

A DISPUTE WITH HISTORY IN THE BACKGROUND: HUNGARY-UKRAINE RELATIONS AFTER 1991

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

■ **Historical roots of the territorial dispute**

The region of Transcarpathia serves as the historical focal point of Hungarian-Ukrainian tensions. Originally part of the Kingdom of Hungary (Crown of St. Stephen) until the Treaty of Trianon (1920), it underwent a forced Magyarisation process in the late 19th century, resulting in a significant increase in the Hungarian population share (from over 105,000 in 1880 to more than 184,000 in 1910). Following World War I, the region was incorporated into Czechoslovakia, despite Hungarian attempts to retain the territory through autonomy proposals like *Ruszka-Krajna*. The brief Hungarian annexation in 1939 and the subsequent Soviet annexation in 1945 led to demographic shifts that marginalised the Hungarian population, setting the stage for modern grievances regarding minority rights.

■ **Post-Soviet autonomy attempts and early cooperation**

In the final phase of the USSR (1991), 72% of Transcarpathian residents voted in a referendum in favour of autonomous status – a move supported by both local Hungarians and Rusyns but ultimately rejected by Kyiv's central authorities. Despite this setback, early bilateral relations were relatively stable, with Hungary supporting Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations until 2014. However, the demographic decline of the Hungarian minority continued, dropping from over 150,000 in 2001 to under 131,000 by 2017, largely due to emigration to the EU.

■ **Escalation over minority rights (2017–2019)**

Relations deteriorated significantly following Kyiv's legislative moves to strengthen the state language, specifically the 2017 Education Law and the 2019 Language

Law. Budapest viewed these laws as discriminatory against the Transcarpathian Hungarian minority, fearing the dismantling of a well-functioning Hungarian school system. In retaliation, Hungary began systematically blocking Ukraine's integration into NATO and EU structures, demanding the restoration of minority rights as a precondition for any progress.

- **The dual citizenship conflict**

A major point of friction is Hungary's 2015 national policy strategy, which facilitated the granting of Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Magyars abroad, including in Transcarpathia. Ukraine, which does not legally recognise dual citizenship, views this as a threat to its sovereignty, drawing comparisons to Russian passportisation tactics in the Donbas. This issue led to diplomatic expulsions and reciprocal entry bans, severely straining trust between Kyiv and Budapest.

- **Hungary's strategic pivot and “pseudo-pacifism”**

Following the 2022 Russian invasion, Viktor Orbán's government adopted a stance of distinct neutrality, refusing to provide military aid and blocking weapons transit while calling for an “immediate peace” that would effectively freeze the conflict on Russian terms. This policy was driven by Hungary's heavy reliance on Russian energy (importing 80% of its gas from Russia), and the Paks II nuclear plant project with Rosatom. Budapest maintained high-level diplomatic channels with Moscow, positioning itself as an outlier within the EU and NATO.

- **Instrumentalisation of the veto in EU politics**

Throughout 2023–2025, Hungary leveraged its veto power within the EU as a bargaining chip to unlock its own frozen EU funds while obstructing aid to Ukraine. Budapest blocked sanctions packages, delayed EU accession talks for Ukraine, and opposed joint EU borrowing for financial aid, arguing that sanctions harmed the European economy more than Russia. This obstructionism culminated in the December 2025 crisis over a 90 billion

EUR loan to Ukraine, during which Hungary refused participation in joint liability mechanisms.

- **Deepening diplomatic isolation and hostile rhetoric**

By late 2025, relations reached a nadir, with Orbán labelling EU summits as “war councils” and questioning who the true aggressor in the conflict was. While forcing tactical concessions from the EU, this stance isolated Hungary diplomatically, alienating regional partners like Poland within the Visegrád Group. Concurrently, Hungarian state media propagated narratives aligning with Russian propaganda, portraying Ukraine as a “failed state” or a puppet of the West.

- **Future scenarios linked to political shifts**

The future trajectory of the dispute is now heavily dependent on external and internal political changes rather than bilateral diplomacy. Orbán is betting on a shift in US policy under Donald Trump to validate his scepticism toward Ukraine, predicting a partition of the country. Internally, the rise of the opposition Tisza Party (leading Fidesz by 4% in December 2025 polls) suggests a potential future pivot back to EU-aligned policies, while corruption scandals in Kyiv and potential elections in Ukraine introduce further variables to the equation.

INTRODUCTION

On 22 March 2022, Iryna Vereshchuk – then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Reintegration of the Temporarily Occupied Territories of Ukraine in the government of Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal – delivered a poignant statement regarding the Hungarian government’s stance toward the ongoing war between the Ukrainian state and the Russian Federation: “[The Hungarians] do not support sanctions. They not only fail to provide weapons but also refuse to allow the transit of arms supplies from other states through their territory. In effect, they say ‘no’ to everything. A little more, and the rhetoric of official Budapest will be openly pro-Russian. What does this mean? Do they want cheap gas? Or, perhaps, do they want our Transcarpathia?”¹.

These questions underscore the magnitude of mutual misunderstanding between the two states amidst the total collapse of the established international order in Central and Eastern Europe following 24 February 2022. However, the deterioration of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations is not solely a consequence of recent events associated with Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and Budapest’s necessity to define its position regarding the conflict and its aftermath. Tensions between Hungary and Ukraine – beyond obvious external factors – are also a by-product of efforts to implement various strategic assumptions and plans adopted by the leaderships of both states following the collapse of the USSR and its satellite system of so-called “people’s democracies”. These strategies, spanning both foreign and domestic policy dimensions, inherently

¹ Верещук сумнівається, що хоче Орбан за любов до РФ – дешевий газ чи Закарпаття, Європейська правда. Міжнародна безпека та євроінтеграція України, 22 March 2022, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2022/03/22/7136417/> [10.12.2025].

presupposed the occurrence of mutual conflicts and animosities upon their implementation.

The primary arena of dispute appears to be the Ukrainian region of Transcarpathia (Zakarpattia), which is home to a relatively large Hungarian minority, although mutual contradictions have extended to other spheres as well. From the Hungarian perspective, particularly Viktor Orbán's leadership, these tensions stem from efforts to enhance the state's role in both regional and European dimensions, as well as a policy aimed at exerting influence over territories that once constituted part of the Crown of St. Stephen prior to the Treaty of Trianon (1920). Conversely, Kyiv has sought internal consolidation around the concept of strengthening the Ukrainian character of the state, alongside pro-EU and pro-NATO endeavours, which have arguably been effectively obstructed by Budapest to date.

Therefore, to comprehend the complexity of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations, particularly post-2014, it appears pertinent to analyse several key issues: the status of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, taking into account its historical context; Kyiv's posture toward the Hungarian minority in the Transcarpathian Oblast (including as a component of its broader activities regarding national minorities); the historical policy of Viktor Orbán's government (post-2010); Hungarian-Ukrainian cooperation prior to 2014; Hungarian-Russian cooperation over the last decade; and, finally, the state of Hungarian-Ukrainian relations after 24 February 2022.

When examining the mutual relations of both states, it is evident that their current status is influenced by both the legacy of the past (primarily as an element of domestic mobilisation) and by challenges emanating from current developments on the Russo-Ukrainian front. The events unfolding in this part of Europe should also be situated within the context of a broader phenomenon: the struggle to undermine the prevailing global role of the United States and to establish a new global security architecture

accompanied by fundamental economic transformation. The People's Republic of China, led by General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping, plays a pivotal role in this dynamic, consolidating a group of states dissatisfied with the status quo, with the Russian Federation at the forefront. Likewise, the Republic of India, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, should also be taken into account, as it is increasingly articulating its trans-regional aspirations.

