

Hungary and the Balkans in the 20th Century – From the Hungarian Perspective

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One of the most important consequences of the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy was the radical transformation of the relationship between Hungary and the Balkans. It is doubtful if Budapest even had a coherent Balkan politics after the war, while it had been an important pillar of the Austro-Hungarian foreign policy at the turn of the century. In the Hungarian historiography renowned scholars such as István Diószegi or Emil Palotás discussed the role of the “Eastern question” (i.e. the Great Powers’ contest for the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans) in the foreign policy of the Habsburg Monarchy, the rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Russia for a determining influence over the region, and the tragic culmination of this process in what was ultimately called the Great War.¹ The aforementioned scholars also showed how significant role the Hungarian desire for supremacy over the Balkans played in this process. During the age of dualism the aspiration for a Hungarian domination over the region was a prevailing view in Budapest. This view was based on various economic and geographic arguments referring to the “civilizing mission” of Hungarians as ‘a civilized Western people’, the “economic misery” of the Balkan’s small states, the need to counterbalance pan-Slavic influences, medieval feudal claims and other arguments. As the contemporary geographer and supporter of the Hungarian imperial ambitions, Rezső Havas noted: “We do not have colonies [...] the Balkan Peninsula, however, and its neighborhood literally invite us to gain hegemony [...] up to the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.”²

This imperial attitude had not been realistic even at the turn of the century (even though at that time Hungary’s size, economic indicators and power position as a partner state of the Habsburg Monarchy were far better than that of the Balkan’s small states) and it had to be forever abandoned after 1918. What is more, throughout the ensuing “short twentieth century” (from the end of WWI to the fall of the Soviet bloc)³

1 I. DIÓSZEGI, *Die Außenpolitik der Österreichisch-Ungarischen Monarchie 1871–1877*, Budapest 1985, p. 364; I. DIÓSZEGI, *Az Osztrák-Magyar Monarchia külpolitikája 1867–1918*, Budapest 2001, p. 220; E. PALOTÁS, *Machtpolitik und Wirtschaftsinteressen: Der Balkan und Russland in der österreichisch-ungarischen Aussenpolitik 1878–1895*, Budapest 1995, p. 399.

2 B. ÁBRAHÁM, *A Balkán képe a 19–20. századi magyar geopolitikai és tudományos gondolkodásban*, in: *Regio*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2007, p. 57.

3 See E. HOBSBAWM, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, London 1994, p. 640.

one of the main and recurring challenges for the Hungarian foreign policy was to get rid of any association with the Balkans.

DEBATES ABOUT HUNGARY'S PLACE IN THE REGION

After 1918, with the massive reduction of Hungary's territory and influence, many Western observers held Hungary to be one of the nations of the Balkans. But Hungary never regarded itself as part of that region (no matter how inclusively one defines it, see later), especially since the term 'Balkans' carried negative connotations. As it is well-known, the first use of the name "Balkans" (the term comes from the German geographer Johann August Zeune, who in 1808 borrowed the Turkish of one of the large mountain ranges to refer to the whole of the peninsula) only had a geographic content.⁴ However, with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the confusing internal relations of the successor Orthodox small states and their contest for more power and territory, the reputation of the Balkans gradually deteriorated in the "civilized", Western Christian Europe. It became a synonym of backwardness, lack of culture, ethnic and religious fighting and state fragmentation (the latter often referred to as "Balkanization"). The concept of the "dark Balkans" was thus born. No wonder that everybody seeks to disclaim this attribute.⁵

Until 1918 Hungary did not have defend itself against this charge. The defeat in the war, however, meant not only a great loss in territory and international significance, but a continuing deterioration of the Western prestige and Western judgment of Hungary, a process which had started in the late 19th century. Openly or not, Hungary was held to be a Balkan state, and not even the best one; as the eminent poet, Gyula Illyés commented, in the eye of many Westerners Serbians were more courageous and the Romanians were more educated than the Hungarians.⁶ Naturally, the Hungarian public opinion was not ready to be confronted with such opinions (since it continued to believe that even after the loss of political supremacy Hungary preserved its "cultural advantage" over its neighbors.)

Notwithstanding the above, the questions of "where do we belong?", the place of Hungary in Europe and the topic of the "transit country" between the East and the West have always been central themes in the Hungarian politics, historiography and public thinking. The geographical region most often mentioned in this context — the territory once occupied by the Czech, Polish and Hungarian kingdoms — has been variably called Eastern Europe (contrary to today's public opinion not only after 1945 but also in the interwar period, by those who opposed the German Mitteleuropa-

4 J. A. ZEUNE, *Gea: Versuch einer wissenschaftlichen Erdkunde*, Berlin 1808.

5 From the literature on Hungarian views of the Balkans, see E. NIEDERHAUSER, *Forrongó félsziget — A Balkán a XIX–XX. században*, Budapest 1972, p. 227; C. DUPCSIK, *A Balkán képe Magyarországon a 19–20. században*, Budapest 2005, p. 294; ÁBRAHÁM, pp. 44–78; N. PAP, *Magyarország a Balkán és a Mediterráneum vonzásában*, Pécs 2010, p. 320; F. GLATZ (Ed.), *Hungarians and Serbs 1918–2012 — Coexistence, Revealing the Past, Reconciliation*, Budapest 2013, p. 509.

6 P. PRITZ, *Az objektivitás mítosza?*, Budapest 2011, p. 11.

plans), Central-Eastern Europe (as one sub-region of the larger Eastern Europe, mainly used in the 1960s and 1970s), East-Central Europe (used by the supporters of the German orientation in the interwar period or later, from the 1980s onwards, by those, who wanted to express a distance from the Soviet Union with the concept of Central Europe) or “Zwischeneuropa”,⁷ favored by those who opposed both the German and the Russian-Soviet orientation.

