

The Russia and Turkey Factors in Hungary- Serbia Tandem's Policies

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Abstract

The authors analyze the foreign policies of Hungary and Serbia, whose relations with other countries are based on the “partnership of necessity” concept. Initially, these countries drew closer together in search of ways to resolve the common problem of illegal migration, but gradually they deepened their cooperation. Russia’s special military operation in Ukraine gave a new impetus to the intensification of relations between Hungary and Serbia as both states were unwilling to fully share the EU’s sanctions policy towards Russia. Serbia tried to maneuver while Hungary struggled to get exemptions for itself from EU sanctions regulations. Also, the Hungary-Serbia tandem built two unofficial trilateral mechanisms with Austria and Republika Srpska, which have their own claims against the EU. In their efforts to maintain partnership with Russia and Turkey, Budapest and Belgrade are driven by the desire to minimize energy, trade, and economic risks for themselves and sustain a flexible centrist foreign policy course.

Keywords: Hungarian foreign policy, Serbian foreign policy, Hungary-Serbia relations, trilateral mechanisms, Russia-Turkey relations, balancing.

For those states that are not willing to be fully embedded in the mainstream policies set by more influential actors and try to preserve room for maneuver, retaining a flexible foreign policy stance is a difficult and multifaceted task. Such countries can team up even if their ultimate foreign policy goals differ.

The growing cooperation between Hungary and Serbia is a telling example of such “partnership of necessity.” A new spiral in the development of the Hungary-Serbia tandem was triggered by Russia’s special military operation (SMO): Hungary disagreed with the other members of the Visegrad Four (V4) on support for the Ukrainian authorities, although previously Budapest had sided with Warsaw in opposing the EU policy on a number of issues.

The cooling of relations within the V4 prompted Hungary to further strengthen relations with Serbia. Moreover, earlier Hungary and Serbia had jointly established unofficial trilateral mechanisms with Austria and Republika Srpska, a territorial-political entity within Bosnia and Herzegovina, which also opposed the pressure from Brussels. By acting in tandem and using the Russia and Turkey factors, Hungary and Serbia have managed to maintain relative internal political and economic stability and get additional support in preserving a flexible foreign policy. Besides, Budapest and Belgrade see Moscow and Ankara as potential “gateways” to promoting the eastern foreign policy vector.

GENESIS OF HUNGARY-SERBIA TANDEM

The 2015 migration crisis in Europe brought Budapest and Belgrade closer to each other as they both faced the problem of illegal cross-border migration. Serbia, which shares a border with Hungary, a Schengen member state, became a de facto central hub on the Balkan migration route. To counter the threat, the Hungarian authorities, in June 2015, announced the construction of a four-meter-high fence along the 177-kilometer border (ReliefWeb, 2016) and, starting from September that year, closed the Hungarian-Serbian border, leaving only two official border crossing points. After that, meetings between Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and then Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić became more frequent.

The issue of illegal migration is considered a key factor in the establishment of close relations between the two states, but it is not the only one. Hungary and Serbia are engaged in joint economic projects, such as the TurkStream gas pipeline and the construction of the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railroad with the participation of Russian Railways and Chinese companies. In recent years, Hungarian MVM and Serbian Srbijagas, both state-owned companies, have concluded agreements to increase electricity transit between the neighboring countries, and store Serbian gas in Hungary's storage facilities. In addition, the two parties are planning to establish a joint venture to purchase gas on the European market and build an oil pipeline that would bring Russian oil via the Druzhba pipeline through Hungarian territory to Serbian consumers (Neftegaz.ru, 2023). Both countries are also interested in expanding the Trans Adriatic Pipeline project in a bid to obtain Azerbaijani gas.

Budapest has openly supported Belgrade's European integration path. "Serbia is much more important to the EU than the EU is to Serbia. Perhaps that is not visible from the Baltic Sea or the Atlantic Ocean but it is very visible from Budapest," said Orbán during his visit to Serbia in May 2020 (B92, 2020). In response, Serbia let Hungary work closely with the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, which is home to the Hungarian minority, and act independently in Southeastern Europe.