Contemporary Hungarian-Ukrainian relations are, therefore, a component of a larger whole, ultimately constituting a struggle for global hegemony. Hungary finds itself in a decidedly more advantageous position in this context, unembroiled in armed conflict and capable of pursuing a policy of equilibrium between the interested parties. Ukraine, finding itself in a relationship of clientelist dependence on its political-military sponsors, is in a significantly more precarious position. Consequently, a defining characteristic of the mutual relations between the two states is a profound – and difficult to mitigate – structural imbalance.

THE BEGINNING: THE DISPUTE OVER PRIMACY

Transcarpathia (ukr. Закарпaттiя, hung. Kárpátalja) is currently an administrative region (*oblast*) within the borders of Ukraine, situated on the southwestern slopes of the Eastern Bieszczady, Gorgany, and Chornohora ranges of the Carpathian Mountains. It was first established as a distinct administrative unit under the name *Ruszka-Krajna* by the Hungarian government in late 1918. From 1920 onward, under the name Subcarpathian Rus' (Czech: *Podkarpatská Rus*), it became part of Czechoslovakia. Within the framework of the Crown of Saint Stephen, modern-day Transcarpathia comprised parts of the counties (*comitatus*) of Ung, Bereg, Ugocsa, and Máramaros. Nevertheless, due to a tradition spanning over a century, it is treated as a historically distinct region.

The Hungarians conquered the Pannonian Basin, along with the territory of later Transylvania (referred to in Magyar tradition as the *honfoglalás* or “conquest of the homeland”), through a relatively gradual process occurring at the turn of the 9th and 10th centuries. It was during this period that they appeared in significant numbers in Transcarpathia. Over the following centuries, the region became a subject of Hungarian-Ruthenian rivalry, and was eventually incorporated into the Hungarian ecumene in the 13th century as an indisputable integral component, while consistently retaining a multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. Along with other Hungarian lands, the territory of future Transcarpathia became part of the Habsburg state in the late 17th century, known from 1804 as the Austrian Empire. The Austro-Hungarian Compromise (*Ausgleich*) of 1867 led to the creation of a dual monarchy in which the Kingdom of Hungary assumed an equal role. In the late

1860s, Hungarian authorities initiated a campaign of Magyarisation directed at their non-Hungarian citizens. These actions also extended to Transcarpathia, where the local intelligentsia of Rusyn and Slovak origin – particularly Greek Catholic clergy – played a significant role in the process. Judging by statistical data, from Budapest's perspective, this initiative was highly successful. Within three decades (1880–1910), while the Rusyn population (identifying as Ukrainian or distinct “Carpatho-Rusyn”) increased in this area by 35.5% (from 244,700 to 331,000), the Hungarian population grew by 74.8% (from 105,400 to 184,300). By approximately 1917, Hungarians constituted over 30% of the region's total population².

The general standard of living in Transcarpathia improved somewhat at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Central authorities directed substantial financial resources toward revitalising local agriculture and undertook efforts to establish an industrial base, particularly in the timber sector. A railway network was also developed. These were tangible changes that contributed to the positive assessment of Hungarian rule during this period in later years. The situation in the region changed fundamentally with the end of World War I and the attribution of shared war guilt to the Hungarians. The treaty imposed on Hungary (signed in Trianon on 4 June 1920) stripped the state of nearly two-thirds of its pre-war territory³.

² S.A. Sroka, *Węgry, Poznań* 2015, pp. 49–50; B. Kész, *Északkelet-Magyarság középkora (a honfoglalástól 1526-ig)*, [in:] L. Brenzovics et al. (eds.), *Kárpátalja története. Örökség és kihívások*, Beregszász–Ungvár 2021, pp. 108–125; P.R. Magocsi, *Pod osłoną góra. Dzieje Rusi Karpackiej i Karpatorusinów*, trans. M. Król, Rzeszów 2022, pp. 71–74; P. Eberhardt, *Problematyka narodowościowa Rusi Zakarpackiej, “Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa”* 2011, issue 39, p. 32; I. Csernicskó et al., *Kárpátalja 1920–2020. A kárpátaljai magyarság elmúlt 100 éve*, Beregszász 2020, p. 8 (the table showing the percentage of Hungarians in Transcarpathia according to official censuses 1880–2001).

³ І. Мандрик, *Угорська політика на території Закарпаття в кінці XIX – на початку ХХ ст.*, [in:] В. Смолій (ed.), *Україна – Угорщина:*

Authorities in Budapest had no intention of relinquishing their historical territories, including the Carpathian lands. In cooperation with pro-Hungarian Rusyn activists, the government of Prime Minister Mihály Károlyi created the ostensibly autonomous province of *Ruszka-Krajna* (*Ruténföld*) on 21 December 1918, with its own representative body (the Diet) and its capital in Mukachevo. This action aimed to create a *fait accompli* in the hope of securing acceptance from the victorious powers. However, the divergence between local Rusyns and the central government regarding the administrative borders of the future Rusyn autonomy, combined with the efforts of pro-Czechoslovak activists, ensured that this initiative did not endure. With the collapse of the Károlyi government and the establishment of the communist-led so-called Hungarian Soviet Republic (whose de facto leader was Béla Kun), *Ruszka-Krajna* was transformed into a Soviet republic. An offensive by the anti-Hungarian coalition led to the occupation of the Carpathian lands by Czechoslovak and Romanian troops. Ultimately, by decisions made at the conferences in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (10 September 1919) and Trianon, almost the entire territory of the former *Ruszka-Krajna* province was incorporated into Czechoslovakia⁴.

For the first time since their settlement centuries earlier, the local Hungarian population found itself in a position of

спільне минуле та сьогодення. Матеріали міжнародної наукової конференції (Київ, 14–16 квітня 2005 р.), Kyiv 2006, pp. 178–188; P.R. Magocsi, op. cit., pp. 174–176; R. Gerwarth, *Pokonani. Dlaczego pierwsza wojna światowa się nie zakończyła (1917–1923)*, trans. J. Szukudliński, Poznań 2017, pp. 239–240.

⁴ L. Szarka, *A történeti Magyar Királyság felbomlása és a keleti Svájc koncepciója*, [in:] Cs. Fedinec, M. Vehes (eds.), *Kárpátalja 1919–2009. Történelem, politika, kultúra*, Budapest–Ungvár 2010, pp. 23–25; M. Jarnecki, *Miedzy centralizmem a autonomią. Administracja czechosłowacka na Rusi Zakarpackiej (1918–1938)*, “Dzieje Najnowsze” 2005, issue 3, pp. 3–6; I. Vidnyánszky, *Csehszlovák diplomáciai sikerek*, [in:] Cs. Fedinec, M. Vehes (eds.), op. cit., pp. 44–48; I. Szakáll, *Az első Csehszlovák Köztársaság időszaka (1918–1938)*, [in:] L. Brenzovics et al. (eds.), op. cit., pp. 399–412.

genuine political and social disadvantage. Their numbers decreased significantly, as did their share of the total population (according to 1921 data, 116,000 Magyars resided in Subcarpathian Rus', nearly 68,000 fewer than in 1917). The land reform implemented in the mid-1920s, which primarily favoured Czechs and Slovaks, played a role in this shift. Formally, within the territory of Subcarpathian Rus' – which from 1928 constituted one of the four lands comprising Czechoslovakia – the “titular” population was the local Rusyns. However, they did not constitute an ethnic monolith due to internal fragmentation (divided into Carpatho-Rusyn, Ukrainian, and a clearly minority but nonetheless present Russian orientation)⁵. In practice, however, the role of the East Slavic element in shaping the daily life of Subcarpathian Rus' was increasingly marginalised by authorities in Prague, with decisive power held by governors appointed by the central government. Under such circumstances, neither the Subcarpathian (Transcarpathian) Hungarians nor the authorities in Budapest abandoned their aspirations to revise the Treaty of Trianon and to restore the Crown of Saint Stephen.

