

Summary

Historical evidence shows that Hungarian ancestors lived and migrated together across the steppes, maintaining connections over time. Hungary strives to foster strong relations with nations that share an understanding of our history, habits, and national character. Hungary is the "most Western Asian nation", even though our appearance may no longer reflect those Asian origins.

The Hungarian government offered to host the first and only diplomatic representation of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in Budapest, functioning as a quasi-embassy and fully financed by Hungary. This initiative opens new opportunities for cultural, scientific, educational, and economic cooperation with the Turkic World. It allows Hungary to initiate projects that benefit our nations, encapsulating our public diplomacy approach.

Instead of leveraging Hungary as a bridge and facilitator between the Turkic World and the EU, the EU tends to overlook this opportunity. Political motivations often overshadow rational necessities. Hungary is uniquely positioned to understand the Turkic World better than any other EU member state.

Hungary, Foreign Policy and Public Diplomacy.

Prof. László VASA - Széchenyi István University

We are living in a time when international cooperation is no longer a luxury but a necessity. We face global challenges (economic uncertainties, climate change, digital transformation, and social inequality). On the other hand, we see global opportunities such as new technologies, global learning, cultural creativity and scientific discovery. In this complex world, it is clear that countries must understand each other better, not only in business or politics but also in how we learn, innovate, and tell our national stories. This is essentially what public diplomacy is about. It is also evident that countries must foster better mutual understanding.

Hungary strongly believes that friendship, mutual respect, and strategic cooperation should last longer than election cycles or annual reports. More than fifteen years ago, our politicians decided to adopt a fundamentally new and different foreign policy approach. These are not mere political slogans for us; they form the foundation of how we think about diplomacy. When we look at the Turkic World (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan), we do not see just partners in a formal sense. We see something more personal.

In connection with the Turkic World, we see a shared story of cultural memory, deep linguistic ties, and people who once traveled the same steppes, lived similar traditions, and preserved values of honor, family, and knowledge. As many Hungarian historians and linguists have written for centuries, the Hungarian people carry cultural and linguistic links to the East. Some of these are symbolic, some are scientific, but all remind us that our story is connected to yours. In Hungary, we sometimes say we are distant relatives but close friends.

Over the past decade, Hungary has transformed this symbolic idea into a strategic policy called the Eastern Opening, launched more than eleven years ago. This is not just about trade or infrastructure; it is about rebalancing our attention, looking more seriously to the East (Central Asia and the Turkic World) as key partners for the future. Because we believe these relationships are not only natural but also strategic, full of opportunities, and built on deep cultural trust.

Public diplomacy is an excellent tool, not only for building roads or railways or signing economic agreements, but for creating bridges of knowledge, innovation, and human understanding. We need to focus on the most important pillars of Hungary's soft power diplomacy. For instance, Hungary and the Turkic World are partners where progress is being made, not just economically but also culturally through people-to-people programs and related projects.

We share common values such as genuine friendship, family, mutual respect, and cooperation based on trust. Within the framework of Hungary's Eastern Opening, or rather our broader opening to the East, we have expanded our networks and increased the frequency of our relations with Central Asian countries and the Turkic World. This doctrine focuses not only on Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus, and Türkiye but also on the broader post-Soviet area and China. Later, Hungary began opening to the South, covering Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This reflects a completely new approach to our foreign policy.

The main idea behind this was that, thirty-five years ago, after the political changes, Hungary chose to follow the Euro-Atlantic track, which was a wise decision. We still believe that Hungary belongs to the Western World. However, twenty-five years later, it became clear that we were overly dependent on the West, not just economically but also, to some extent,

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culturally. This dependency created potential conflicts of interest within our tradition-based society when it came to Western values, which were sometimes perceived as excessive. Economically, our trade was very one-sided. The more than 80% of our exports were oriented toward the Western World.

When the economies of Western countries, such as Germany, the US, or Western Europe, weaken, Hungary's economy suffers as well. Therefore, the main idea was to reconnect with our traditional partners in the East, where we have always found mutual understanding, even during Soviet times. We had a strong foundation for new collaborations. We began increasing our cultural, scientific, higher education, and economic presence in the region.

As a part of public diplomacy pattern, we opened new embassies, such as the one in Bishkek, and increased the number of our diplomats, particularly cultural and commercial attachés, in the region. Several high-level visits have taken place between our countries and regions, including multilateral talks. As you kindly mentioned in your introduction, Hungary is an observer member of the OTS. However, we are as active as any full member. We initiate projects, such as the Drought Prevention Institute to combat desertification in our lands.

Additionally, we participate in the Turkic Investment Fund and all professional bodies of the OTS, including the Turkic Academy and the official think tank network of the Turkic States. To discuss Hungary's hard and soft power perspectives, certainly, Hungary is not a hard power. There were times when the Hungarian Kingdom was one of the strongest in Europe, but now we are a small country. We have endured significant historical challenges, and our territory is relatively small, ranking around 100th in the world.