The Hungary-Serbia tandem became instrumental for building trilateral interaction mechanisms in the region with two very different partners—Austria and Republika Srpska. Hungary and Serbia's cooperation with Austria began amid the worsening illegal migration crisis, while their rapprochement with Republika Srpska (headed by President Milorad Dodik) was due to this entity's close ties with Serbia, with which Banja Luka discusses its issues and under whose influence it remains.

AUSTRIA'S PARTNERSHIP WITH THE HUNGARY-SERBIA TANDEM TO COUNTER A COMMON CHALLENGE

The common problem of illegal migration brought Hungary and Serbia closer to Austria, which was one of the main target countries

for illegal migrants coming through Serbia and Hungary. It was then that the first political triangle was formed, with Orbán as the frontman openly defying mandatory quotas for accommodating illegal migrants in the EU. Before the EU-Turkey agreements were reached in March 2016, Orbán had called such agreements an illusion and pointed to the EU's becoming dependent on Ankara's benevolence (Reuters, 2016). However, his position subsequently softened, and he agreed to support the EU migration deal as an important means of curbing the flow of illegal migrants (Hürriyet Daily News, 2016). Since then, Orbán himself has sought to build up relations with Turkey, specifically with its President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Serbia has not stayed aloof, especially after Aleksandar Vučić took office as president. Mutual contacts between Ankara and Belgrade have also expanded.

Austria's engagement with Hungary and Serbia in fighting illegal migration strengthened after Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz took office in 2017. Vienna refused to sign the UN-brokered Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and support the idea of mandatory quotas. Kurz repeatedly emphasized that Europe had made a grave mistake five years earlier by letting in so many migrants (Infomigrants, 2020). Although Kurz was forced to resign as Chancellor in October 2021 amid a string of scandals, the unofficial political triangle continued to function.

Despite the EU's strenuous efforts to resolve the migration issue, the number of illegal border crossings in 2022 was the greatest since 2016, with almost half of the 330,000 crossings made via the Balkan route (Frontex, 2023). For that reason, trilateral meetings were held in October and November 2022 in Budapest and Belgrade between Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić, and Karl Nehammer (who took over as Austrian chancellor in December 2021). These summits were meant, above all, to show the ineffectiveness of the EU policy of fighting illegal migration. Also, they served as a means of blackmailing Brussels. According to the Austrian chancellor, the ineffectiveness of the EU migration policy forced these EU member states and candidate countries that wanted to fight illegal migration to deepen cooperation

(Szpala, 2022). Nehammer hoped that it would push EU institutions to be more active in this field.

At the November 2022 summit in Belgrade, Aleksandar Vučić, Viktor Orbán, and Karl Nehammer signed a Memorandum of Understanding “to strengthen trilateral cooperation in the field of effective fight against illegal migration.” Austria and Hungary promised to share the cost of readmission of people from Serbia who were not eligible for international protection. They agreed to strengthen the protection of the Serbia–North Macedonia border. Specifically, Belgrade promised to tighten the policing of the border with North Macedonia, with assistance from the Austrian border guards.

Thus, for all the parties in the triangle, combating illegal migration served as significant leverage both in dealing with the domestic audience and/or in dialogue with the European Union. The parties had similar objectives to stop and/or push migrants out of their territories. Austria was keen to reduce the number of migrants coming via the Balkan route, while Hungary was determined to push migrants back into Serbia, positioning itself as a defender of the EU's external borders. As for Serbia, Belgrade tried hard to push migrants back to North Macedonia and across the “transparent” borders with Bosnia and Herzegovina in the south. In fact, Serbia sought to use the situation to its advantage in the subregion in order to prevent its turning into the end point of the Balkan migration route.

REPUBLIKA SRPSKA AS A COMPLEMENTARY PARTNER IN THE HUNGARY-SERBIA TANDEM

Another political triangle, which began to form—even prior to the start of the SMO—on the basis of the Hungary-Serbia tandem, involved Republika Srpska's President Milorad Dodik. Traditionally, many issues concerning the life of Serbs in the region and in Republika Srpska are discussed at regular meetings with the Serbian leadership, specifically with Aleksandar Vučić. At the same time, certain tactical moves by Banja Luka are also coordinated with Belgrade. Therefore, Republika Srpska's bandwagoning with the Hungary-Serbia tandem is quite logical and complementary. “I am happy about the global development

of relations between Hungary and Serbia, and we, as part of the Serbian people, want to participate in it,” said Milorad Dodik after the meeting of the delegations of Republika Srpska and Hungary in Banja Luka in June 2023 (Nezavisne novine, 2023).