Centrifugal tendencies characterised the activity of the Magyar minority throughout the entire period of Subcarpathian Rus' existence within the Czechoslovak Republic⁶. By the late 1930s, alongside the deepening crisis of

⁵ D. Świątek, *Mniejszość węgierska w strukturze etnicznej Zakarpacia*, [in:] Z. Górką, A. Jelonek (eds.), *Geograficzne uwarunkowania rozwoju Małopolski*, Cracow 2002, pp. 464–465; A. Пушкаш, *Цивилизация или варварство. Закарпатье 1918–1945*, Moscow 2006, pp. 91–98; M. Jarnecki, *W „republike nauczycieli”. Ewolucja stosunków politycznych na Rusi Zakarpackiej w dobie autonomicznej 1938–1939*, “*Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*” 2007, no. 42, pp. 137–150; A. Stec, *Polityka Czechosłowacji wobec zagadnienia ukraińskiego w kontekście stosunków czechosłowacko-polskich w latach 1918–1939. Zarys problematyki*, “*Przegląd Geopolityczny*” 2014, vol. 8, pp. 64–65.

⁶ В. Гира, *Угорська іредентна в міжвоєнному Закарп'ї («угорський фактор» у суспільно-політичному житті)*, Uzhhorod 2012, pp. 84–100; P.R. Magocsi, op. cit., pp. 234–236.

Czechoslovak statehood, similar irredentist aspirations began to characterise the local Rusyn elites. Initially, capitalising on the Munich Agreement (29–30 September 1938), proponents of the Carpatho-Rusyn orientation led by Andrej Bródy established the first autonomous government of Subcarpathian Rus' (11 October 1938). This government adopted a decidedly pro-Hungarian stance and, after merely fifteen days in office, was replaced by a successor government with a distinctly pro-Ukrainian orientation, led by the Greek Catholic priest Avgustyn Voloshyn (26 October 1938). Concurrently, as a result of the First Vienna Award (2 November 1938), the territory of Subcarpathian Rus' was reduced in favour of Hungary, resulting in the loss of Uzhhorod, Mukachevo, and Berehove. The remaining territory of the province, with its capital in the city of Khust, was granted broad autonomy by a decision of the Czechoslovak parliament on 22 November 1938. Alongside the formally retained old name, a new designation also came into use: Carpatho-Ukraine. Interestingly, for the authorities in Khust, the primary adversary became the government in Prague, which sought to maintain its sovereign influence over Rus'. Against the backdrop of the Voloshyn political camp's open aspirations to declare the independence of Carpatho-Ukraine (Carpathian Ukraine), clashes occurred between the autonomy's paramilitary arm, the Carpathian Sich, and the Czechoslovak army. Following Slovakia's proclamation of independence, Voloshyn's government announced the same decision (14 March 1939). In response, on the very same day, the Hungarian army crossed the borders of Subcarpathian Rus' and, during the course of a campaign lasting several days, annexed the territory. In response to the Hungarian move, Prime Minister Voloshyn convened the deputies of the provincial parliament present in Khust (15 March 1939) to ratify the declaration of independence of Carpatho-Ukraine, which duly occurred. Simultaneously, Avgustyn Voloshyn was appointed president of the newly proclaimed state. On the same day, he left Khust

for Romania, and subsequently for Prague, which was then under German occupation⁷.

The takeover of the territories of former Subcarpathian Rus' by Hungarian troops completely altered the region's situation. Authorities in Budapest initially considered the idea of regional autonomy (*Kárpátalja vajdaság*) and the elevation of the Rusyn language to state status (alongside Hungarian). However, this project was soon abandoned, and the area formally became a standard administrative unit known as the Subcarpathian Territory (*Kárpátaljai terület*). Although Magyars once again became the dominant nation, local Rusyns were not persecuted and retained their position as full-fledged co-citizens. While the effects of the Czechoslovak land reform of the mid-1920s were partially reversed, the Hungarian state endeavoured to invest in the province's economy, aiming for its at least partial development. Consequently, this policy did not generate widespread opposition to the restitution of Hungarian authority in Subcarpathian Rus'⁸.

The occupation of Transcarpathia by Soviet troops in the autumn of 1944 once again raised the issue of the region's state affiliation. Formally, it constituted part of Czechoslovakia, whose representatives commenced activities in Khust and remained there until February 1945, when they were forced to leave by the local Soviet administration. Simultaneously, authorities in Moscow initiated a campaign to annex Subcarpathian Rus' to Ukraine. Ultimately, on 29 June 1945, a treaty was signed between the Soviet Union and

⁷ M. Jarnecki, *Miedzy centralizmem a autonomią...*, pp. 13–15; M. Jarnecki, M. Palinczak, *Kwestie i spory religijne na terenie Rusi Zakarpackiej w czechosłowackim epizodzie jej dziejów*, "Sprawy Narodowościowe. Seria nowa" 2014, issue 45, pp. 99–100; M. Jarnecki, P. Kołakowski, *Ukraiński Piemont. Ruś Zakarpacka w okresie autonomii 1938–1939*, Warsaw 2017, pp. 183 ff.

⁸ N. Szőlősi, *A Magyar Királysághoz visszatért Kárpátalja (1938–1944)*, [in:] L. Brenzovics et al. (eds.), op. cit., pp. 467–480; P.R. Magocsi, op. cit., pp. 330–334.

Czechoslovakia, by virtue of which the region (expanded at the expense of Slovakia) was incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic as so-called Transcarpathian Ukraine, which was subsequently transformed into a standard oblast on 22 January 1946. Following a brief period of relative liberalisation, during which a partial land reform was enacted, efforts began to assimilate Transcarpathia with the rest of the Ukrainian lands. Agricultural collectivisation and industrialisation were implemented, particularly in the timber and chemical sectors. Consequently, immense demographic changes occurred. As a result of flight to Hungary, deportations to forced labour camps deep within the USSR, and fear of repression, the number of Magyars decreased significantly (in 1959, there were only 158,000 in the area). At the same time, the number of Ukrainians and Russians increased exponentially (in 1959, 686,000 and 29,000, respectively). The anti-Hungarian policy of the Soviet authorities, manifesting in the restriction of all institutional possibilities for preserving the identity of this nationality group, led to further unfavourable transformations for the Hungarians. According to the 1989 census, there were only 155,000 Hungarians in the Transcarpathian Oblast, compared to 976,000 Ukrainians and 49,000 Russians. The area of compact Magyar settlement shrank significantly, and attempts were made to fragment what remained. In 1941, Hungarians formed a decisive majority in 103 localities, whereas by 1989, this was the case in only 78. Furthermore, the influx of East Slavic populations (Ukrainians and Russians) increased the local Rusyn population, resulting in them becoming a minority in their own homeland⁹.

⁹ R. Oficinszkij, *A szovjet-csehoslovák tárgyalások és egyezmény Kárpátalja sorsáról*, [in:] Cs. Fedinec, M. Véhes (eds.), op. cit., pp. 242–244; D. Świątek, op. cit., pp. 466–468.

