sup>40</sup>. Even more controversy was caused by the SVM's initiative to erect a monument in Novi Sad dedicated to the "innocent victims" of 1944 and 1945, because, according to the Serbs, many of these victims had committed crimes during the Hungarian occupation, most notably during the cold days<sup>41</sup>. Although the project was ultimately not implemented, it did not endear the Magyars to the Serbs, especially since it was planned to be located near the Promenade of the Victims of the Raid.

Officially, friendly Hungarian-Serbian relations are not symmetrical. Budapest has both a political advantage (membership in Euro-Atlantic structures) and an economic advantage. The direct result of this is the constant outflow of Vojvodina Hungarians to their mother country. As previously emphasised, the demographic catastrophe affects both sides of the poor borderland, whose inhabitants emigrate to the north (Szeged, Budapest) or to the west in search of a better future. The results of the 2022 census in Subotica are symptomatic, as it turned out that for the first time in history, the city had fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, most of whom were Serbs, rather than Hungarians as was previously the case<sup>42</sup>. The asymmetrical nature of the relationship is also evidenced by the fact that the cultural organisations and media outlets of Serbs living in Hungary are financed by Budapest<sup>43</sup>.

Hungarians arriving in their homeland are treated as foreigners. Valér Veres' research has shown that the Hungarian nation is not a monolith; the diasporas from Serbia, Ukraine, Romania, and Slovakia have their own

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<sup>40</sup> N. Šinković, *Zvanični Beograd čuti na rehabilitovanje mađarskih zločinaca*, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/reakcije-na-otkrivanje-biste-miklosu-hortiju-u-parlamentu-mad-jarske/32024389.html> [22.07.2025].

<sup>41</sup> N. Mitrović, *Drugi svetski rat, zločini i Novi Sad: Spomenik nevinim žrtvama – „relativizacija zločina” ili „civilizacijsko dostignuće”*, <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-60473183> [25.07.2025].

<sup>42</sup> *Prvi put u istoriji Subotice Srbi većinsko stanovništvo: Popis otkrio i da u ovom gradu živi skoro 6.000 „vanzemaljaca, vilenjaka, hobita i džedaja”*, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/prvi-put-u-istoriji-subotice-srbi-vecinsko-stanovnistvo-popis-otkrio-i-da-u-ovom/gpg1ody> [25.07.2025]; *Rezultati Popisa 2022: Gradsko jezgro Subotice po prvi put palo ispod 100.000 stanovnika*, <https://www.maglocistac.rs/subotica/rezultati-popisa-2022-gradsko-jezgro-subotice-po-prvi-put-palo-ispod-100-000-stanovnika> [25.07.2025].

<sup>43</sup> *Ethnic Serbs in Hungary*, <https://emberijogok.kormany.hu/ethnic-serbs-in-hungary> [5.10.2025].

identities, and they are closer to each other than to Hungarians from Hungary<sup>44</sup>. The divisions are exacerbated by the fact that the Magyars from Vojvodina are labelled as voters for V. Orbán, while both Szeged and Budapest are ruled by the opposition.

## Conclusions

Bilateral relations between Orbán's Hungary and Vučić's Serbia are not only outstanding but are constantly improving. The regimes cooperate on many levels, one of which is the intensification of contacts on the Serbian-Hungarian border. The non-transparent nature of investments and subsidies, combined with the autocratic policies of Belgrade and Budapest oriented towards the interests of the ruling elites rather than the welfare of citizens, means that the region remains poor and backward. The direct consequences of this are depopulation and a declining number of Hungarians in Vojvodina.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that Orbán and Vučić have managed to bring together nations that have been hostile to each other for years. Difficult experiences from the past are not used to reproduce negative stereotypes and prejudices. Even if unfavourable opinions about neighbours are expressed in private conversations, they are far from the ethnic distances manifested in other regions of the Balkans. This shows that converging political interests can contribute to reconciliation and build an atmosphere of trust.

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<sup>44</sup> V. Veres, *National Attitudes of Ethnic Hungarians from Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine: A Comparative Perspective*, "Studia UBB Sociologia" 2013, no. 1, pp. 108–109.

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