These regional definitions and the corresponding Hungarian self-perceptions all expressed a distance from the Balkans, and they only “admitted” at most that both the region encompassing Hungary and the Balkans can belong to a larger entity: either to the large Eastern Europe that stretches from the Elba-Leitha line to the Ural Mountains or to “Zwischeneuropa” that lies between the German and Russian language territories (which, in my opinion, is the best way to define Hungary’s place in 20th century Europe, not denying the rationality of the alternative concepts). In the Hungarian historical and political thinking it was only the various Danube-region concepts that considered Hungary and its Balkan neighbors (mainly the direct neighbors: Serbia/Yugoslavia and Romania) to be one region, as we can see from the best-known example, the plan of Lajos Kossuth to establish the Danube Confederation (the Hungarian-South Slavic-Romanian Union). But even these concepts propagated the leading role of the Hungarians, sometimes overtly, with imperial attitudes, but mostly more softly, presenting the Hungarians as the pioneers of the cooperation of the small but equal nations of the Danube.⁸

That is not quite how things looked from the West, though. After 1918 Hungary was viewed by many as a country related to the Balkan and showing “Balkan characteristics”, even if the term was not directly employed, and the more neutral “South-East European” was used instead. Hungarian public discourse and foreign policy sought to disclaim even this qualification. The term South-East Europe as a definition of a geographic region was introduced in 1863 by the German geographer Theobald Fischer, who disagreed with the correctness of the most frequently used Northernmost frontier of the peninsula (which was the line of the Danube, Sava and Kupa rivers).⁹ Later Fischer’s term of South-East Europe was used to indicate both the region of the “historical and cultural Balkan”, which is larger than the geographical Balkan (the historical Balkan encompasses the countries, whose culture was shaped by Byzantine and Ottoman influences) and the northern neighbors, which are linked to the Balkans by strong geographical, historical, economic, ethnical and political ties (namely Hun-

7 Unfortunately, this apt German term has no neat equivalent in English. The closest approximations are the “In-Between Europe” or “Inter-Europe”.

8 On Hungary’s place in the region and in Europe, see É. RING (Ed.), *Helyünk Európában: Nézetek és koncepciók a 20. századi Magyarországon*, 2 Vols., Budapest 1985–1986, pp. 649 and 693; J. SZÚCS, *Die drei historischen Regionen Europas*, Frankfurt am Main 1990, p. 107; T. KRAUSZ, *A magyar történetírás és a marxizmus — megjegyzések a “keleteurópaiság” problémájához*, in: *Eszmélet*, No. 94, 2012, pp. 114–143; I. ROMSICS, *Közép- és/vagy Kelet-Európa?*, in: *Rubicon*, Vol. 7, No. 5/6, 1997, pp. 54–61.

9 T. FISCHER, *Die südosteuropäischen Halbinsel*, in: A. KIRCHOFF (Ed.), *Unser Wissen von der Erde: Allgemeine Erdkunde und Länderkunde: Länderkunde von Europa*, Vol. 3, Part 2, Leipzig 1893.

gary and the South Slavic area). Greece, which received the title of a Mediterranean country, is often left out. As the above defined South-East Europe was frequently used as a synonym for the Balkans or the “Balkan of modern politics”, Hungary also tried to be left out. This seemed possible during the brief period when the Nazi geopolitics rendered the term politically incorrect. But ultimately the concept of South-East Europe proved durable, not only in the German foreign political thinking but also in the Anglo-Saxon and Marxist Eastern European-concepts, and it is also used today.

Consequently, Hungary sometimes had to be contented with this label, which she tried to alter in two ways. Firstly, by pointing out the differences between the concepts of the Balkans and South-East Europe, always objecting to a synonymic usage. Secondly, to minimize the damage, she sought to make profit from the label by promoting a Hungarian-dominated Danube region. For example, in the 1930s and 1940s the Hungarian foreign policy consistently sought to win the title of *primus inter pares* in the German “Südostraum”, which, however, never succeeded because in the Nazi South-East European politics Bucharest and Belgrade often had a larger role than Budapest. But the same damage-minimizing attitude could have led Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy when during his American trip in 1946 he argued that the Hungarian-Romanian borderline should be modified in favor of Hungary because she is the only democratic country in South-East Europe...

Hungary had to face this challenge also after the change of regimes. At that time the Hungarian approach to the Balkan-South-East European region was ambivalent. Although Budapest had a vested interest in building close ties with the Balkans, the predominant interest was to join the central institutions of the Euro-atlantic region, the European Union and NATO as soon as possible. Therefore she sought to be accepted as a Westernized country that was only temporarily and artificially associated with the East because the iron curtain of Communism isolated her from its natural place, the German-dominated Central-Europe. Consequently, Budapest pursued two agendas: on the one hand, she worked hard to distance herself from the South-Eastern neighbors (especially after the Balkan wars broke out) because she was afraid that the Western powers view her as part of this crisis zone. On the other hand, whenever Budapest tried to show its usefulness to the West, she stressed the unique knowledge and relations of Hungary with the region as an added value that the West would miss without the Hungarians.¹⁰ Despite these efforts of differentiation from both the Bal-

10 This ambivalence helps to explain the timid post-socialist Hungarian foreign policy towards the Balkans, which always followed Western directions instead of coming up with own initiatives. There were, of course, other (among them acceptable!) factors: lack of economic capacity allowing for real political ambitions (Hungary could not afford significant capital export and sponsorship, which would have been the economic basis of an ambitious Balkan-policy); lack of reciprocal interest especially from Romania and Serbia (both states showed less interest in building contacts than the Hungarian); and the special position of Hungarian minorities in these two countries, always exposed to possible retaliatory measures. Furthermore, harmonizing bilateral interests (e.g. aligning Hungarian policy towards Croatia with the different needs of that towards for instance Bosnia-Herzegovina or Serbia) was also difficult. The combined effect was that the frequently stressed strategic importance of the Balkans (even though the Balkan was in principle

kans and South-East Europe — remarkably, the Slovenes and Croats made the same case — Hungary had to join the South-East European Cooperation Initiative (SECI) in 1996, which was the most favored instrument for regional cooperation of the West at the time.