Hungary's population is less than 10 million, and we do not believe that migration, particularly mass migration, can solve our demographic challenges. Instead, we focus on the values of family and supporting families to have more children. This is a key part of Hungarian public policy, though it is not directly related to foreign policy. However, several countries are very interested in studying the Hungarian model of family support. Our economy is close to that of the most developed countries, but we are not yet among them. We strive to reach the average living standard of the EU, but this will require time and effort.

When it comes to hard power, our military is not large, but we have begun significantly strengthening our military capabilities and equipment, partly with the help of our friends from Türkiye, such as through the acquisition of Gidran

vehicles. This reflects the excellent cooperation between our countries. However, there are fields where Hungary is overrepresented relative to its hard power, particularly in culture. In music, for example, Hungary has given the world-famous composers like Bartók and Liszt, and Hungarian folk music is widely recognized.

In science, we are proud of 12 Nobel laureates of Hungarian origin. Although most received their awards abroad, they were educated in Hungary. In technology, several Hungarian inventions are well-known. Our education system, particularly in technical universities, is of a very high standard. In sports, Hungary ranks among the top 20 countries globally in terms of Olympic gold medals and overall achievements.

The quality of life in Hungary is quite high, even compared to the Western World, as we preserve our natural sites and societal values. In tourism, Hungary is widely known, especially among Turkic tourists. Budapest is a magnificent and highly attractive city. Our cuisine, including dishes like goulash and fish soup, is also famous. However, we need to make greater efforts to strengthen our gastronomy diplomacy and establish more Hungarian restaurants abroad, as Türkiye and other Central Asian countries have done successfully.

In line with the Eastern Opening foreign policy, launched in the same year, Hungary decided to offer thousands of university seats for foreign students through scholarships. These studies are fully funded by the Hungarian government. Through this initiative, we aim to attract talented students from the emerging world, including Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus, and Türkiye, to study in Hungary, primarily in English.

Knowledge diplomacy is closely tied to science diplomacy, which focuses on networking and supporting projects abroad. It leverages the value of knowledge in science, science organization, and science management for diplomatic and bilateral or multilateral purposes. Such collaborations stimulate professional discussions, joint publications, and policymaking in science and academia.

Cultural diplomacy is a traditional and vital tool of public diplomacy, focusing on showcasing national identity through culture. To this end, Hungary has established cultural institutes in 26 countries, located in major capitals and cities worldwide. These institutes, often branded with the name of our famous composer Franz Liszt, promote Hungarian culture.

Sports is another closely related field. As mentioned, Hungary ranks eighth globally in total Olympic medals, a

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remarkable achievement given our country's size. We have won approximately 181 gold medals in the history of the modern Olympic Games. Budapest has hosted major international sporting events, reflecting our active role in sports diplomacy, much like Central Asia and Türkiye.

Tourism is another obvious tool for soft diplomacy. A well-managed visa regime can significantly boost tourist numbers. To this end, we have strengthened our consular presence in the Turkic World to attract more visitors from Central Asia, the Southern Caucasus, and Türkiye.

Humanitarian aid is another key soft diplomacy tool. Through the Hungary Helps program, over the past five years, we have supported more than 270 projects in over 50 countries, providing nearly \$100 million in humanitarian and rehabilitation assistance, improving the lives of almost one million people.

Conclusion

Hungary's soft power vision is built on trust, excellence, and vision. We aim to co-create lasting partnerships in knowledge and culture. We need not just partners around the world, but friends, because friendships form the foundation for initiating and realizing projects. Through these relationships, our goal of improving the world can be achieved more effectively.

Hungary shares deep historical and cultural ties with the Turkic World. These ties are not rooted in the 150-year Ottoman occupation, as that would not be a sufficient reason. Instead, our common roots trace back to the Southern Urals and Northern Central Asia, where Hungarian and other Turkic peoples originated.

Indeed, the ancient Hungarians migrated westward from Central Asia. There is an ongoing debate about whether the Hungarian language is purely Finno-Ugric or also has Turkic influences. We have several hundred ancient words in our language that predate the Ottoman period, suggesting a partial Turkic background. This shared heritage provides a strong foundation for public diplomacy. Hungary's participation in the OTS reflects this connection.

Hungary pursues pragmatic relations with Russia and China, free from ideological or value-based politics, much like Italy, Germany, or even the United States. Hungary has the lowest perception of a Russian threat among Central European countries, for several reasons. The Hungarian government has consistently and openly expressed its interest in maintaining good relations with Russia, primarily due to practical needs. On the other hand, Hungary is often seen as the "black sheep" of the European Union. We hold firm to certain values that we

believe should not be overridden by so-called European values.