Budapest also welcomes closer relations with Banja Luka. Since 2019, after the first official meeting between Orbán and Dodik, mutual visits and economic cooperation between Hungary and Republika Srpska have intensified. After the start of the SMO, it primarily involved the energy sector. In February 2023, Dodik announced that Hungary, Serbia, and Republika Srpska were working on an energy association where the latter would supply surplus electricity to Serbia and Hungary and get oil and oil products from them in return (Dnevni.ba, 2023). Also, according to various reports, the Trebinje-1 solar power plant is to be built in Republika Srpska with the assistance of the Hungarian company Lugos Renewables, which is likely to get a controlling stake in the project (RTRS, 2023).

In December 2021, Viktor Orbán promised to allocate €100 million in financial assistance to Republika Srpska as part of Hungary’s responsible neighborhood policy to fund small and medium-sized businesses. By making his statement Orbán was allegedly providing political support to Dodik in the run-up to the general October 2022 election in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In actual fact, measures to implement these intentions began to be discussed in December 2022, following the success of both political leaders in the April and October 2022 elections, respectively. Subsequently, in 2023, Banja Luka received €35 million of the promised €100 million from Budapest. The money was to be granted to local farmers to compensate for the costs of buying Hungarian-made agricultural equipment (Nezavisne novine, 2023).

At the end of 2022, the Hungarian bank EXIM provided a much-needed €110-million loan to finance Republika Srpska’s budget deficit and refinance part of its debt (Nezavisne novine, 2023). This implies that Hungary is trying to expand its economic and investment presence in Republika Srpska, which also strengthens the political mechanism among the three parties.

Hungary and Republika Srpska's leaders are not only at odds with the EU's mainstream migration and economic policies, but they also have a political image of "bad guys" among European bureaucrats (Stier, 2016). In recent years, they have repeatedly come under criticism from the EU authorities. The European Parliament has called for imposing sanctions on Dodik because of his attempt to "destabilize Bosnia and Herzegovina." In December 2022, the European Commission blocked almost €22 billion that Hungary was to receive from the Cohesion Fund for the period of 2021-2027 (Ozturk, 2023a) for "violating the principles of supremacy of law and guarantees of human rights and freedoms."

In response, Orbán and Dodik have toughened their rhetoric against the EU and made some tactical moves that let them use this situation to their advantage. Hungary seeks to unfreeze more than €28 billion and further maintain access to EU budget funds, as they are important for the Hungarian economy. So Orbán's rhetoric is aimed at encouraging the EU to make further compromises in the negotiations on unblocking the funds promised to Budapest. For his part, Dodik, wishing to preserve Republika Srpska's autonomous status within Bosnia and Herzegovina, confronts the EU, as some international actors seeking Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration in the Euro-Atlantic structure openly support the policy of "creeping centralization" of this state (Eremin, 2022, p. 207).

European media have often reproached Dodik for his desire to follow in Orbán's footsteps, for example, on issues related to the anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ+ agenda. In 2021, Hungary passed the Child Protection Act, which includes a ban on the use of printed and other content promoting homosexuality in schools and other juvenile facilities (Kovács, 2023). Dodik intends to take similar measures to ban the distribution of LGBTQ+ materials among students and school visits by LGBTQ+ activists (Kurtic, 2023). However, such ideological "copy pasting" is addressed primarily to the domestic electorate in order to cement and mobilize it during election campaigns and to assert themselves as the defenders of national interests and sovereignty.

In 2022, parliamentary elections were held in Hungary and general elections in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Brussels bureaucrats

most likely wished to see Orbán and Dodik lose the elections. However, both politicians remained in the saddle. Orbán retained his position, and his party won a qualified majority in parliament. Dodik made a successful swap with his running mate Željka Cvijanović, who became a member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency, while Dodik took over as Republika Srpska's president. Orbán and Dodik supported each other during the election campaigns, with the Hungarian prime minister pledging not to support EU sanctions against Dodik (N1, 2022).