Did Hungary succeed to “escape” from the Balkans? It would be a cheap joke to point out the political and social phenomena that deserve this attribute... It must also be admitted that in some specific contexts (thanks to the above mentioned correlations) the labeling of Hungary as a South-East European country is well grounded. World value surveys also show that the mentality and value system of Hungarians is in many ways closer to those of the Balkans and the post-Soviet region than to the Western European or North American patterns.¹¹ But overall the Hungary of the change of regimes presented a credible image of belonging to a Central Europe that is part of the West, rather than to the Balkans or to South-East Europe. This is best shown by the fact that at that time Hungary attracted the largest part of the total FDI flowing into the region. The rapid integration to the Euro-Atlantic system separated the country from the Balkans, which was a significant political success. But we should not live under the spell of this achievement. Historical and political regions are entities that change both in space and time; to mention just one extreme but not illogical scenario of modern political geography, the Balkans can “climb up” to Central Europe, whereas South-East Europe would encompass a region, which geographically does not belong to the Eurasian peninsula called as Europe but is politically integrated to the modern Europe (namely Cyprus, Turkey and the Trans-Caucasus).¹² And sooner or later (if we don’t start from the assumption that the EU is falling apart) all Balkan states could be included in the Euro-Atlantic integration, and then we can again find ourselves in the same club with the Balkan states.

In the “short 20th century”, Hungary had to face another challenge concerning the Balkans: it had to accept and manage the new reality that since the two new post-war neighbors, Romania and Yugoslavia are larger than Hungary, they are more important for the great powers and their “Hungarian-policy” often plays a more significant role in our relations (or indeed domestic affairs!) than our Balkan-policy. It is enough to mention that in 1919 Romania had an important role in the triumph of the counter-revolutionary Horthy regime and in 1956, Yugoslavia and Romania both actively participated in the consolidation of the Kádár regime. But we can also find positive examples like the “third way” of Yugoslavian socialism, which significantly influenced the Hungarian reforms of the 1950s and 1960s. Contrary to Hungary, the

one of the priorities of the Hungarian foreign policy) was referred to the realm of rhetoric (which is the case also today, apart from the issues of the Hungarian minorities). For further reading see O. FÜZES, *The Main Elements of Hungary’s Balkan Strategy*, in: *The Analyst*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2007, pp. 33–48.

11 Moreover, out of the post-socialist Central-European societies it is the Hungarian that stands the closest to the “Eastern” (post-Soviet and Balkan) mentality. See R. INGLES-HART — C. WELZEL, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy*, New York 2005, pp. 63, 344.

12 P. KATONA, *A Nyugat-Balkán helye Délkelet-Európa átalakuló politikai földrajzi térképén*, p. 1, <http://geography.hu/mfk2006/pdf/Katona%20P%E9ter.pdf>, [cit. 2013–12–09].

short 20th century was a successful era for Romania and (to 1991) Serbia/Yugoslavia: their states gained new territories and they were on the winning side in both wars (Yugoslavia more so, but compared to Hungary, Romania fared much better in both world wars). Needless to say, there was a lot of bad blood between these countries and Hungary. Their foreign policy only rarely attributed an important role to Budapest — and even more rarely a positive one.¹³ The predominant attitude was a mix of fresh superiority, indifference, distrust or sometimes overt hostility and their Hungarian minorities were always suspected of supporting Hungarian imperialism. If we add that after 1918 the Hungarian attitude towards the region also underwent a profound change, we should not be surprised at the contemporary decline of the relations between Hungary and the Balkans.

AFTER 1918

After 1918, the Hungarian foreign policy towards Romania and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (to 1929 Serb-Croat-Slovene Kingdom) was subordinated to the larger revisionist objectives.¹⁴ The Trianon peace treaty, signed on 4th June 1920, annexed 103 thousand km² with 1.66 million ethnic Hungarians to Romania and 21 thousand km² with 0.46 million ethnic Hungarians to Yugoslavia (combined with Croatia the figures are 63 thousand km² with 0.56 million Hungarians, all based on the 1910 census). This meant that 44 % of the area of the historical Kingdom of Hungary, and 22 % of the ethnic Hungarian's population was "moved to the Balkans" — but it should also be noted that Hungarians constituted only about a quarter (in Transylvania) or a third (in Voivodina) of the population of the annexed territories.¹⁵ No wonder that Hun-

13 From the South Slavic literature on the Hungarian-Yugoslavian relationship, see V. VI-NAVER, *Jugoslavija i Madarska*, 2 Vols., Beograd 1971–1976, pp. 574 and 461; K. KOVAČEVIĆ, *Yugoslav-Hungarian Relations 1953–1956*, in: L. DIMIĆ (Ed.), *Great Powers and Small Countries in Cold War 1945–1955 — Issue of Ex-Yugoslavia*, Beograd 2005, pp. 140–158; N. JEFTIĆ-SARČEVIĆ, *Geopolitical Correlation between Serbia and Hungary — The Importance of Connections between the Danube and the Black Sea Regions*, in: *Mediterrán és Balkán Fórum*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, pp. 19–20. From the recent Romanian literature on the Hungarian-Romanian relationship, see A. CAPELLE-POGĂCEAN, *Les relations hungaro-roumaines et la question des minorités magyare*, in: *Les Etudes du CERI*, No. 12, 1996, p. 41; C. IORDACHI, *The Romanian-Hungarian Reconciliation Process*, in: *PolSci — Romanian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 1, No. 3/4, 2001, pp. 88–134.

14 For summaries on Hungarian foreign policy in the modern era, see M. FÜLÖP — P. SIPOS, *Magyarország külpolitikája a XX. században*, Budapest 1998, p. 494; F. GAZDAG — L. J. KISS (Eds.), *Magyar külpolitika a 20. században*, Budapest 2004, p. 350; P. PRITZ (Ed.), *Magyar külpolitikai gondolkodás a 20. században*, Budapest 2006, p. 320; R. GYÖRI SZABÓ, *A magyar külpolitika története 1848-tól napjainkig*, Budapest 2012, p. 408. From among documentary editions, see the volumes of the *Diplomáciai iratok Magyarország külpolitikájához, Iratok a magyar diplomácia történetéhez*, and the *Magyar Külpolitikai Évkönyv*.

