

Chapter 6

Hungary's Motivations and Steps on its Path to Enter the Euro-Atlantic Community

László Kovács

Hungary has been part of Christian Europe for over one thousand years. Hungarian tribes, led by Árpád, arrived from Asia in 896 and settled down along the Danube and the Tisza, the two rivers that continue to dominate Hungary today. Saint Stephen, who would be the first king of the country, appealed to Rome for the crown, and his requested was granted. The Bavarian princess he chose as his wife was escorted to Hungary by Bavarian knights.

For centuries, Hungarians proved successful in halting and driving out various forces attacking Europe from the east, including the Mongolian Tartars and, ultimately, the conquering Ottoman Turks, who ruled the country for 150 years. Subsequently, Hungary became and for a long time remained part of the Habsburg Empire, mounting a series of wars of independence against its masters over the centuries. The so-called Compromise of 1867 led to the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy as part of the Habsburg Monarchy. This dual kingdom, with the two countries sharing the same monarch, continued to rule other peoples in the region until World War I, which Hungary was instrumental in triggering on the side of Germany and Austria, and eventually lost. In the aftermath of the war, Hungary had to relinquish two-thirds of its territory and population, but remained part of Europe.

Later, Hungary once again made a major contribution to the outbreak of World War II as a supporter of Nazi Germany and its ally, fascist Italy. Once again, the country emerged from the war as one of the losers, sustaining enormous damage in terms of material assets and human lives. After the German occupation in 1944, Soviet Russia moved in beginning in April 1945, effectively tearing Hungary from the western half of Europe and engulfing it in the Warsaw Pact and Comecon. It was along the Austro-Hungarian border that the infamous Iron Curtain was erected and fortified, laying a mine barrage between

what became two different political, social and economic systems, and thus two different cultures and ways of life.

The revolution and war of independence that broke out on October 23, 1956, proved that the people of Hungary had not resigned themselves to their fate and refused to accept Soviet rule or the political, social, and economic arrangement imposed by the Soviet Union, including the single-party scheme and the eradication of democracy, liberty, and the market economy.

The revolution was crushed by the Red Army. Mátyás Rákosi, the de-throned dictator, was granted asylum in the Soviet Union and replaced at the helm by János Kádár, the protégé of Moscow, who had served time in prison under the Rákosi régime. Kádár proceeded to rebadge the Communist Party and meted out death sentences and harsh prison terms to the revolutionaries in a wave of vengeance he called “consolidation.” Imre Nagy, the Prime Minister of the revolutionary government who had returned to Hungary after spending decades in the Soviet Union, was executed along with several of his “accomplices.” With the work of retribution complete, and having learned the lessons of the revolution, in the second half of the 1960s Kádár began to introduce cautious economic reforms. From the early 1970s, he played an active role in assisting the détente between East and West, and participated in the wording and promulgation of the Helsinki Accords in 1975.

After 1975, János Kádár instructed the Foreign Department of the party headquarters to start building bridges between the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party (formed in 1957) and the Social Democratic parties of Western European countries. This marked a major turning point in East-West relations, given that the Soviet bloc had been ruled by communist hegemony, whereas many countries in Western Europe had been governed by Social Democrats, solo or in coalition with other parties.

Starting in the early 1980s, a handful of senior officials of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, particularly of the Central Committee and the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Economic Policy, received the permission of János Kádár and assistance from Chancellor Helmut Schmidt to enter into a dialogue with the German member of the European Commission (EC), Wilhelm Haferkamp, and his staff. The objective of the discussions was to phase out the quotas imposed on

Hungarian exports to Community member states, followed by paving the way toward industrial cooperation between Hungary and the EC.

The phasing out of quotas clearly improved Hungary's market opportunities, while the initiative of industrial cooperation aided our ability to benefit from the relations forged with the most advanced European countries in other ways as well.

On the Hungarian side a select small group of six senior party and government officials, including First Secretary János Kádár and Prime Minister György Lázár (and me), were dealing with EC matters, as well as, obviously, the six senior staff members who actually conducted the negotiations with Brussels.

To this day I do not know whether the highest echelons of the Soviet leadership were ever briefed on these meetings. The matter was certainly never brought up by Soviet officials to their counterparts in Hungary. I find it highly likely, however, that the KGB was informed about the meetings taking place, although they probably never found out what had transpired at those meetings. Having first-hand experience with the inner workings of a single-party system, I can even imagine that nobody wanted to "burden" the political leaders in the Kremlin with such "unsavory" information. It is important to remember in this regard that, by the fall of 1982, Brezhnev had been struggling with a terminal disease, and died at the end of the year. He was followed as party head and chief executive of the country by an equally ill Andropov, who had served as Moscow's ambassador to Budapest during the 1956 Revolution, and later as KGB chief. He died a year and a half later himself. Chernenko, his successor as General Secretary, died in 1985. In all likelihood, the KGB simply refrained from "inconveniencing" the ailing leaders with such intelligence.

