



Golden Age of Hungarian-Turkish Relations – A Question of Power-Political Fraternity?

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Abstract: *Turkish-Hungarian relations have been characterised by unusually good cooperation over the last 10 years in particular. The governments of the two countries cooperate closely in almost every policy area and on every occasion. One can speak of a golden age in Turkish-Hungarian relations. This analysis aims to answer the question of whether the authoritarian leadership style of the presidents of both countries is the reason for this golden age of relations. The qualitative study used the autocracy promotion approach to analyse the interests of Erdoğan and Orbán in their close cooperation. It can be concluded that the authoritarian style of government of both statesmen at least has a positive influence on the very good relations.*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Erdoğan, what’s the matter, you want to go all Orbán on us? This is Turkey, not Hungary,” Eranted opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu after Erdoğan held out the prospect of a referendum on the headscarf debate (INDEPENDENT Türkçe, 2022). Kılıçdaroğlu smelled another attempt by Erdoğan to divide the people on this controversial issue shortly before the presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023, to consolidate his political camp and tighten the fronts. Cultural and ideological cohesion in the conservative-nationalist spectrum was to take precedence over the country’s political and, above all, economic problems and ensure another election victory, which Erdoğan succeeded in doing in the second round of voting. It remains to be seen why Kılıçdaroğlu sought to criticise Orbán and Hungary for this type of election tactic. However, it is clear that Orbán is also focussing on dividing Hungarian society and that this is a much-used instrument of autocrats - autocrats like Erdoğan (Holscher, 2018). There are many similarities between Erdoğan’s and Orbán’s domestic and foreign policies. Above all, deficits in democracy and the rule of law have become increasingly apparent in Hungary and Turkey in recent years. The governments of both countries are attempting to bring the press and judiciary under their direct control and reduce their independence. This threatens the separation of powers in both countries and suppresses opposition forces. But it is not just the autocratic leadership style that unites the two presidents. Erdoğan and Orbán have a deep friendship and show solidarity, which also has an impact on the bilateral relationship between Hungary and Turkey. Although the representatives of both countries explain the excellent relations between their states with cultural proximity and historical ties - which in turn give rise to strategic alliances - the question arises as to whether the autocracy in which the highest offices in Ankara and Budapest have fallen also plays a special role in the exceptionally positive relations?

The fact that autocrats support each other and this is reflected in the foreign policy behaviour of the states they govern is a phenomenon that has been observed for some time. Whether Putin, Xi Jinping, Orbán or Erdoğan: autocracies are not only on the rise, but are often close to each other on the international stage. The agreement between Russia and China, which was concluded in

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the shadow of the Ukraine war in March 2023 and is intended to expand the strategic partnership between the two countries, or the negative attitude of both Hungary and Turkey towards Finland and Sweden joining NATO could also have been favoured by the regimes of the respective countries. On the other hand, relations between Hungary and Turkey, for example, have been good not only since the Orbán-Erdoğan era, but the common leadership style of both countries is likely to be a reinforcing factor at best.

This qualitative case study aims to investigate whether mutual autocracy promotion has a leverage effect on foreign policy cooperation. To this end, selected text material was analysed and evaluated using the autocracy promotion approach.

2. RESEARCH INTEREST AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

It can be surmised that the autocratic leadership style of both presidents strengthened international cooperation between Hungary and Turkey. As the power of both politicians has increased, their cooperation has become increasingly positive (Tarrósy & Vorös, 2020, pp. 122-124), so that it is possible to speak of autocracy promotion. Unlike democracy promotion, autocracy promotion defines deliberate actions that are intended to at least maintain the substance of an existing autocracy or possibly even strengthen the autocratic regime. Therefore, primarily autocratically governed countries that benefit from cooperation with other autocratic governments tend to maintain the regime, as democratisation could result in the risk of a change of direction in foreign policy. This in turn would entail economic and strategic disadvantages. In order to support the retention of power in the autocratic partner state and thus secure long-term profit, various measures of influence are used. Burnell (2010) mentions cooperation between authoritarian governments on the international stage as one measure to promote autocracy in order to give the respective autocratically greater freedom in political action compared to other international players (Kästner, 2015, pp. 496-497). Another side effect of relations between autocracies is the learning effects that occur. To this end, the political methods and tactics of other autocratic rulers are recorded and emulated. It is sufficient for the learning process if the recipient country alone takes action. A direct initiation of the receiving autocratic regime by the model country is not necessary. A distinction is made between positive and negative learning. In the case of positive learning effects, the political actors orientate themselves towards an external role model that is registered as successful and imitable. Negative learning processes, on the other hand, relate to precautions to avoid the mistakes of other autocracies in their own country. However, it is difficult to prove whether learning effects have actually taken place. This is because they start at the cognitive level and cannot be easily measured. There is also no evidence as to whether learning processes tend to take place between elites or institutions. However, due to the pronounced personalism in autocracies, it can be assumed that individual learning effects play a greater role (Bank & Josua, 2017, p. 5).

3. HUNGARIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS IN THE ORBÁN/ERDOĞAN ERA

The rise to power of the authoritarian heads of state Erdoğan and Orbán in their own country seems to correlate with the relations between the two states. Since Erdoğan and Orbán have been in office together, Turkish-Hungarian relations have intensified. Both states are working closely and increasingly together in security policy, economic policy, finance, the defence industry and cultural policy. Although there have been no significant problems in these activities at a political level for a long time that could have affected bilateral relations, both countries have made every effort to limit potential risk areas in relations and improve the current situation. Hungary is still in

favour of Turkey's accession to the EU. During a visit to Ankara, Mr Orbán stated that Hungary continues to support Turkey's EU membership and will always do so. Because if the EU wants to become a global player, Orbán said, it must work together with Turkey. It is clear from Orbán's statements that relations between Turkey and Hungary are based on trust and an affirmative attitude - in contrast to relations between Turkey and the EU, which generally have a rather bumpy character. Another notable confirmation of the special relationship is the opening of the representative office of the internationally unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in Budapest on 16 October 2014, as well as the two countries' involvement in international organisations, particularly the United Nations (UN) and NATO, in cooperation with each other. The candidacy of the other partner country is to be supported by international organisations, committees and offices. The aim is to transform the relationship into a strategic partnership. The close cooperation bore fruit, for example, when the EU states came together to adopt a resolution to condemn the Turkish military operation in Syria in 2019, which was vetoed by Hungary (Deregözü, 2020, p. 16-17).

4. AUTHORITY TENDENCIES OF BOTH PARTNERS

The core values of Orbán's Fidesz party, such as family, national identity and religion, are particularly popular with tradition-orientated voters. Populist appearances and resilience in the face of political crises have strengthened the party's power. The support that Fidesz received in its election victory in 2010 was preceded by political, legal and economic reforms. Similar arguments can be used to explain the electoral successes of Erdoğan's AKP since 2002. Both politicians have recognised that a broad social consensus can be achieved by promoting conservative values. Contrary to the majority of Hungarian and Turkish society, there tends to be a negative image of Orbán and Erdoğan abroad. Both leaders are criticised for silencing the dissident press in their countries and taking control of the judiciary. Orbán's anti-democratic practices are the subject of controversy, particularly within the EU. Orbán has been labelled a "dictator" due to his autocratic leadership style. EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker went one step further and greeted him at an EU summit in 2015 with a contemptuous expression on his face and the words "Hello dictator". Erdoğan faced similar criticism after restricting access to social media platforms on the internet. The Freedom House organisation rates Turkey in the "unfree country" category. Orbán and Erdoğan are similar in their tendency to ignore any criticism. Orbán even goes on the offensive and explains the following to representatives of the Hungarian minority in Romania: "Today, the most popular question is how undemocratic, illiberal and non-Western systems manage to make their nations successful. The stars of international analysts today are Singapore, China, India, Russia and Turkey" (DIKEN, 2014). Orbán's speech, in which he defended an illiberal democratic model, met with strong reactions in the EU. German Chancellor Merkel, who was on an official visit to Hungary, said in Orbán's presence that she personally could not combine the illiberal worldview with an understanding of democracy. Orbán's answer that not every democracy has to be liberal was taken up by the pro-government and Islamist newspaper *Yeni Akit* from Turkey and celebrated with the words: "Orbán silences Merkel". The opposition press in Turkey emphasised that Orbán was taking Erdoğan's methods as a model. On the other hand, Erdoğan is often accused of modelling himself on Orbán's practices. Both politicians are thus equally criticised by their opponents with similar statements (Sara, 2016, pp. 737-742).