15 On the history of Hungarian minorities in Yugoslavia and Romania, see N. BÁRDI — C. FEDINEC — L. SZARKA (Eds.), *Kisebbségi magyar közösségek a 20. században*, Budapest 2008, p. 508. According to the latest census, there are 1,230,000 million Hungarians in

gary, which sought the revision of these terms, had a tense relationship with the anti-Hungarian alliance of Romania, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, which protected the status quo at any price. We should in fact speak of the “Small Entente-policy” of Budapest at this time instead of a Balkan-policy as all South-East European relations were subordinated to the aim of destroying this alliance.¹⁶

The Hungarian Balkan policy was limited to the two neighboring countries. In order to weaken the hinterland of the Small Entente, Budapest signed a treaty of neutrality with Turkey in 1929, as well as kept good relations with Bulgaria (after the political left there was defeated in 1923). But these contacts remained weak. The Albans had been once patronized by the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy with the aim to weaken the Serbs; however, after 1918 only the romantic marriage of Ahmed Zogu and Geraldine Apponyi could evoke the interest of the Hungarians.¹⁷ Greece was left out of the horizon of the contemporary Hungarian foreign policy. Generally, this almost exclusive focus on Romania and Yugoslavia persisted in the later decades. For example, the cordial but superficial Hungarian-Bulgarian relations seemed merely to be a reflection of the similarly superficial friendship of the party leaders Todor Zhivkov and János Kádár.

In the inter-war period, after the shock of Trianon and with the discrimination against Hungarians in Transylvania and Voivodina, relationships between Hungary and Romania and Hungary and Yugoslavia were dominated by conflicts throughout the era. While in the Bled Agreement in 1938 the Small Entente states eventually allowed Hungary to rearm and committed themselves to improving the situation of the Hungarian minorities in return for Budapest’s renouncing of the use of force, the agreement came far too late to change the course of events (and has never, in fact, entered into force). Political tensions prevented the possibilities of economic cooperation even though economic interdependence was clearly illustrated by the trade data after 1918. In the ensuing two decades, 10 to 13 per cent of the Hungarian foreign trade went to these two countries (while in the 1980s this figure was only 5–6 per cent and today it is 10 per cent, including all Yugoslavian successor states). It would probably have helped to overcome the economic crisis at the beginning of the 1930s if the contemporary plans of regional commercial cooperation had been realized (Tardieu-plan; Beneš-plan). But political tensions and the mutual lack of cooperative will persistently prove stronger than economic considerations.

Yet Hungarian foreign policy towards Romania and Yugoslavia was not identical, although equally cold. Whereas there was a constant opposition to Romania, Budapest showed a somewhat more conciliatory attitude to Belgrade. Hungarian politicians saw the Kingdom as the least stable country in the Small Entente, and hoped to start the disruption of the alliance with its weakest link. So Budapest was ready to

Romania and 250,000 in Serbia. The number of Romanians in Hungary is 8,000, and that of Serbs is 4,000.

16 For further reading see M. ÁDÁM, *A kisantant*, Budapest 1981, p. 265; G. JUHÁSZ, *Magyarország külpolitikája 1919–1945*, Budapest 1988, p. 483; L. GULYÁS, *A Horthy-korszak külpolitikája*, 2 Vols., Máriabesnyő 2012–2013, pp. 180 and 200.

17 The King of Albania I. Zogu married Geraldine Apponyi, a Hungarian duchess, on 27th April 1938.

support any enemy or rival of Belgrade, both foreign and domestic; this is why they assisted Mussolini's policy to establish Italian supremacy on the Balkans and "surround" Yugoslavia or this is why Budapest was linked, albeit only indirectly, with the assassination of King Alexander in Marseille in 1934.¹⁸ An alternative strategy to dismantle the Small Entente was to win over Yugoslavia to the Hungarian side by reviving the old dream of Hungarian policy-makers: the Rome-Belgrade-Budapest-Warsaw axis. This led to conciliatory attempts in the mid-1920s (when on the 400th anniversary of the Mohács Battle Governor Horthy revived the memory of the common anti-Ottoman struggles and spoke of the possibility of a new Hungarian-South Slavic cooperation) and in the late 1930s when Yugoslavia was the only neighbor of Hungary through which the government of Pál Teleki, which sought an "armed neutrality" could have attempted to maintain the Western contacts (on the Hungarian side this was the purpose of the "eternal friendship treaty" signed by Yugoslavia and Hungary on 12th December 1940).

In 1940–41 many believed that the annexation of northern Transylvania¹⁹ and parts of Voivodina²⁰ justified the Nazi-orientation of Budapest's Balkan policy. But ultimately, while emotionally the revisionist attitude was understandable, it lacked any sense of reality — especially that the "all or nothing" option triumphed over the observation of the actual ethnic lines.²¹ Therefore the intoxicating results of German-backed revisionism were short-lived and came at a high price. They were not a product of Hungary's own efforts, but only of Hitler's personal decision, serving his own aims. Nor were they executed in a manner even remotely acceptable for the anti-fascists powers, especially in the case of Yugoslavia. Prime Minister Pál Teleki, in his suicide note, was perfectly right in describing the participation in the war against Yugoslavia as "looting a corpse". Once again Hungarians were thus at war with their Southern neighbor — with all the consequences of an armed conflict, such as the "cold days" of January 1942 and the "even colder ones" between October — November 1944.²² And

18 Hungary gave some support to the nationalistic separatist organization (VMRO, Ustaša), and she offered them shelter in Jankapuszta but was not involved in the assassination itself. For further reading see M. ORMOS, *Merénylet Marseille-ben*, Budapest 1984, p. 235.

19 On 30th August 1940 a German-Italian arbitration court ruled in favour of Hungary in the border dispute with Romania, returning 43,000 km² and 2.4 m people (approximately 55 % ethnic Hungarians) to Hungary.

20 Governor Horthy allowed the German military to use Hungarian soil to attack Yugoslavia in April of 1941, and sent in Hungarian troops one week later. Hitler reciprocated by giving back a large portion of the territory lost in Trianon (11,500 km² and 1 m people, 40% ethnic Hungarians). Prime Minister Pál Teleki, supporter of neutrality (on this issue), took his own life on the 3rd April. For further reading, see E. A. SAJTI, *Délvidék 1941–1944 — a magyar kormányok délszláv politikája*, Budapest 1987, p. 305.

21 One must admit that this was complicated, as the largest Hungarian bloc (the Székelys) lived in the middle of Romania (Székelyföld, Ținutul Secuiesc).