INDEPENDENCE

In the final phase of the Soviet Union's existence, both activists of the Rusyn movement and local Hungarians in the Transcarpathian Oblast raised the issue of granting the region – following the example of the earlier period of the decline of Czechoslovakia or the existence of Carpathian Ukraine – a certain form of autonomy within Soviet Ukraine. Within the framework of the referendum announced for 1 December 1991, citizens of the Transcarpathian Oblast, in addition to expressing their will regarding the independence of Ukraine, were also given the opportunity to express their opinion on granting it the status of an autonomous territory. As many as 72% of voters expressed such a will. This position was supported by the then-candidate for the office of president, Leonid Kravchuk. However, the Verkhovna Rada did not consent to such a constitutional solution, even though a similar situation occurred in Crimea, which was granted autonomous status. It should be mentioned that the demand for a certain degree of independence from central authorities was supported jointly by Transcarpathian Rusyns and Hungarians. The final blow to the idea of autonomy was dealt by the constitution introduced in 1996, by virtue of which Ukraine became a centralised state. Nevertheless, these failures did not cast a significant shadow on the attitude of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia toward the Ukrainian state. In the early years of independence, Ukraine's central authorities were relatively weak and did not exercise full control over peripheral territories, such as the Transcarpathian Oblast. This gave the Hungarian minority the opportunity to organise around the defence of their own particular interests, especially since they had the support of successive Hungarian governments, which, while seeking good relations with Kyiv,

continued to support their compatriots that remained outside the borders of the former Crown of Saint Stephen. The proportion of Hungarians in the total population of Transcarpathia was continuously decreasing – from over 150,000 in 2001 to just under 131,000 in 2017. This was undoubtedly influenced primarily by emigration (permanent and long-term), especially after Hungary's accession to the European Union¹⁰.

A significant challenge for the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia emerged with the law adopted by the Verkhovna Rada in 2012, “Про засади державної мовної політики” (the so-called “Language Law”, annulled by the Constitutional Court of Ukraine in 2018). Its annulment did not mean the end of problems related to the change in Kyiv's policy toward national minorities. In 2017, the Ukrainian parliament adopted the law “Про освіту”, according to which a gradual transition was to take place in education from teaching in the minority's native language to the Ukrainian language. This caused immense opposition not only from Transcarpathian Hungarians but also from the authorities in Budapest¹¹.

Official Ukrainian-Hungarian relations after 1991 were characterised by high intensity. Regular, bilateral visits by high-ranking politicians from both sides took place,

¹⁰ K. Darcsi, *Kárpátalja Ukrajna függetlenségének időszakában – a magyar érdekképviselet megjelenése, az elveszett autonómia ügye*, [in:] L. Brenzovics et al. (eds.), op. cit., pp. 661–665; Cs. Fedinec, *A kárpataljai magyar kisebbség helyzetének változásai Ukrajnában*, [in:] N. Bardi, Cs. Fedinec, L. Szarka Laszlo (eds.), *Kisebbségi magyar kozossegek a 20. században*, Budapest 2008, pp. 346–352; I. Бабинець, *Закарпаття в системі міждержавних відносин України і Угорської Республіки (1991–2004 рр.)*, [in:] В. Смолов (ed.), op. cit., pp. 251–263; I. Csernicskó et al., op. cit., p. 9 (the table showing the number of Hungarians in Transcarpathia in the years 1959–2017); P. Tátrai et al., *SUM-MA 2017: a kárpátaljai magyarok demográfiai felmérése*, [in:] V. Ferenc, K. Kovály (eds.), *Kárpátalja mozgásban: társadalmi változások és interetnikus viszonyok az Euromájdan után*, Budapest 2020, pp. 21–41.

¹¹ M. Malski, I. Ziňko, *Mniejszości narodowe w systemie politycznym Ukrainy*, “*Studia Europejskie*” 2020, no. 1, pp. 111–113.

important agreements were signed and subsequently carefully implemented, and cross-border cooperation proceeded effectively. Certain changes occurred during Hungary's preparations for accession to the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, when Budapest focused its efforts on the Western orientation. However, even after Hungary's entry into NATO and the EU, Ukrainian-Hungarian relations remained correct, especially during the tenure of Ferenc Gyurcsány, leader of the Democratic Coalition, as Prime Minister¹².

The return to power of Fidesz (*Fidesz – Magyar Polgári Szövetség*) in the 2010 elections and Viktor Orbán's assumption to the post of prime minister did not initially negatively affect mutual relations. Hungary continued, at least declaratively, to support Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. However, a change in the rhetoric of the new authorities and the socio-political circles gathered around them slowly ensued. Voices critical of Ukraine – particularly regarding the deteriorating situation of Hungarians in Transcarpathia – appeared increasingly frequently in the Hungarian public space. The Fidesz government formulated its historical policy, in which a fundamental place was occupied by the aspiration to redress the wrong done to Magyars at Trianon. Its practical dimension was enabling a fast-track path to obtaining Hungarian citizenship

¹² I. Мудрієвська, *Розвиток політичного співробитництва України з Угорською Республікою (1991–2011 рр.)*, “Науковий Вісник Чернівецького Університету. Історія. Політичні науки. Міжнародні відносини” 2014, issue 702–703, pp. 215–220; S. Kubas, *Kształtowanie się polityki zagranicznej Węgier w regionie Europy Środkowej: od 1989 do 2014 r. Wybrane aspekty*, [in:] M.J. Barański, N. Rudakiewicz, M. Guzy (eds.), *Doświadczenie transformacji systemowej w państwach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej*, Katowice 2015, pp. 258; M. Голош, *Українсько-угорські відносини новітньої доби та їх вплив на європейську інтеграцію*, “Геополітика України: історія і сучасність. Збірник наукових праць” 2018, issue 1, pp. 80–84; I.B. Аблазов, П.А. Терпяк, *Правові основи сучасних українсько-угорських відносин: від Тріанону до сьогодення*, “Політичне Життя” 2020, no. 1, pp. 85–86.

for all those who lived outside Hungary's borders and could prove their belonging to this nation (primarily using the Hungarian language in daily life and having ancestors who were once citizens of the Crown of Saint Stephen). The adopted concept of "national unity across state borders" simultaneously became a tool of influence wherever the Hungarian minority lived¹³.

The slogan of "Greater Hungary" (*Nagy-Magyarország*) was also popularised in the public space along the Danube as a cultivation of the memory of the lands lost in 1920. This also serves as a specific transmission belt for increasing political influence among Magyars living in neighbouring states¹⁴. History, understood in this way, served Viktor Orbán in two ways: in domestic policy (by sustaining historical resentments), and in relations with his neighbours, especially those outside the European Union, as a tool of influence. Ukraine, in particular, seemed susceptible here, due to both its unstable political system and the relatively significant role of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, which found broad support in its former homeland.

Relations with the Russian Federation play a significant role in constructing current Hungarian foreign policy. These relations are primarily pragmatic in nature and concern the energy sector. A significant joint venture in this regard is the Paks nuclear power plant, whose expansion involves Russian enterprises (with Rosatom serving as the main investor) and Russian capital (although in 2025, the Hungarian side undertook efforts to be exempted from

¹³ A. Sadecki, *Polityka zagraniczna Węgier po 2010 roku*, [in:] L. Skiba, M. Rapkiewicz, M. Kędzierski (eds.), *Węgry Orbána – wzór czy przestroga*, Warsaw 2014, pp. 134; A. Sadecki, *Długi cień Trianon. Węgierskie zmagania z przeszłością*, Punkt Widzenia, OSW, no. 80, Warsaw 2020, pp. 19–21; K. Sutarski, *Trianon – czy zabliżnia się ta otwarta rana Europy?*, Warsaw 2021, pp. 40–44.

¹⁴ A. Tatarenko, „*„Wielkie Węgry” i „Trianon” w polityce historycznej Węgier: Zarys problemu*,” *Komentarze IEŚ* 2019, no. 14, pp. 1–2.

sanctions on Russia and to diversify this project by establishing cooperation with the US, where technologies and nuclear fuel are to be purchased). Until recently, Hungary imported 80% of its gas from Russia, which was also its third-largest trading partner. Moreover, Hungarian society has a very positive attitude toward Russia, which translates into the Budapest government's approach to the issue of the conflict in Ukraine by adopting a decidedly Moscow-centric perspective¹⁵.