Meanwhile, attempts are being made to break this political triangle. Some European media claim that the relationship between Vučić and Dodik is ambiguous. Dodik's political opponents, represented by his main rival Jelena Trivić, seek to get closer to Vučić, claiming that Dodik does not truly care for the Serbs living in the entity (Lane, 2023).

However, since all the three leaders won the elections, the political triangle has been getting stronger. This became especially visible after February 2022, in the parties' attitude towards the Ukraine crisis and energy security issues. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina refused to join EU sanctions against Russia, as Dodik blocked all moves by politicians representing the Bosniaks and Bosnian Croats. Hungary, an EU member state, had to support the restrictive measures, but it has consistently worked to get exemptions for itself from the EU sanctions regulations, especially those concerning the energy sector. Orbán has repeatedly stated that EU sanctions against Russia were a mistake and should be terminated because they fuel inflation and energy price hikes (Ozturk, 2023b).

INDISPENSABLE RUSSIA

The Russia factor in the energy sector is of special significance for these trilateral mechanisms. Under new contracts with Russia, Hungary, Serbia, and Republika Srpska retained or obtained a favorable price for Russian gas supplied via the overland extension of TurkStream's second string. Budapest managed to negotiate an exemption for Russian oil supplies via the Druzhba pipeline that was not subject to the EU embargo, effective since December 2022 (Teremetsky, 2022). At the same time, as has been mentioned above, Hungary and Serbia plan

to build a pipeline to receive Russian oil from the Druzhba network. Cooperation in the oil and gas sector, which is traditional for Hungary, is complemented by plans to develop nuclear power production, specifically to build the 5th and 6th reactors at the Paks nuclear power plant, which will actually make up the Paks-2 NPP.

As for Republika Srpska, Dodik has long pressed for the implementation of the Eastern Interconnection gas pipeline project and the construction of a gas pipeline running through Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bijeljina, Banja Luka, Prijedor, and Novi Grad) to increase gas supplies via TurkStream (TASS, 2023). However, there are certain rifts between the two entities within Bosnia and Herzegovina itself: while Republika Srpska's leadership is seeking to expand energy cooperation with Russia, the authorities of the Bosniak-Croat entity (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) are lobbying for the construction of a gas pipeline connecting with the Croatian gas network and the liquefied natural gas terminal located on the Island of Krk. Bosniak and Bosnian Croat members of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency are working hard to hamper the energy project initiated by Dodik.

Some EU member states and institutions have openly criticized Hungary, Serbia, and Republika Srpska for contacts and joint projects with Moscow. Austria was rebuked, too, although it had supported all the sanctions imposed by the EU, except for those related to energy supplies. The main reason for dissatisfaction with Vienna was that its government was in no hurry to reduce its dependence on Russian gas, contrary to the European Union's general policy. According to some reports, as of December 2022, about 70% of Austria's gas came from Russia. "OMV has long-standing contracts with the Russian Federation. If the Russians continue to deliver, then I can't forbid OMV to fulfill contractual obligations," said Austrian Chancellor Nehammer at a press conference with European journalists (Kurmayer, 2023). It is noteworthy that the Austrian town of Baumgarten is home to one of Europe's largest gas distributing nodes, the Central European Gas Hub. Another reason for criticism was the operation of Austria's second most important Raiffeisen Bank International (RBI) in Russia. The European

Central Bank is pressuring RBI to curtail its business in Russia, even though the banking group's profits in 2022 were 2.5 times higher than those in 2021 (Reuters, 2023).

Austria is also reproached for its neutral status: unlike Finland and Sweden, it has refrained from joining NATO. Vienna continues to adhere to the concept of a “bridge between the East and the West” as the basis of its survival, while its neighbors are pushing it towards other scenarios. To appease the interests of its “partners” Vienna has voiced readiness to provide humanitarian and economic assistance to Ukraine, but no military aid (Dahm, 2023).