22 First, Hungarian authorities executed a large anti-partisan raid in January 1942, killing 3,000–5,000 civilians. Vengeance came in 1944, when Tito's partisans reconquered the area and killed 5,000–25,000 — equally innocent — Hungarians civilians. For further reading, see E. A. SAJTI, *Hungarians in the Voivodina 1918–1947*, New York 2003, p. 581.

while at war with Yugoslavia,²³ Hungary also quickly found herself in a race with Romania to prove their usefulness to Hitler in the war against the Soviet giant — all the while Budapest ignored the more important clashes of interest with Romania. To paraphrase the title of a book by Dániel Csátári,²⁴ Hungary found herself in the whirlwind of World War II along with Romania and Yugoslavia — and it was the Hungarian political elite that proved the least competent of the three.

AFTER 1945

In 1945, the clock was basically reset to 1918 as far as the Hungarian relationship with South-Eastern Europe was concerned. Yugoslavia was among the winners, and Romania, while it did not count as a winner, was more important for the Soviet Union than Hungary. Therefore the goal of the contemporary Hungarian foreign policy to retain some parts of the revision in the new peace treaty was doomed to failure. This chance was lost when Horthy failed to break with Nazi Germany and join the Allies in October 1944.

During the decades of state socialism, Hungarian relations with the Balkans were a function of the “limited sovereignty” of the country, of its dependence from the Soviet Union. Autonomous foreign policy was only possible in a very limited manner (and not at all between 1949 and 1962). Therefore up to the beginning of the 1960s the Hungarian Balkan politics (insofar as it existed) depended on the Soviet plans in South-Eastern Europe. Further obstacle was the sensitive Cold War geopolitics in the Balkans: a different line was to be followed with the brotherly Romania and Bulgaria than with Yugoslavia and Albania that were socialist but outside of the Soviet bloc, and yet another with Greece and Turkey, which were integrated into the Western alliance.

However, after 1945 the new context brought positive changes in the Hungarian-Yugoslavian-Romanian relations. Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia belonged to the same international bloc, had very similar political systems, which increased the possibilities of cooperation. Treaties of friendship were signed, and some even planned customs union and dreamed of a confederation. This hopeful period, however, did not last long. When Stalin excluded Tito's Yugoslavia from the Soviet bloc in June 1948, the Rákosi government was overzealous to follow the Soviet line and thus Hungary became one of the most committed enemy of Tito's Yugoslavia, providing “evidence” to the false Soviet accusations in the show trial against László Rajk.²⁵ This put Hun-

²³ The axis powers divided up Yugoslavia in April 1941, an act deemed illegitimate by the Allies, and the Titoist partisans fighting Hungarian forces among others, acted as the Résistance of Yugoslavia. The political fragmentation of the Southern Slavic region (puppet states Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro) may have seemed advantageous at first for Budapest, but it failed to form friendly relations with the Croatia (“*Nezavisna Država Hrvatska*”, NDH) that could have served as an ally (mainly because of territorial disputes concerning Muraköz). See D. SOKCSEVITS, *Horvátország a 7. századtól napjainkig*, Budapest 2011, pp. 525–526, 846.

²⁴ D. CSATÁRI, *Forgószélben — magyar-román viszony 1940–1945*, Budapest 1969, p. 490.

²⁵ Former minister of the interior and also of foreign affairs László Rajk was persuaded to plead guilty for espionage for the “imperialist” Belgrade and was sentenced to death on

gary in the front line of the Cold War as a stronghold for the economic, political and military blockade against Yugoslavia. While relations slightly improved in 1955–1956, they deteriorated again after the failure of the revolution, and only normalized in the 1960s.²⁶

Relations with Romania were less stressed in the late 1940s, but nonetheless remained minimal. The (limited) friendliness of the Romanian government towards Hungary and minority Hungarians quickly disappeared after the signing of the Paris peace treaty (10th February 1947). Moreover, the early years of the Stalinist iron discipline did not allow any bilateral contact between the socialist countries (practically everybody had to be in touch with only Moscow). So by the late 1940s, early 1950s, there was practically an iron curtain between the two countries. The only result of this period is that in 1952 Székelyföld (Ținutul Secuiesc) became autonomous based on the Soviet example (which lasted until 1968). This autonomy, was, however, rather formal and limited.²⁷

By the early 1960s, Kádár's regime was consolidated, its Western contacts and its prestige in the East improved. As a result, the Hungarian foreign policy became more independent, leaving room to Kádár's pragmatism and endeavor to avoid conflicts. This benefited the Hungarian-Yugoslav relations, which marked the beginning of a quarter century of prosperity in bilateral relations, which was in direct opposition to the cold or even hostile relations that characterized the relations between the two countries in the past four decades (which would return in the 1990s concerning "Small-Yugoslavia", the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia or FRY). Political summits became regular by the end of the 1960s, various committees (dealing with economic, cultural or scientific areas of cooperation) were formed, the closed military border zone was dissolved, the obligatory visa system was abolished and bilateral trade was growing fast. Of course, some differences remained. Yugoslavia was a member of the non-aligned movement and kept its 'third way' model of socialism based on self-management, whereas Hungary was part of the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON. Consequently, under the principle of "limited sovereignty" Budapest was subject to Soviet expectations both in terms of its economic and social system and foreign policy.

24th September 1949. Stalin's propaganda based the charges against Yugoslavia partly on this sentence.

- 26 Yugoslavia had initially supported the Hungarian reforms, but later saw „counter-revolutionary tendencies” in the process, and backed the (second) Soviet intervention on the 4th November, as well as Kádár's government. It was indeed Tito, who recommended that Kádár should be Prime Minister instead of the hard-liner Ferenc Münnich. Despite the support given to Kádár, Belgrade condemned the deportation of Imre Nagy to Romania from the Yugoslav embassy, as well as his execution later on, and also permitted free passage for the more than twenty thousand refugees to the West. In return, the Soviets accused Yugoslavia of supporting “Hungarian revisionism”. On the relations between Hungary, Yugoslavia and the Soviets in 1956, see L. BÍRÓ, *Die Sowjetunion und die jugoslawisch-ungarischen Beziehungen 1956*, in: W. MUELLER — M. PORTMANN (Eds.), *Osteuropa vom Weltkrieg zur Wende*, Wien 2007, pp. 241–256; Z. RIPP, *Hungary's Part in the Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict 1956–58*, in: *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 7. No. 2, 1998, pp. 197–225.
- 27 S. BOTTONI, *Sztálin a székelyeknél — a Magyar Autonóm Tartomány története 1952–1960*, Csíkszereda 2008, p. 446.