It was therefore not surprising that the Hungarian government showed solidarity with the Turkish security forces during the crackdown on the Gezi protests in Istanbul in 2013, while the Western and liberal public sided with the demonstrators. Zsolt Németh, State Secretary of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said in a statement to the Hungarian news agency that the Hungarian government trusts in the strength of Turkish democracy and supports Ankara in its domestic policy. The domestic

policies of Erdoğan and Orbán are incalculably similar, as are the criticisms they face and the way they deal with these criticisms (Sara, 2016, pp. 742-743). Opposition members and observers accuse both countries almost equally of no longer holding fair elections and of having democratic institutions that exist formally but are controlled by the government and their ability to function is curtailed. In addition, those in power abuse public resources in order to create politically loyal economic actors or to strengthen them by granting them advantages in the awarding of public contracts. Clientelism, favouritism and nepotism have penetrated to the highest administrative offices (Handelsblatt, 2022).

A series of electoral and judicial reforms took place in both Turkey and Hungary, apparently in order to secure the continued rise to power of both governing parties. In 2007, for example, Ankara decided to allow Turks living abroad to vote in their country of residence. Hungary followed suit in 2011 when the Fidesz government also strengthened voting rights for Hungarians living abroad. At the same time, the number of seats in Parliament was reduced, the second round of voting and the equalising mandates were abolished and the constituencies were redrawn. Erdoğan even went one step further by largely disempowering parliament and replacing it with a presidential system in which the president can rule by decree. Before every election, the electoral system is modified so that it serves the ruling party and increasingly restricts the opposition's room for manoeuvre. For example, before the 2023 elections in Turkey, electoral alliances were granted less power through reform. Electoral alliances were formed in both Turkey and Hungary at the last elections to have any real chance of coming to power. However, the opposition in both countries is deeply divided and any electoral alliances are more likely to be seen as alliances of convenience.

Several reform packages in the judiciary have restricted the independence of the courts in Hungary. For example, the position of President of the National Judiciary was created. This concentrates as much power in one person as was previously exercised by an entire body. This makes the president equivalent to a super-judge who is subject to almost no judicial control (Daum, 2012). Further reforms have also further limited the powers of the Constitutional Court. For example, the court lost the power to scrutinise the content of constitutional amendments. In Turkey, however, following a constitutional amendment, the president can directly appoint six of the 13 members of the Council of Judges and Public Prosecutors - a body that is responsible in particular for appointing judges and public prosecutors. Although parliament appoints seven other members, it should be borne in mind that the president, as the leader of the majority party, can usually exert his influence here too. Before the reform, the judges and public prosecutors themselves determined the majority of the then 22-member council by-election (Tanneberger & Pasch, 2017). A similar constellation emerged with the reform of the Turkish Constitutional Court. Twelve of the 15 members will be appointed by the president from 2017 onwards. The dominance of the president in the composition of the highest courts in Hungary and Turkey is leading to an erosion in the separation of powers.

5. STUMBLING BLOCKS IN TURKISH-HUNGARIAN RELATIONS

The refugee crisis, which erupted primarily after the devastating civil war in Syria, is considered the greatest test of strength in recent Turkish-Hungarian relations. The refugees sought refuge in the wealthier Western and Central European countries via the Turkey-Balkans route. As the first Schengen state on the route, Hungary not only played a role as a transit country, but many refugees also settled in the country. The asylum seekers were not exactly welcome in Hungarian society and politics, not only for economic but also for socio-cultural reasons. In a newspaper article, Orbán pointed out that it should not be forgotten that the refugees belong to a different religion and culture and that the majority of them are not Christians but, on the contrary, Muslims: "This

is a very big problem. Because Europe has its roots in Christianity. Isn't it worrying that Europe is not able to protect its own Christian values? If we don't take this into account, then European ideas can become a minority view on our own continent" (TRT Haber, 2015).