Such an approach stems from the long-term strategy adopted by the ruling Fidesz party after its electoral victory in 2010, aimed at seeking new economic solutions through access to cheap energy sources and new sales markets. The result of such a manoeuvre was the establishment of close cooperation with the Russian Federation, symbolised by frequent mutual visits by Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán. Economic cooperation, in turn, became the basis for deepened political relations, in which Russia constituted a counterweight to both the European Union and the United States. It should be noted that despite high dependence on Russian hydrocarbons and declared mutual friendship and cooperation, the Hungarian government, despite frequently and consciously expressing dissatisfaction with the attitude of Ukrainian authorities toward the Magyar minority in Transcarpathia, sought to maintain at least minimally correct relations with Kyiv after 2014, making minor but significant gestures of support. It is therefore not the case that Orbán was significantly dependent on the Kremlin at that time, for, as it seems, he was pursuing

¹⁵ D. Héjj, *Rozbudowa elektrowni atomowej w Paks – znaczenie i perspektywy*, Prace Instytutu Europy Środkowej, no. 4, Lublin 2021, pp. 33–38; I. Gizińska, *Węgiersko-rosyjski projekt atomowy Paks: Nowy wylom w zachodnich sankcjach*, Analizy, OSW, 14 July 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2025-07-14/węgiersko-rosyjski-projekt-atomowy-paks-nowy-wylom-w-zachodnich> [12.12.2025]; V. Jóźwiak, *Węgiersko-rosyjskie stosunki gospodarcze*, "Biuletyn PISM" 2019, no. 105, pp. 1–3.

a policy reasonable from his point of view, aimed at achieving assumed goals, especially in the sphere of energy security and the continuous raising of the level of trade¹⁶.

¹⁶ Л. Шишелина, *Три десятилетия новых российско-венгерских отношений*, “Современная Европа” 2019, no. 7, pp. 13–15; P. Bieliński, *Relacje węgiersko-rosyjskie za rzqdów Viktora Orbána w latach 2010–2019*, “*Studia z Dziejów Rosji i Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej*” 2020, no. 1, pp. 207–223.

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE: RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN 2014 AND THE CRISIS OF THE UKRAINIAN STATE

Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 confronted Hungary with a serious dilemma: whether to maintain the existing intensive Eastern dimension of its foreign policy, including increasingly strong ties with Russia, or to reduce this orientation for the sake of solidarity with the victim of the conflict. It appears that Prime Minister Orbán opted for the former solution. On the one hand, he proceeded with arrangements regarding the expansion of the Paks nuclear power plant with the Russian side; on the other, he imposed conditions on Kyiv regarding the potential autonomy of Magyars in Transcarpathia. As an argument, the Hungarian side invoked the 1991 referendum and the promises made at the time by future president, Leonid Kravchuk. Hungary sought to circumvent sanctions imposed on Moscow by the EU and, furthermore, supported the concept of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline construction, arguing – in the Prime Minister's view – that it would increase gas supply security to Europe. The most significant point of contention in bilateral relations between Kyiv and Budapest became the previously mentioned Education Law, adopted by the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in September 2017. As a result of its provisions, the Hungarian school system in the Transcarpathian Oblast – hitherto excellently organised and functioning, at times decidedly better than Ukrainian schools – could suffer severe detriment to its potential. Due to procedural delays,

this problem remains unresolved, though it has not been abandoned¹⁷. A similar resonance was felt along the Danube regarding the Ukrainian Language Law of April 2019, which was perceived as targeting the Hungarian minority as well. Here too, the matter was suspended due to presidential elections in Ukraine at the time.

The issue of dual citizenship constitutes a major point of contention in mutual relations. Ukrainian law does not permit dual citizenship (although in the second half of 2025, President Volodymyr Zelensky introduced such an option regarding several states into public discourse). In reality, however, this is a common practice among Ukrainian citizens, particularly in reference to residents of the Russian-occupied Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts and Crimea. In 2015, Hungarian authorities adopted a national policy strategy intending to grant citizenship to Magyars residing in neighbouring states that had formerly belonged to the Crown of Saint Stephen. Over the next few years, a significant portion of the Magyar minority in Transcarpathia accepted Hungarian passports, which offered their holders opportunities incomparable to those associated with a Ukrainian passport. This issue triggered new tensions in relations between Kyiv and Budapest and, like previous issues, has remained unresolved. It is no coincidence that in 2018, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó deemed all the aforementioned problems as impediments to any discussion regarding Ukraine's accession to European and Euro-Atlantic structures. This view was expressed in a memorandum sent in May 2018 by the Hungarian Prime Minister to the leaders of NATO member states and its Secretary General. In it, Orbán presented an entire catalogue of Ukraine's transgressions against the Hungarian minority,

¹⁷ D. Héjj, *Polityka Węgier wobec rosyjskiej agresji na Ukrainę*, Prace Instytutu Europy Środkowej, no. 10, Lublin 2022, pp. 13–18; M. Karolak-Michalska, *Etnopolityka w państwach Europy Wschodniej. Implikacje dla bezpieczeństwa*, Łódź–Warsaw 2021, pp. 414–417.

as well as its internal problems, serving as evidence that, in his opinion, it is a failed state. This document became the foundational basis for the perception of Ukraine by the Hungarian ruling party and its supporters until the open Russian aggression of 24 February 2022¹⁸.

However, alongside these negative aspects of mutual relations, there is also a positive dimension resulting from geographical proximity and the necessity of cooperation that it entails. Suffice it to note that in the period from 2004 to 2019, both states concluded approximately thirty agreements covering practically all spheres of activity¹⁹.

18 A. Sadecki, T. Olszański, *Ukraina-Węgry: narastający spor o prawa mniejszości węgierskiej*, "Komentarze OSW" 2018, no. 280, pp. 1–7; A. Potiha, *Загострення відносин між Україною та Угорщиною через видачу угорських паспортів жителям Закарпаття* й спроби знайти порозуміння, "Україна: події, факти, коментарі. Інформаційно-аналітичний журнал" 2018, по. 18, пр. 4–12; A. Бутирський, I. Бутирська, *Українсько-угорські відносини на сучасному етапі*, "Актуальні питання Суспільних наук та Історії Медицини. Спільний українсько-румунський науковий журнал" 2018, по. 4, пр. 42–45; U. Ільницька, M. Щербак, *Зовнішньополітичні стратегії та пріоритети Угорщини в умовах геополітичних та безпекових викликів російсько-української війни: особливості та трансформація*, "Вісник Львівського Університету. Серія філос.-політолог. студій" 2024, issue 55, pp. 318–319; Z. Parafianowicz, *Według Orbana Ukraina to państwo upadłe*, Forsal.PL, 29 May 2022, <https://forsal.pl/artykuly/1126849,wedlug-orbana-ukraina-to-panstwo-upadle.html> [14.12.2025].

¹⁹ В. Бенце, *Аспекти українсько-угорських відносин 2004–2019 рр.*, “Міжнародний Науковий Вісник” 2019, issue 1–2, p. 150.

TIME FOR A CHANGE? THE FULL-SCALE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR AND THE STANCE OF VIKTOR ORBÁN'S GOVERNMENT TOWARD UKRAINE

In 2020, Hungary adopted a new security strategy. It also executed – in opposition to the European Union – a political pivot toward China, Russia, and Turkey, referred to in official propaganda as the “Opening to the East” (it should be added that this new political option created deep dependencies, particularly on Moscow). At the same time, Hungary skilfully maintained very good relations with key EU member states – Germany and France – especially by declaring a willingness to purchase significant quantities of armaments. In this way, it emphasised its concern for its own sovereignty and agency, while simultaneously negating integrationist tendencies emanating from Brussels²⁰. Under such circumstances, a radical change in Budapest’s attitude toward Kyiv was impossible.

This did not change with Russia’s open and full-scale attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Following the Russian invasion, Hungary found itself in a unique yet controversial position within the European Union and NATO.

²⁰ O. Balogh, *Kultura strategiczna Węgier w aspekcie bezpieczeństwa pozmianych ustrojowych*, “*Studia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego*” 2021, no. 20, pp. 39–43.