Despite these differences, it was only after the intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968 that bilateral relations again deteriorated. The intervention was condemned by Yugoslavia, while Hungary not only backed it but also participated in the oppression of the Prague Spring. However, apart from this episode, bilateral relations were normal and progressed continuously. Coming to terms with reality, both countries gave up their attempts to change the other (previously, Hungary tried to win over Yugoslavia to the Soviet camp, while Yugoslavia often backed Hungarian reforms to promote its own peculiar model of socialism). They had similar opinions of several international questions (the détente, the place for market mechanisms in a socialist economy, the role of minorities as bridges between nations); and their economies were similar in terms of level of development and were often complementary in structure. The normalization of relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet block from the 1960s facilitated this process, as did the increased opportunity of Hungarian foreign policy to be a little more autonomous and to attempt to represent the interests of its nationalities. It is shown by the fact that Hungary remained neutral in the disputes between other socialist countries and Yugoslavia, e.g. in the Bulgarian-Yugoslav conflict over the Macedonian question. Needless to say, none of the countries became the primary partner of the other, but the intensity and dynamics of relations, which went beyond the sphere of politics, was reflected in the frequency of high-level meetings: Kádár and Tito met nine times between 1962 and 1979. The Adriatic beach became a prime destination for Hungarian tourists during this period. The situation of Hungarians in the Voivodina became much better than in any other Socialist country (Husák's Czechoslovakia, Brezhnev's Soviet Union and Ceaușescu's Romania). The value of trade between the two countries multiplied: it increased from 40 million USD in 1962 to 700 million in 1990.²⁸

The Romanian-Hungarian relations had a completely different dynamics. Both Hungary and Romania were members of the Warsaw Pact and the COMECON, so in principle they were allies. In the mid-1950s relations started to recover but after 1956, Bucharest again made attempts to intervene in the Hungarian domestic affairs (as we can see from the fate of Imre Nagy). Later on, the combination of neo-Stalinist dogmatism and great-Romanian nationalism that culminated in Ceaușescu's regime ultimately led to estrangement. In fact, Romania already started to distance itself from the USSR under Gheorghiu-Dej by exploiting the Soviet-Chinese differences. This manifested itself in the independent foreign policy Bucharest pursued: their new strategy, announced in 1964, advocated the primacy of national interest. This new strategy occasionally had positive by-effects for Hungary and there were cases when the Hungarian side tolerated the Romanian viewpoint, furthermore, indirectly facilitated it by a passive behavior in the disputes between Romania and other socialist countries. This was especially the case in economic matters, as Romanian and Hungarian party leaders both had an interest in strengthening economic ties with the West, as well as rejecting the plans to turn the COMECON into a supra-national economic planning bureau.

²⁸ L. ARDAY, *Reformok és kudarcok*, Budapest 2002, pp. 72, 120–128, 351; *Magyar Külpolitikai Évkönyv* 1990, pp. 340, 521. For further reading about the Hungarian-Yugoslavian relationship, see Á. HORNÝÁK, *Találkozások — Ütközések*, Pécs 2010, p. 192; E. A. SAJTI (Ed.), *Magyarország és a Balkán a XX. században*, Szeged 2011, p. 226.

At the same time Kádár's concept of socialism and internationalism could not be reconciled with Ceaușescu's politics that he always considered to be harmful for the universal mission of socialism. More importantly, Kádár eventually had to face the increasing discrimination against Hungarians in Transylvania, which he did not want to and could not address until the early 1970s since it increased anger in Hungarian society and thereby threatened to undermine the hardly won and therefore ardently protected social support of the regime. As a result, after the initial improvement, Hungarian-Romanian relations became ambivalent and stagnated, which is shown by the fact that party leaders did not meet at all in the decade between 1977 and 1988 as Romania failed to keep the agreements signed at the meetings of Debrecen and Oradea on 15th and 16th June 1977 (even closing the Hungarian consulate in Cluj-Napoca in 1988). Károly Grósz' trip to Romania on 28th August 1988 was likewise unsuccessful. Kádár both refused to go to Romania and to invite the 'Conducător' to Hungary — which the latter would have preferred. This means that there was some evolution in Kádár's attitude towards Romania from his initial speech given in Târgu Mureș in 1958,²⁹ but he ultimately failed to influence, let alone change Ceaușescu's anti-Hungarian policy.

AFTER THE CHANGE OF REGIMES

The collapse of the bipolar world order and the dissolution of the Eastern European socialist bloc brought about radical changes in the Hungarian-Balkans relations. Hungary became one of the model countries of the region, and the Hungarian minority even contributed to the fall of Ceaușescu through the Tőkés-affair in December 1989.³⁰ Meanwhile Yugoslavia descended into the chaos of war and disintegrated and Romania lost orientation (especially until the end of the first Iliescu government in 1996). Evidently, Budapest had to pursue a different policy towards the war-torn Western Balkans from the policy towards the "Eastern-Balkans" encompassing Bulgaria and Romania both of which intensively sought to catch up with East-Central-Europe from 1996–1997. Furthermore, Hungary had to carefully consider the new era's ambiguous effects on her South-East European minorities. On the one hand, it soon became obvious everywhere that the high hopes and expectations of 1989 could not be fulfilled, and Hungarians in Yugoslavia even faced the threat of war. On the other hand, their general situation improved (after the fall of the Milošević regime in October 2000 even in Serbia) as political pluralism developed, borders opened and integration to the European Union started — all this improved opportunities for busi-

29 In this speech Kádár showed ignorance towards the grievances of the Hungarian minority and gave undue praise to Romanian minority policies. See G. FÖLDES, *Magyarország, Románia és a nemzeti kérdés 1956–89*, Budapest 2007, pp. 39–41, 562. For further reading about the Hungarian-Romanian relationship, see B. BORSI-KÁLMÁN, *A békétlenség stádiumai: Fejezetek a magyar-román kapcsolatok történetéből*, Budapest 1999, p. 373; M. FÜLÖP — G. VINCZE (Eds.), *Vasfüggöny Keleten*, Debrecen 2007, p. 392.