In the spring of 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was elected to lead the Soviet Union as Secretary General of the Communist Party. His arrival and moves towards economic reforms encouraged the Hungarian leadership to disclose the fact and the purpose of the talks that had been taking place with the EC since the early 1980s, and to delegate the task of their continuation to competent government members instead of central party officials. In the fall of 1988, Deputy Prime Minister József Marjai, who also represented Hungary in the Comecon, and I (by then serving as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) signed an agreement

that provided not only for industrial cooperation and the phasing out of export quotas but also for the establishment of embassy-level diplomatic relations between Hungary and the EC. In those days, the Comecon, of which Hungary was a member, did not even recognize the existence of the Common Market.

An important, if delicate, moment in the process of opening up to the West had come in November 1982, shortly before Brezhnev died, when Hungary—subsequent to the decision of the party's Central Committee—submitted its application to join the IMF and the World Bank. This move had previously been considered and rejected point-blank by Brezhnev in various meetings with Kádár over the years. It was a vital step because gaining membership in both institutions in the summer 1982 enabled Hungary to access loans from international financial markets on much more favorable terms.

Even more spectacular was the step Hungary took toward opening foreign relations to the West when Soviet-American arms control negotiations over intermediate-range nuclear missiles (INF) ground to a halt in late 1983. NATO's double-track decision of 1979 had entailed that, in the event that the Soviet Union failed to withdraw beyond the Ural Mountains (or even reduce) its SS-20 missile arsenal, then stationed in the western parts of the country (from where Great Britain and West Germany easily fell within range), then NATO would proceed to deploy Pershing 2 and cruise missiles in the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands, to ensure striking capability on the European territory of the Soviet Union. Since the SS-20s were still in place at the end of 1982, NATO began preparations for its reciprocal deployments.

Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko responded by announcing the cessation of the Geneva INF arms control talks, blaming NATO for making it impossible for the Soviet Union to remain at the negotiating table. A few days later, premiers Margaret Thatcher (UK), Bettino Craxi (Italy), Wilfred Martens (Belgium) and Helmut Kohl (Germany) unveiled plans to make a trip to Hungary – as a sign that they wanted to keep relations with Eastern Europe going, irrespective of a potential re-freeze of superpower relations. The tacitly obvious purpose was to ease tensions related to the INF issue, which threatened to reignite the Cold War. Citing Gromyko's statement, Hungary's

Ministry of Foreign Affairs proposed that the visit be declined, while the foreign department of the party headquarters argued in favor of receiving the delegation.

Finally, on the recommendation of Kádár himself, the party's Political Committee decided to accept the visit, which duly took place with the participation of Thatcher, Craxi, Kohl, and Martens. The Soviet leadership essentially glossed over the Budapest meeting in silence. In subsequent years, senior NATO officials and the leaders of the aforementioned countries repeatedly spoke in words of praise about Hungary's openness to receive the four premiers, contrasting Hungary's positive attitude with the aloofness of other countries in the Soviet bloc, which seemed to hark back to the days of the Cold War.

This opening up of foreign relations—or rather Hungary's new *Westpolitik*—on the eve of its domestic democratic turn, which ushered in a favorable change in the international perception of Hungary, was supplemented by visits Prime Minister Károly Grósz paid to various countries, including Austria, Greece, West Germany, the United States, and Canada, as well as from concurrent visits to Budapest by several dignitaries from NATO member states, such as the Presidents of West Germany and France, the Queen of the Netherlands, the Queen of Denmark, and the King of Spain.

This series of visits culminated in the summer of 1989, when U.S. President George H.W. Bush came to Budapest. No other country in the Soviet bloc had ever managed to stage such a sequence of mutual visits, alone or together. The more positive opinion being formed in the West of Hungarian foreign policy further benefited from the restoration of diplomatic ties with the Vatican and Israel, which Hungary had formerly severed under Soviet orders, and from newly established diplomatic relations with South Korea and South Africa.

A further highly symbolic and momentous episode, as part of the overall campaign to open the country to the world beyond the Iron Curtain, took place on September 10, 1989, when Hungary decided to open its western border with Austria, effectively allowing East German refugees who had been staying for months in Hungary to leave for the Federal Republic of Germany. Just over a year later, Germany was unified. German Chancellor Helmut Kohl proclaimed that "Hungary knocked the first brick out of the Berlin Wall."

Without the democratic turn, the establishment of a multi-party system and the rule of law, the reinstatement of safeguards for basic liberties, and the first free elections, Hungary would not have been able to join Euro-Atlantic organizations. By the same token, it also must be said that had it not been for the decisions, measures, and initiatives taken in Budapest that I have outlined above, Hungary would never have received the amount of attention, recognition, and support the Euro-Atlantic Community provided to facilitate the country's accession and smooth integration.