While EU member states and NATO allies unanimously condemned the aggression and imposed sanctions on Russia, Budapest pursued a policy balancing between membership in Western structures and the declared protection of its own national interests and the preservation of its relations with Moscow. Both the government centred around Fidesz and the overwhelming majority of Hungarian society distanced themselves from the conflict in the name of their own national security.

The Hungarian authorities not only refused to provide direct military aid but also prohibited the transport of weapons through their territory. Prime Minister Orbán repeatedly and consistently emphasised at the time that Hungary could not afford to participate in actions that, in his opinion, would harm its economy more than Russia's, and that the conflict was a matter between "two Slavic nations", into which Hungary should not be drawn. In this manner, Hungary became one of the few EU member states to adopt such a stance. Budapest not only refrained from sending weapons but also blocked the transit of armaments from other countries through its territory. This position stemmed from a fear of Russian retaliation, but it met with criticism from allies who accused Hungary of undermining European unity in the face of aggression. Authorities in Budapest allowed for an increase in the number of Russian diplomatic personnel. Official media avoided portraying Ukraine as a victim of aggression, and the genocidal actions of the Russian army were largely universally denied. Hungarian state propaganda often replicated Russian narratives regarding the "rule of Ukrainian nationalists" and presented Ukraine as a state dependent on the West, portrayed as having deliberately provoked Russia into launching a "special military operation".

It should be noted, however, that Hungary simultaneously provided (limited in scope) humanitarian aid (including medical assistance) and accepted tens of thousands of war refugees. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó announced

the delivery of nearly 30,000 tonnes of food and fuel, and Prime Minister Orbán initiated a campaign worth 600 million forints, covering hygiene products and basic needs for children. These gestures aimed to alleviate the humanitarian crisis but did not encompass military support, distinguishing Hungary from other EU and NATO members²¹.

In the early phase of the Russian aggression, Prime Minister Orbán emphasised in public appearances that his priority was to avoid dragging Hungary into the war. He stated at the time that Hungary's security was paramount. Simultaneously, he criticised the policy of the European Union, which he deemed provocative toward Russia. This anti-war rhetoric gained the support of Fidesz supporters but deepened tensions with Brussels and Kyiv. A key element of the government's official narrative at the time became the slogan of "immediate peace". Prime Minister Orbán repeatedly called for a ceasefire and the commencement of negotiations, which in practice would mean freezing the conflict on terms favourable to Russia (including the sanctioning of captured territories). Formally, Hungarian authorities officially supported sanctions against Russia, while simultaneously striving hard to preserve the possibility of Russian hydrocarbon supplies to their economy. While the EU sought to break its dependence on Russian raw materials, Hungary not only failed to reduce this reliance, but, in some aspects, intensified cooperation in this field. Additional agreements for gas supplies were signed, and the expansion of the Paks II power plant, with Rosatom as the main partner, remained a priority for Budapest. This policy was presented by the government as a guarantee of Hungary's energy sovereignty and, consequently, low prices

²¹ D. Héjj, *Węgry wobec wojny na Ukrainie*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2022, no. 544, pp. 1–3; K. Dudzińska, Ł. Ogrodnik, J. Pieńkowski, *Współpraca regionalna w Europie Środkowej po agresji Rosji na Ukrainę – zmiany i perspektywy*, ed. by T. Żornaczuk, V. Jóźwiak, Raport PISM, Warsaw 2024, pp. 21–22.

for its citizens. Hungary maintained open high-level diplomatic channels with Russia. Meetings of foreign ministers took place, and trade and cultural contacts were not severed. This distinguished Hungary from the majority of EU states and was perceived as an expression of its special relationship with the Kremlin. The Hungarian approach to the war itself also did not change; it was treated as a threat in itself, devoid of its actual context. In this view, the blame for the prolongation of the war lies with Ukraine itself and its allies, whose actions make it impossible to conclude a peace that would restore a certain order in the region²².

One of the most serious flashpoints in relations with NATO and the EU in the initial phase of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was Hungary's firm veto against the use of alliance funds for the purchase of weapons for Ukraine and the blocking (for the subsequent dozen or so months) of the commencement of EU accession talks with Ukraine. Budapest first demanded the removal of the Hungarian bank OTP (*Országos Takarékpénztár* – National Savings Bank, owned by Hungarian billionaire Sándor Csányi, who is closely linked to Orbán) from the Ukrainian list of so-called "sponsors of war", treating this as a symbolic humiliation. Despite the ongoing hostilities, the key point of contention between Hungary and Ukraine remained the rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia. Budapest continued to accuse Kyiv of discrimination through unabandoned language and educational reforms that directly affected national minorities. Consequently, Ukraine's aspirations to NATO were consistently blocked. Prime Minister Orbán withheld the ratification of NATO protocols, demanding the restoration of minority rights, which complicated Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration. Hungarian political and business

²² D. Héjj, *Węgry idą w zaparte w sprawie wojny. Wybrały „pseudo-pacyfizm”*, *Dziennik. Gazeta Prawna*, 18 November 2022, <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/swiat/artykuly/8590968,wegry-postawa-wojna-ukraina-rosja-pseudo-pacyfizm.html> [14.12.2025].

elites exhibited a veritable mental dependence on Moscow at the time, which translated into their particular leniency toward various Russian activities. Moreover, Hungarian media waged a specific campaign against the West regarding anti-Russian sanctions, arguing that they were harmful to all Europeans. The high inflation (24.8%) plaguing Hungary at the turn of 2022 and 2023 was presented as both an effect of the war and a consequence of anti-Russian sanctions²³.

Such a stance likely stemmed from the conviction that Ukraine's defeat was inevitable, and consequently, that states clearly supporting Kyiv in its efforts to defend its territory would also be losers. In the event that Ukraine defended its statehood, Russia would likely retain part of its gains and would certainly remain a fundamental player in Eastern Europe. Either way, Hungary stands to gain the most in this view through its compliant policy toward Moscow. An argument in favour of such an attitude was also the Russian side's decision to leave the Transcarpathian Oblast practically outside the range of missile strikes or drone usage (the only instance being a missile strike on a railway substation in Volovets on 3 May 2022), which may in turn constitute a specific gesture toward the Hungarian minority living there, and thus indirectly toward Budapest.

In February 2022, Ukraine applied for EU membership, which was treated primarily as a symbolic act of resistance against the Russian invasion. Hungary initially supported this gesture, but Prime Minister Orbán soon began to question the accelerated accession path. He argued that, firstly, Ukraine did not meet the relevant criteria and, secondly, that its entry into the EU would threaten Hungary's economy

²³ A. Sadecki, *Kampania Węgier przeciw polityce Zachodu wobec Rosji*, Analizy, OSW, 28 September 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2022-09-28/kampania-wegier-przeciw-polityce-zachodu-wobec-rosji> [15.12.2025]; K. Varseck, *Putin i Orban. „Rosja może szantażować Węgry”*, rp.pl, 17 November 2022, <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art37436851-putin-i-orban-rosja-moze-szantazowac-wegry> [15.12.2025].

through, among other things, competition in the agricultural sector. In June 2022, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status, which was a breakthrough despite Hungary's blockades. Budapest initially acted to halt this process but ultimately yielded under the threat of the suspension of EU payments.

After the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, Prime Minister Orbán repeatedly declared that he did not take into account a significant role for NATO in ensuring Hungary's security. He called the war on his northeastern border a "proxy war", toward which the state he led must adopt a neutral stance. The NATO summit in Madrid on 29–30 June 2022, when the Alliance recognised Russia as an aggressor and announced the strengthening of its eastern flank, was not only completely ignored by Budapest, but statements by politicians of the ruling coalition placed even stronger emphasis on the message regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine on Hungary's deteriorating economic situation. In this message, Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations were portrayed as an obstacle to ending the armed conflict; therefore, the Hungarian side opposed them in the name of the welfare of its citizens²⁴.