Hungary faces ongoing debates with the EU on fundamental issues. This creates a challenging situation, both economically and politically. While EU subsidies account for only about 2% of Hungary's annual GDP, their absence creates liquidity issues. Despite these challenges, the Hungarian government remains committed to its principles. Public perception of the EU in Hungary is generally negative, influenced by the government's sovereigntist and patriotic stance. From Hungary's perspective, the EU's future is uncertain in this new political atmosphere.

The EU sometimes criticizes Hungary's engagement, but not harshly. The real issue is that the EU lacks a coherent strategy for Central Asia. While the EU still perceives itself as a major power in the region, it lacks a unified foreign policy. Member states compete with one another in the Turkic World, each pursuing their own business interests. Hungary's position is clear: we seek strong, positive relations with the Turkic world without interfering in their domestic politics, a stance not always shared by other European countries.

About the Author

Prof. László VASA - Széchenyi István University

Prof. László Vasa is the Chief Adviser and Senior Research Fellow at the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs. After earning degrees in agricultural economics, German-Hungarian translation, and international MBA studies, he completed his PhD and habilitation at Szent University, Hungary.

He worked as an associate professor at this university, where he also served as the vice dean for international affairs at the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences. Currently, Dr. Vasa is a full professor and dean of the Doctoral School of Regional Sciences and Business Administration at Széchenyi István University. His main fields of research include the economics of transition, post-Soviet studies - particularly in the Caucasus and Central Asian countries - economics of natural resources, trade policy, and international issues in agricultural economics. He is a professor and PhD supervisor at Hungarian and foreign doctoral schools and a member of the editorial boards of various international and Hungarian scientific journals. He actively participates in several international scientific organizations and networks as a visiting professor and honorary doctor at Japanese, Russian, and Kazakh universities.

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Throughout history, shaping the perceptions of societies has been one of the most fundamental elements of domestic and foreign policy. As the nation-state structure became widespread and nation-states emerged as the main actors in international relations, public diplomacy along with traditional diplomacy began to play a crucial role in shaping these relations.

Diplomatic relations between states are conducted by diplomats, including ambassadors and consuls. These diplomats also engage in public diplomacy, which serves a vital function in interstate relations. Public diplomacy activities have a significant impact not only on the citizens of a state but also on its leaders. Public diplomacy plays a pivotal role in shaping the relations between states alongside other diplomatic activities.

The aim of the project Public Diplomacy in Foreign Policy conducted in collaboration with Cappadocia University and Ankara Center for Crisis and Political Studies (ANKASAM) is to discuss the principles for implementing public diplomacy, identify key activities and highlight public diplomacy efforts undertaken by foreign diplomats in Türkiye. The ultimate goal is to contribute to shaping Turkish Foreign Policy and influencing decision-making processes.

For detailed information about the project;
<https://commonhorizon.kapadokya.edu.tr/> You can reach us from the address.

Prof. Dr. Şafak OĞUZ

Prof. Dr. Şafak OĞUZ became an Associate Professor in 2019 and a full Professor in 2024. He retired in 2021 after 23 years of service in the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF). During his time there, he also worked for the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). His expertise lies in Weapons of Mass Destruction, Terrorism (WMD), International Security, International Organizations and Peace and Conflict Studies. Prof. Dr. Şafak OĞUZ currently serves as the Acting Dean of the Faculty of Economics, Administrative and Social Sciences at Cappadocia University. He is fluent in English and German.

Prof. Dr. Mehmet Seyfettin EROL

Prof. Dr. Mehmet Seyfettin EROL graduated from the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Boğaziçi University (BU) in 1993. After completing his Master's Degree at BU in 1995, he was accepted to the PhD program at BU in the same year. After completing his PhD at Ankara University in 2005, Prof. Erol became an Associate Professor in 2009 in the field of "International Relations" and a full Professor in 2014. His areas of expertise are "Geopolitics", "Crisis Management", "Security", "Turkish Foreign Policy" and "Central Asia".

Prof. Erol has published numerous scientific articles and books on these subjects. He is the author and editor of various journals such as Eurasia File, Black Sea Studies, Gazi Akademik Overview, Journal of Regional Studies, International Crisis and Political Studies and contributor for national radio-television programs such as TRT, A HABER, TV NET, CNN TÜRK and HABERTÜRK.

Prof. Erol, whose opinions have been published in Turkey's leading magazines and newspapers has been deemed worthy of many awards, including Writers and Artists Foundation of the Turkic World (TÜRKSAY) in 2007, "Turkish World Service Award" in 2015 and Writers' Union of Turkey (TYB) "Press-Intellectual Award".

Prof. Erol has lectured at Ufuk, Ankara and Gazi Universities. As a faculty member in the Department of Relations at the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences at Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, he served as an expert, coordinator and founder president in Türkiye's leading think tanks (ASAM, SDE, GSAM, USGAM). He has been the founding chairman of Ankara Crisis and Politics Research Center (ANKASAM) since 2016.