During the brief days of the 1956 revolution and war of independence, most Hungarians preferred a neutral future for Hungary. Later, too, arguments for neutrality resurfaced in the wake of the democratic transition. Proponents cited Austria as the model to emulate. I and others of the new Hungarian Socialist Party, founded by the reformists, pointed out that in the case of Austria, neutrality had never been a problem because it had never been questioned by Austrian public opinion or the international community since the adoption of that country's State Treaty in 1955. By contrast, Hungary had been a member of the Warsaw Pact, and therefore envisioning a neutral state in our case would have cast doubt over the seriousness of our efforts to join the Euro-Atlantic Community. On a more practical level, as we insisted on pointing out, the cost efficiency of national defense would be much greater if we became a member of NATO. We cited the examples of Sweden and Finland, two neutral countries spending far more on their own defense than Norway, a country of comparable size and conditions but within the fold of NATO. The vast majority of the Hungarian public—in part persuaded by the Hungarian Atlantic Council, with its solid backing by intellectuals—concurred with this logic, and the issue of neutrality was taken off the agenda. Furthermore, neutrality seemed ill-advised in view of aggressive moves by Russia, including its former involvement in Afghanistan, its “near abroad” rhetoric and wrangling with the Baltics over border treaties.

Hungary's early decision to push for NATO membership now seems all the more justified in hindsight, given Russia's 2008 military action against Georgia and its 2014 attack on Ukraine, particularly its annexation of Crimea and its military backing of secession efforts mounted by Russians living in that country.

Hungary's first democratic elections in 1990 produced a three-party coalition government led by József Antall and his Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). From the start the new government and the three parties in opposition agreed that Hungarian foreign policy had to strive to achieve three interrelated goals. First, we had to join the Euro-Atlantic Community and its institutions, including NATO and the European Union. Second, we needed to finally establish good relations with neighboring countries, in part by putting behind us centuries of mutual wrongs and grievances. Third, we had to recognize the duty to protect the interests of Hungarian minorities living across the border and support them in their rightful pursuits and ambitions.

NATO and the European Union provided the additional incentive for Hungary and our neighbors to normalize relations by expressly and unambiguously stipulating this as a cardinal condition for the accession of former Soviet bloc countries.

I became Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary's second government after the régime change. That government was a coalition between the Hungarian Socialist Party and the liberal Alliance of Free Democrats. In the spring of 1996, I received an unmistakable hint from a senior national security official in the United States that we stood a good chance of becoming one of three countries to participate in the first round of NATO enlargement, provided that we signed a Basic Treaty with Romania (akin to the one already signed between Hungary and Slovakia) prior to the NATO Council session scheduled for the summer of 1997. Since we managed to fulfill this condition, we were able to join in the first round.

I remain convinced that we stayed on the right course thereafter when we chose to endorse, rather than to thwart, Romania's own ambitions of acceding to NATO. This had a beneficial influence on our ties with our neighbor.

I believe that the reigning government of Hungary, led by Viktor Orbán, would be well-advised to follow a similar path. Gestures in the service of improving bilateral relations would accomplish more on behalf of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine than obstructing Ukrainian advances to NATO. The Hungarian Socialist Party, now in the opposition, continues to urge the Orbán government to meet its obligations that come with NATO membership, including an annual 0.1 percent

increase of its defense budget and participation in NATO's peace-building and peacekeeping missions. Finally, we affirm that NATO's involvement in the fight against international terrorism is essential.

The failure and ultimate fall of the Soviet model, foisted upon Hungary with its communist ideology, single-party rule, and insistence on a planned economy, did not come entirely as a surprise. The writing had been on the wall in Hungary for decades, perhaps from the start, or certainly since 1956. It was just a matter of time, especially after Hungary started to introduce the "goulash economy" in the late 1960s and to open up to the West. The democratic overhaul in the late 1980s—aided by the prevailing state of international relations—was accomplished by inside reformers who gradually turned against what had been a dead-end street from the start, in unison with the popular will, which point-blank rejected the single-party system – and by default the decade-long Soviet imposition of Communist ideology on the socio-economic and political order and the Red Army presence on Hungarian soil.

Subsequently, two referenda supporting Hungarian membership in NATO and the European Union demonstrated, without the shadow of a doubt, that the overwhelming majority of Hungarian citizens preferred to become part of the Euro-Atlantic Community. Indeed, the process of our integration within both organizations was a seamless one.

The 2010 domestic elections, however, brought an unfavorable shift in Hungary's relations with its Western Allies: the relations between the new Orbán government—now in power for nearly a decade—and the central institutions of the two organizations, as well as the majority of the member states, have deteriorated. The verbal back-and-forth with the European Union has been escalating, and in recent months even Hungary's ties with NATO have come under strain due to Orbán's edging closer to a Russia bogged down in conflict with the Ukraine, even as the latter is eyeing NATO membership.

I personally and firmly believe that creating or maintaining tensions with the two organizations of the Euro-Atlantic Community, of which Hungary is a member, is blatantly antagonistic to our very real interests. This is an untenable situation, which Orbán's government must remedy at the earliest opportunity.