In 2023, Hungary repeatedly blocked EU sanctions packages against Russia, delaying their implementation. Prime Minister Orbán argued that sanctions harmed Europe more than Moscow, citing rising energy prices. These actions deepened Budapest's conflict with Brussels, where the Fidesz government was accused of sabotaging solidarity with Ukraine. This influenced the decision to withhold billions of euros from structural funds for Budapest. Hungary's conflict with the EU escalated in 2023–2024, when Brussels froze 7.5 billion EUR for Hungary due to "rule of law violations". Viktor Orbán counter-argued by blocking financial aid to Ukraine, including a loan of 18 billion EUR.

²⁴ D. Héjj, *Co Węgrzy na to, że odbył się szczyt NATO*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2022, no. 648, pp. 1–3.

The strategy he adopted allowed Hungary to negotiate desired concessions but simultaneously isolated it diplomatically, worsening relations with Kyiv.

Orbán's intensifying dispute with EU institutions over the rule of law, EU funds, and sanctions on Russia directly influenced policy toward Ukraine. Hungary utilised its veto power in Ukrainian matters as leverage in negotiations with the European Commission. This instrumentalisation of foreign policy deepened divisions within the Union and weakened the cohesion of support for Kyiv.

In July 2023, at the NATO summit in Vilnius, no decision was made to invite Ukraine to the Alliance during the ongoing war. At the same time, long-term aid from G7 countries was declared at this meeting. Prime Minister Orbán did not question the decisions made, yet he consistently questioned Ukraine's readiness for this act. In doing so, he emphasised, among other things, the lack of reforms regarding minorities²⁵.

Officials in Budapest unyieldingly proclaimed that Ukraine was a threat to European security by escalating the war. Such an attitude resulted from the lack of major Russian successes on the front after its stabilisation in 2024. During this period, Prime Minister Orbán increasingly called for a ceasefire and peace negotiations. In Budapest's official rhetoric, there was no mention of Ukraine regaining lost territories or returning to the 1991 borders.

Hungarian society was subjected to particularly strong anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, based on – true or semi-true – information coming from Ukraine. Toward the end of 2024, under immense pressure from the EU and the US, and faced with a deteriorating economic situation, Hungary decided on tactical concessions. In exchange for the partial unblocking of EU funds, Budapest consented to a new financial aid

²⁵ W. Lorenz, *Szczyt NATO w Wilnie – decyzje w sprawie Ukrainy*, “Biuletyn PISM” 2023, no. 95, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/szczyt-nato-w-wilnie-decyzje-w-sprawie-ukrainy> [15.12.2025].

package for Ukraine and a symbolic declaration regarding the future of EU membership. However, this did not fundamentally change Prime Minister Orbán's strategic scepticism toward Ukraine. At the same time, the Ukrainian issue became one of the driving forces for the Hungarian opposition. Péter Magyar, leader of the Tisza Party, repeatedly criticised Fidesz's policy toward Russia and Ukraine, thereby gaining broad social support. Recent polls (early December 2025) show a four percent lead for the Tisza Party over Fidesz. Simultaneously, 83% of Hungarians expect Russian interference in the elections (scheduled for April 2026), while 25% expect it from Ukraine. In May 2025, mutual relations reached their greatest crisis point following accusations by the Security Service of Ukraine regarding the detection of a Hungarian spy ring in Transcarpathia, allegedly working for Russian intelligence. In response, Hungary expelled Ukrainian diplomats and imposed an entry ban on Ukrainian army officers, which exacerbated the mutual dispute and negatively affected Kyiv's negotiations with the European Union²⁶.

In July 2025, Viktor Orbán met with Vladimir Putin in Moscow, provoking condemnation from both the EU and Ukraine. The Hungarian-Russian talks concerned energy supplies on the one hand and a potential truce in Ukraine on the other. Regarding the latter issue, Viktor Orbán advocated for an immediate ceasefire. This meeting was another element isolating Hungary within the European Union. In September 2025, Ukraine completed another stage of negotiations with the EU. However, Hungary blocked the

²⁶ *Węgrzy obawiają się ingerencji w wybory w swoim kraju. Sondaż mówi jasno*, Onet, 12 December 2025, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/wybory-na-wegrzech-ponad-80-proc-osob-boi-sie-ingerencji/5xcshdn> [17.12.2025]; I. Gizińska, K. Sienicki, *Aresztowanie na Zakarpaciu i zawieszenie rozmów ukraińsko-węgierskich*, Analizy, OSW, 14 May 2025, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2025-05-14/aresztowania-na-zakarpaciu-i-zawieszenie-rozmow-ukrainisko-wegierskich> [15.12.2025].

opening of negotiation clusters, demanding guarantees for the Hungarian minority. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó announced four areas of conflict: agriculture, security, energy, and sanctions. Ukraine's position was further weakened by the revelation of a massive scale of political corruption in the state, including in the immediate vicinity of President Volodymyr Zelensky. The flight to Israel of his former business partner and – privately – friend, Tymur Mindich, as well as the resignation of the Head of the Presidential Office, Andriy Yermak, did not improve the image of the Ukrainian state in the eyes of European public opinion.

Despite the image crisis of the Ukrainian elites, the European Commission decided in early December 2025 to accelerate the process of Ukraine's EU membership, defying Budapest's formal veto. According to this decision, Kyiv is to continue required reforms in terms of alignment with EU law and standards, which will be assessed successively by EU officials. The actions taken, in accordance with the declaration of EU Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos, expressed in Lviv on 11 December 2025, are to be of a technical nature, and their implementation does not require Hungary's consent. It seems that such an attitude stems from the expectation of a new political arrangement in Hungary in connection with the elections and the strong position of the opposition leader, Péter Magyar. Viktor Orbán has also made himself known as an enthusiast of the plan to end the war under consideration by President Donald Trump. Back in September 2023, at his annual speech in Kötcsé, the Hungarian Prime Minister expressed the conjecture that the war in Ukraine would last at least until 2030, and that it would result in the loss of half of that state's territory. He repeated this thought in the same place two years later, stating that Ukraine is in a phase of division into three zones. The first is to be the Russian zone, the basis of which is Crimea, with only the remainder being unknown: four, five, or six oblasts. The second would be a demilitarised zone along the border with Russian-controlled territory, and the third would encompass

the rest of Ukraine's territory, intended to remain under the influence of Western states. It appears that the stance presented in this way expresses the Hungarian leader's actual desires regarding the future of the Ukrainian state. However, what is important is that even in such an unfavourable resolution for Kyiv, the common Hungarian-Ukrainian border will not disappear, and consequently, neither will the problem of the Magyar minority in Transcarpathia. Hungary has not obtained any significant guarantee in this matter. It should be noted that the number of Hungarians in Transcarpathia is constantly decreasing as a result of the ongoing war.

The Brussels summit of 18 December 2025, dedicated to aid for Ukraine, revealed the European Union's lack of cohesion on this issue. The essence of the dispute is the method of financing the loan granted to Kyiv: whether it should be based on the frozen assets of the Russian central bank (approx. 210 billion EUR, primarily in Belgian banks), or whether the EU should incur debt guaranteed by its common budget. A complicating element in solving this problem is the opposition articulated by the Prime Ministers of Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, who declared that their states [sic] would not participate in this operation. Viktor Orbán, in particular, firmly marked his opposition to the idea of a joint loan, emphasising that the EU is not a party to the war, and declaring that "we will not allow our [i.e. Hungarian] families to pay for the war in Ukraine". He also described the potential confiscation of Russian assets as a declaration of war on Russia by Europe. Such an attitude met with immediate criticism from Volodymyr Zelensky, who further emphasised that the actions of the Hungarian politician not only lead to weakening the international isolation of Vladimir Putin but also, in a way, justify his conduct²⁷.