30 The uprising against the Ceaușescu-regime was started by a protest against the deportation of the Protestant priest László Tőkés in Timișoara started on 16th December.

ness and individuals alike. These developments were often more significant than the support of the motherland, which is of course important but is often more aimed at the domestic audience.

The most important challenge of the period was undoubtedly the relation to the South Slavic wars of the 1990s.³¹ On some occasions, Hungary became involved in them in controversial ways, but to its defense never directly. Firstly by secretly delivering arms to Croatia before the war broke out, in October 1990 (the “Kalashnikov-affair”), and secondly by providing direct political and logistical support to the NATO forces bombing Serbia in March–June 1999. The continuing wars were a national security risk and caused significant economic losses for Hungary, with minorities in Yugoslavia being directly affected.³² This is why Hungary supported and applied international sanctions against Small-Yugoslavia aimed at stopping the conflict. This (in essence approvable) policy was, however, burdened with very serious dilemmas: during the 1999 NATO-bombing Hungary was the only member state of the Alliance, whose national minorities lived in the attacked country, basically becoming potential hostages. This ambivalence explains why — while Hungary always sought to be loyal to the West’s Yugoslavia-policy in her quest to join Western international organizations — Budapest was also more open to Serbia. In other words, every Hungarian government understood the necessity of pragmatism towards the regime of Slobodan Milošević. The Yugoslav wars also increased Hungary’s significance for the West: it became important to preserve the role model of the peaceful Hungarian transition and the West, which had a vested interest in the quick and cost-effective stabilization of the region, also needed reliable local partners in the neighborhood of the crisis zone. Hungary fulfilled these criteria by contributing to the peacekeeping missions in both Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo.³³

We can conclude that after 1989 there was a revival of Hungarian interest in the Balkans. An element of this was certainly the revival of the feeling of historical supremacy, but this did not stem from any intention to restore past hegemony but much more from the hardly hidden pride of being the “West’s eminent disciple” in Central Europe. Foreign policy consensus was quickly formed in that Hungary should pioneer the euroatlantic integration of the Balkans (which continues today, as shown by the strong support given to the Croatian aspiration to becoming full member of

31 For detailed reading on the subject see G. JESZENSZKY, *Hungary and the Break-Up of Yugoslavia I–II*, in: *Hungarian Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2 and No. 3, 2011, http://hungarianreview.com/article/hungary_and_the_break-up_of_yugoslavia, [cit. 2013–11–09], and http://hungarianreview.com/article/hungary_and_the_break-up_of_yugoslavia_part_II, [cit. 2013–11–09]; I. SZILÁGYI, *Hungary and the Western Balkans since 1990*, in: *Foreign Policy Review* (Budapest), No. 1/2, 2005, pp. 184–200, <http://www.kulugyiintezet.hu/pub/default.asp?y=2005&t=8>, [cit. 2013–12–09].

32 Approximately 30–50 thousand refugees fled to Hungary and a few hundred Hungarians were killed in the war. Economic losses to Hungary are estimated at 2–3bn USD. See I. SZILÁGYI, *Magyarország és Szerbia viszonya a rendszerváltás óta eltelt időszakban*, in: *Külügyi Szemle*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2011, pp. 80–94.

33 Z. L. KISS, *Magyarok a békefenntartásban*, Budapest 2011, pp. 106–124, 278, http://www.honvedelem.hu/container/files/attachments/26487/magyarok_a_bekafenntartasban.pdf, [cit. 2014–08–07].

the EU). All Hungarian governments considered the development of the Hungarian-Balkan relations as a strategic priority — although declarations were not always followed by actions. This direction fit well in the new Hungarian foreign policy doctrine of “three priorities”, namely: pursuing the euroatlantic integration, maintaining good neighborly relations, and supporting the Hungarian minorities.³⁴ There was no doubt that a politically democratic and economically growing Balkans with a clear Western orientation was in the interest of Hungary both from the aspects of national security and the protection of Hungarian minorities. Hungarian governments also realized that the Balkans is one of the few regions of the world economy where Hungarian companies had a comparative advantage, and were indeed able to exploit this well until the 2008 crisis. Hence, besides the improvement of the political relations, economic cooperation developed as well, particularly with Romania and with Serbia after 2000. Since joining the EU in 2007, Romania is consistently the third or fourth trade partner of Hungary (with a share of 5–6% of Hungarian exports), and the number one destination of Hungarian capital investment. In other words, Hungary and Hungarian minorities in Transylvania were among the prime beneficiaries of the Romanian accession. Trade with Serbia grew sevenfold between 2000 and 2008 (from 164 million to 1.128 million USD).³⁵

³⁴ This doctrine was only formulated officially and comprehensively in 2008 with the Foreign Policy Strategy Document, but the principles had already been laid out in the form of Government programmes or parliamentary resolutions in the beginning of the 1990s. See “11/1993. számú Országgyűlési Határozat a Magyar Köztársaság biztonságpolitikájának alapelveiről”, <http://www.complex.hu/kzldat/o93h0011.htm/o93h0011.htm>, [cit. 2012-12-09]; “94/1998. számú Országgyűlési Határozat a Magyar Köztársaság biztonság- és védelempolitikájának alapelveiről”, <http://www.mkih.hu/torvenyek/o98h0094/o98h0094.htm>, [cit. 2012-12-09]. Later on, the “1012/2008. sz. Kormányhatározat Magyarország külkapcsolati stratégiájáról”, Budapest 2008, pp. 211–237, http://www.kulugyminiszterium.hu/NR/rdonlyres/057E8586-EFA9-428D-A858-9A38285A130D/0/magyar_kulugyi_evkonyv_2008.pdf, [cit. 2012-12-11]. Reaffirmed these and specified that good relations with Serbia are in Hungary’s “strategic interest”, and that Hungary ‘supports to the full extent the gradual realization of Serbia’s perspective of integration (Ibidem, p. 221.). The position of the Orban-administration (in power since 2010) is essentially the same: “*Within the Western Balkans accession process, we resolutely support Serbia’s immediate accession if she keeps the European values and fulfils all the accession criteria, as well as we support the possibility of her joining NATO*”, Magyar külpolitika az uniós elnökség után, Budapest 2011, p. 21, http://www.kulugyiintezet.hu/doc/files/kiadvanyok/egyeb/magyar_kulpolitika_az_unios_elnokseg_utan.pdf, [cit. 2013-11-03].