Orbán's views have met with sharp reactions in the right-wing and conservative Turkish media. The images at the Hungarian border, in which a camerawoman deliberately kicked a refugee and his daughter to the ground, went around the Turkish press landscape. This gave rise to perhaps unprecedented anti-Hungarian sentiment among the Turkish public. Orbán's merciless comment "Stay in Turkey, it's safer there" about the photo of the lifeless body of the refugee boy Aylan on the banks of the Aegean, which went around the world and caused worldwide consternation, was described in the high-circulation Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* as an "unbelievable view". These words led to even greater reactions in the conservative media, which describe themselves as Muslim-orientated, have a readership made up of a majority of AKP voters and are naturally known for their closeness to the government. Headlines describing the Hungarian government's treatment of refugees as Nazi methods marked the high point of reproachful reporting on Hungary's refugee policy. However, not only the media but also politicians strongly criticised Hungary's approach to the refugee crisis. İbrahim Kalın, Erdoğan's chief adviser, posted a tweet in which Erdoğan accused Hungary and the other EU states of inaction in the refugee tragedy, saying that this was "a lesson in humanity for Hungary's right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán" (Saral, 2016, pp. 753-758).

Another issue that could damage relations between Turkey and Hungary is the rise of far-right parties and their continued rise in Islamophobic attitudes across the EU. Over the past decade, nationalist, populist and far-right movements have increased their influence in Europe. Far-right political parties have gained support in many countries. Negative statements regarding immigration, globalisation and terrorism have led to election results that show that the vote for far-right parties has gradually increased in local elections, national elections or elections to the European Parliament. As a result, anti-Muslim discourses against immigrants are persistent in EU countries and also influence the policies of centre-right parties. Thus, Islamophobia is shaping both domestic and foreign policy, from which Hungary, Fidesz and Orbán cannot completely escape (Deregözü, 2020, p. 39).

Looking at the activities of FETÖ in Hungary, it is clear that it does not have any well-established structures compared to many other European countries. FETÖ's activities are limited to two schools and two NGOs, which are categorised as "harmless" by the Hungarian authorities. Even if Budapest were to consider closing the schools because of their good relations, this is not an easy undertaking, as the schools function as commercial enterprises and cannot be liquidated without further ado. Nevertheless, the Turkish public has the impression that the Hungarian government is doing nothing about the schools and is caving into the FETÖ. Sooner or later, this could cause resentment in Ankara and disrupt the good relationship between the two countries (Deregözü, 2020, p. 38).

6. CONCLUSION

The authoritarian leadership style of current presidents Erdoğan and Orbán also strongly favours international relations. Without the favours that both statesmen grant each other, there would probably be no significant cooperation on armaments and other security policy issues. It is also evident that Hungary deals differently with members of the PKK and FETÖ than the rest of the EU. Both partners keep their backs free in difficult international situations and try to speak with one voice, so to speak. For example, both Hungary and Turkey blocked NATO's northern enlargement for a long time and later gave the green light for Finland and Sweden to join at almost the same time.

Despite these anomalies, however, it is difficult to prove that the governments have always pursued a common foreign policy. Blocking Sweden and Finland from joining NATO could be based on different motives for the two governments. It is also difficult to measure whether there is mutual learning in the suppression of opposing forces and the establishment of questionable electoral tactics, as the autocracy promotion approach suggests. Although both autocrats have consolidated their power through electoral and judicial reforms, the reforms rarely have anything in common in terms of content and timing. However, it should be taken into account that there are significant differences in the political system and therefore one country cannot serve as a one-to-one blueprint for the other. A subsequent comparative study could investigate which parallels can be observed in both states on the path to autocracy and whether this could be due to learning effects. It would be interesting to see whether the opposition in both countries learns from each other - keyword: electoral alliances.

Even though Turkish-Hungarian relations recently hit a short-term low when anti-Hungarian sentiment emerged in the Turkish press in connection with the refugee crisis, this did not last long, meaning that bilateral relations between Turkey and Hungary remain at an above-average level. Incidentally, Viktor Orbán was the only European statesman to attend Erdoğan's swearing-in ceremony in Ankara in June 2023. Together with the autocrats İlham Aliyev from Azerbaijan and Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela, he congratulated him on his recent election victory.

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