²⁷ G. Sorgi, Z. Sheftalovich, „UE stworzyła potwora, który ją pożart”. *Impas w Brukseli: Ukraina musi dostać pomoc, a Viktor Orbán zachować twarz*, Onet, 18 December 2025, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl>

Ultimately, the EU adopted a solution guaranteeing Ukraine a loan from its own resources in the amount of 90 billion EUR (for the next two years). The budgets of Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic will not be burdened by the obligations resulting from this. As can be assumed, in practice, this is a non-repayable loan, because – according to the announcement of the President of the European Council, Antonio Costa – Ukraine is to repay it only when Russia pays potential reparations. The issue of frozen Russian funds was referred for discussion within the European Commission, which also does not constitute a premise for the possibility of working out a constructive solution.

In response to these provisions, Prime Minister Orbán, at a conference in Brussels on 19 December 2025, called the summit held in the city a “war council”. He justified his opinion by stating that “90 percent of the statements at the meeting concerned how Europe could defeat Russia, and only ten percent – Hungarian, Czech, and Slovak voices – dealt with how to achieve peace”. During his speech, the Hungarian politician cast doubt on who the aggressor actually is in this war. He expressed this reservation while speaking about European decision-makers: “They calmly eat breakfast at home, drink their coffee, and think how morally right it is – to help a small country that was attacked, although not so small and it is not entirely clear who attacked whom, in any case, a country subjected to violence – we will help now, and it costs us nothing. But in the end, they will pay”. Orbán called the agreed tranche for Ukraine a “war loan”. He justified this view by stating that – as already mentioned – Ukraine would not be able to repay it, so the only way out is to defeat Russia and recover it in the form

/politico/wsparcie-dla-ukrainy-ue-stworzyla-potwora-kto-ja-pozarł-decydujący-moment/82b5nld [18.12.2025]; С. Сидоренко, В. Романенко, Зеленський покритикував Орбана за плаування перед Путіним, Українська Правда, 18 December 2025, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2025/12/18/8012480/> [18.12.2025].

of war reparations. Therefore, “it is in the direct financial interest of the European Union to defeat Russia”. The leading force pushing for such a solution is allegedly the European People’s Party, in which Germany has the greatest influence. The Fidesz leader summarised Hungary’s role in the face of upcoming events as follows: “So we must, living next to Germany marching to war, remain outside the war – just as was necessary in 1914 and 1939”. It seems that this entire speech was intended for domestic political consumption along the Danube, as Orbán positioned himself as an opponent of actions exposing Hungary to any danger, and called his antagonists from the Tisza Party an emotion-driven “bridgehead of the European People’s Party” that “will fly through Hungarian politics”²⁸. As can be assumed, the only constant element here is Fidesz and the coalition built around it.

Hungarian-Ukrainian relations are in a very dynamic phase. Viktor Orbán is building a specific coalition of dissatisfied states, so far with the participation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In this way, he marks his agency on the Ukrainian issue within the European Union. Incidentally, he has thus marginalised Poland in the Visegrád Group and weakened Warsaw’s pro-Ukrainian voice. Volodymyr Zelensky, meanwhile, is trying to retain existing allies, exemplified by his visit to Poland immediately after the Brussels summit, which was undoubtedly a success for Ukraine, obtaining another two years of practical operational support. The dispute between Budapest and Kyiv, which began over the rights of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia, has not only turned into a struggle over issues fundamental to both states but has also involved practically the entire West, led by the European Union and the United States.

²⁸ Orbán Brüsszelből a háborúról: Nem világos, hogy ki támadott meg kit, hvg.hu, https://hvg.hu/itthon/20251219_orban-viktor-brusszel-haditanacs-befagyaszott-orosz-vagyon-sajtotajekoztato [19.12.2025].

CONCLUSIONS. CRISIS, DEADLOCK, AND STRATEGIC UNCERTAINTY (2022-2025)

The period from the Russian invasion in February 2022 to the end of 2025 marked a phase of deep crisis and mutual hostility in Hungarian-Ukrainian relations. Hungary, leveraging the war and its veto power within the EU, became the primary obstacle to Kyiv's European and Euro-Atlantic integration. However, Budapest was unable to completely block international support for Ukraine, leading to a complex geopolitical stalemate.

1. **Viktor Orbán's strategic calculations.** Viktor Orbán's distinctive stance toward Ukraine after 24 February 2022 was driven by a multidimensional strategy aimed at maximising Hungary's leverage:
 - **Transcarpathian ambitions:** Orbán sought to improve the position of the Magyar minority in Transcarpathia, aiming to preserve the region's historically Hungarian character. The dispute over minority rights remained a central point of contention, with Budapest consistently blocking Ukraine's NATO aspirations until these rights were restored.
 - **EU power broker:** By obstructing consensus, Orbán aimed to establish himself as a key player in the EU, strengthening Hungary's sovereignty and negotiating position against Brussels.
 - **Geopolitical balancing:** Hungary pursued an "Opening to the East", maintaining close ties with Russia (energy dependence, Paks II nuclear plant) and

China, while positioning itself as a future partner for BRICS nations.

- **Bet on the US republicans:** Orbán viewed the US Republican Party and Donald Trump as primary allies in his conflict with the EU mainstream, anticipating a shift in global security architecture.
- 2. **Internal political dynamics:** A potential for change? The future of bilateral relations hinges heavily on domestic political shifts in both nations:
 - **Hungary (Fidesz vs. Tisza):** While Orbán's international profile remains high, domestic fatigue is visible. A breakthrough in relations with Kyiv is likely only if the opposition, led by Péter Magyar and his Tisza Party, wins the upcoming parliamentary elections. Recent polls from December 2025 show the Tisza Party holding a 4% lead over Fidesz.
 - **Ukraine (Zelensky's stability):** The continuity of Kyiv's foreign policy depends on President Volodymyr Zelensky remaining in power. However, Ukraine's position has been weakened by corruption scandals involving high-ranking officials (e.g. Andriy Yermak, Tymur Mindich). Potential presidential elections could destabilise the political landscape and invalidate existing alliances.
- 3. **The role of external factors.** Hungarian-Ukrainian relations are increasingly determined by decisions made outside of Budapest and Kyiv:
 - **The “Trump factor”:** Donald Trump's return to power and his stance on the conflict are critical variables. Orbán has expressed enthusiasm for Trump's peace plans, which align with his own prediction that Ukraine might lose half its territory.
 - **EU divisions:** While the EU's official position remains supportive of Ukraine, internal divisions are growing. The December 2025 Brussels summit highlighted this lack of cohesion, with debates over financing

loans to Ukraine through frozen Russian assets versus common debt.

- **Russian influence:** Russia's influence persists not only in Hungary but also within Ukraine, evidenced by the enduring role of the Russian Orthodox Church despite wartime trauma.

4. **Recent escalations (2025).** Hostility between Hungary and Ukraine peaked in 2025 due to several key events:

- **Spy scandals:** In May 2025, Ukraine accused Hungary of operating a spy ring in Transcarpathia for Russian intelligence, leading to the expulsion of diplomats and entry bans.
- **Orbán's "peace mission":** Orbán's meeting with Putin in Moscow in July 2025 drew condemnation from the EU and Ukraine.
- **"War council" rhetoric:** Following the December 2025 EU summit, Orbán characterised EU aid to Ukraine as a "war loan" and framed the EU's stance as a "war council", further distancing Hungary from the conflict.

The future is likely to bring solutions unforeseen by either side. Whether through a shift in US strategy, a change of government in Budapest, or the imposition of a geopolitical settlement by external powers, the current status quo is unsustainable. Crucially, the legacy of Ukraine's dependence on Russia and the unresolved issue of the Hungarian minority in Transcarpathia will remain structural challenges regardless of the war's outcome.

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