³⁵ On the role of the South Eastern European region in the Hungarian trade relations see B. KÁDÁR, *A Balkán térség és a magyar külpolitika*, <http://www.balkancenter.hu/pdf/kadarbela.pdf>, [cit. 2014-08-07]; ZS. M. CSÁSZÁR, *Magyarország gazdasági, politikai és kulturális kapcsolatai a Balkán egyes államaival a 21. század elején*, in: *Modern Geográfia*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 2010, pp. 1–23; N. PAP, *A magyar Balkán-politika kihívásai*, in: *Külügyi Szemle*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2012, pp. 150–165.

CONCLUSION

After the review of the events of the century, we can conclude that the history of the relations between Hungary and the Balkans is far from being merely a history of conflicts either at the level of governments or in the everyday life of communities that live together. The lesson to be drawn is that if there is a mutual political will to cooperate between the governments and the political elites show a minimum level of tolerance towards their ethnic minorities, this neighborhood can become a symbiotic relationship for both sides. This is illustrated well by both the periods of successful interstate cooperation or by the multiculturalism of Transylvania and Voivodina (that was often destroyed by the waves of nationalism but succeeded to revive). Other examples are the life and works of those humanists who can be a source of national pride for more than one country: the Vujičić brothers, Danilo Kiš, or Attila József (*"My father was half Szekely / half or ethnic Romanian"* — from *By the Danube*).³⁶

There are, of course, more militant voices of the Hungarian-Balkan relations on every side even today. In Hungary for example, Jobbik's stance (the far-right party) on Serbia's accession to the EU differs from the multi-party consensus because they demand historical apology and ethnic autonomy in return for supporting her accession to the EU. Jobbik held the same position in the case of Romania before 2007.³⁷ In my opinion, there is no need for a new strategy towards the Balkans. Interests of the Hungarian minorities in Transylvania and Voivodina could certainly be better represented and served — but long-term improvement can only be guaranteed by continuing a policy of mutual partnership. It is high time that political elites on all sides recognized that as opposed to the dominant trends of the 19th and 20th century and the nationalist periods of state-building (at the expense of other states) today Hungarians and their neighbors in the Balkans can have more common interests and objectives than opposing ones because they can only meet the global challenges and exploit the opportunities of the EU-membership if they cooperate. If the French and the Germans could succeed in this, there is no reason why it would be impossible between the Hungarians and their Balkan neighbors. A precondition for this is of course to abandon the historical grievances and the asking for compensation and to be able to address the unresolved problems of minorities in essence because these are the two issues that burden the most the bilateral relations of today.³⁸

It is wrong to say that Hungary has nothing to do in this respect but it is equally wrong to deny that today our neighbors also have to do something for the improve-

³⁶ The musician Tihomir Vujičić and the writer Stojan Vujičić were ethnic Serbs, who lived in Hungary. The Yugoslavian novelist Danilo Kiš had Hungarian-Jewish ancestry and the Hungarian poet Attila József had, among others, Romanian lineage.

³⁷ See for example a press release of Jobbik: *"We can only support Serbia's application with certain conditions"*. <http://www.mrm.rs/aktualis/501-feltetelekkkel-tudjuk-tamogatni-serbia-eu-csatlakozasatq0>, [cit. 2013-11-10]. Similar opinions were always present on the Hungarian extreme right, but until Jobbik won parliamentary seats in 2010, this was politically irrelevant.

³⁸ F. GLATZ, *Történelmi megbékélés, de hogyan?*, in: *História*, Vol. 32, No. 1/2, 2011, pp. 2, 51-62.

ment of the situation of the Hungarian minority.³⁹ Although noble gestures of the reconciliation process between Hungarians and Serbs, such as the two presidents' (János Áder and Tomislav Nikolić) mutual apologies due to Second World War massacres and memorial inaugurations in June of 2013, might be promising.⁴⁰ Once the political elites will have the will to act cooperatively and the intelligentsia will display mutual empathy and rationality (since as already the renowned Hungarian political philosopher István Bibó showed, in this region we have a tendency to emotionally evaluate any critique of our history or politics or even take it as an attack against our national identity and personal integrity),⁴¹ the relations between Hungary and the countries of the Balkans would be able to go beyond the logic of zero-sum power games (in which one wins that the other loses — as it happened many times in history) and it would be possible to lay the solid foundations for a prosperous co-existence embedded in the modern European integration.⁴²

HUNGARY AND THE BALKANS IN THE 20TH CENTURY — FROM THE HUNGARIAN PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT

The first part of the study reviews the debates about Hungary's "Europeanness" and her place in Europe. It discusses Hungarian self-perceptions about history, socio-cultural character, and on whether the country is Central-European, East-European or South-East European. The second part summarizes the relationship between Hungary and the Balkans from 1918 until the Eastern enlargement of the EU, by focusing on aspects most important from the Hungarian perspective. These are the Hungarian-Yugoslavian (after 1991 Hungarian-Serbian), the Hungarian-Romanian relations and the question of minorities. Finally concludes by pointing to the present challenges in bilateral relations and underlines the perspectives opened by the euro-atlantic integration of the region.

KEYWORDS

Hungary; the Balkans; 20th Century; International Relations

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³⁹ For example, the parliamentary representation of minorities in Hungary was unsolved until 2014, unlike Romania and Serbia — but the situation of the 8,000 Romanians or 4,000 Serbs cannot be compared to that of the 1.2 million Hungarians in Transylvania or the 250 thousand living in Voivodina.

⁴⁰ About the Serbian-Hungarian reconciliation process see <http://www.magyarszerbmult.hu>, [cit. 2014–10–12].

⁴¹ See I. BIBÓ, *Politikai hisztériák*, Budapest 2011, p. 388.

⁴² This paper is the edited and extended version of the lecture delivered at the 2012 General Assembly of the Hungarian Historical Society. Translated by Eszter Bartha and Levente Juhász.