Maintaining contacts with Moscow takes an important place in the political processes in Hungary, Serbia, and Republika Srpska. In 2022, all of them held elections of various levels. Austria's elections are slated for 2024. The Orbán-led party owed its success to his image of a rational politician in crisis situations. The voters preferred “not to swap horses in midstream.” In 2024, Nehammer and his People's Party will have to fight to keep their majority in parliament, which will largely depend on the stability of Russian energy supplies.

Vučić has traditionally opted for the tactics of a centrist politician, which implies catering to the interests of the Russophile electorate, for whom close relations with Russia are of great importance. Dodik met with Russian President Vladimir Putin shortly before the general election in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which he ran for Republika Srpska's president in October 2022. It is worth noting that he is one of the few European leaders to have visited Russia since the start of the SMO.

Russia's political support in diplomatic issues is also crucial for the leaders of Serbia and Republika Srpska. Moscow recognizes Serbia's territorial integrity in what regards Kosovo and Metohija. Back in 2015, Moscow and Belgrade took active steps to prevent partially recognized Kosovo from gaining enough votes required for UNESCO membership. It should be remembered that Russia also vetoed Britain's draft UNSC resolution demanding recognition of the events in Srebrenica in 1995 as an act of genocide. In addition, Russia and China opposed the appointment of Christian Schmidt as High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, as his candidacy had not been considered by the

UN Security Council as required. For this reason, Republika Srpska's current leadership does not recognize Schmidt's decisions, considering them a violation of the Dayton Accords (Eremin, 2023, p. 10). Along with this, Russia has been consistently supporting Republika Srpska in preserving its autonomy within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Since Belgrade has recently stepped up efforts to diversify its economic and diplomatic ties, it may be interested in working with such organizations as the SCO and BRICS that have been developing quite dynamically after the start of the SMO in February 2022. Moscow could help Belgrade join these structures as an independent actor (Entina, Chimiris and Lazovich, 2023).

NO WAY OF DOING WITHOUT TURKEY, EITHER

After the Erdoğan-led Justice and Development Party came to power and integration with the EU was stalled in the second half of the 2000s, Turkey began to position itself as an independent actor seeking to take back the territories that had once been under the control or influence of the Ottoman Empire. In the 2010s, it obtained the status of an important regional player in Central and Southeastern Europe, building relations not only with countries having large Muslim communities, such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and partially recognized Kosovo, but also with Serbia, Hungary, and Austria, which is home to a 300,000-strong Turkish diaspora. In recent years, pragmatic relations have developed even with Republika Srpska, although in the early 2010s, Dodik was still quite skeptical about Turkey's growing influence in the Balkans and "excessive" support of the Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Guskova, 2022, p. 350).

The start of the SMO prompted Central and Southeastern European countries to look for alternative sources of energy supplies. Some set eyes on the Southern Gas Corridor, which delivers Azerbaijani gas to Europe. In July 2022, the European Commission and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding that envisages the expansion of supplies via the Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline from the Turkish border through Greece and Albania to Italy from 10 billion cubic meters to 20 billion by the end of 2027 (Rehimov, 2023).

In addition, to receive Azerbaijani gas, a Greece-Bulgaria gas interconnector has been built. Also, projects similar to the Bulgaria-Serbia and Serbia-North Macedonia gas interconnectors are either under construction or in the design phase. In December 2022, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary agreed to modernize the gas pipelines and transport facilities of their gas networks as an alternative supply route for Azerbaijani gas (Reuters, 2022). Azerbaijan is known to be a traditional ally of Turkey, and Baku and Ankara generally are equally interested in increasing the capacity of the Southern Gas Corridor. This means that Erdoğan, with support from Azerbaijani President İlham Aliyev, will obtain another energy “lever” along with TurkStream. This largely explains the recent frequent visits of Central and Southeastern European heads of state and government to Ankara and Baku. These energy projects may further increase the interaction of the region’s countries with Ankara. But it remains unclear to what extent Azerbaijan will actually be able to increase its production and export of natural gas to the European countries within this timeframe.

Another critical problem is a surge in illegal immigration that followed the easing of COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions. The Central and Southeastern European countries are the focal point of the migration flows, and containing them depends largely on Ankara. Supporting the position of Ankara, the Hungarian authorities openly call on the EU to pay the €6 billion due to the Turkish government directly, not to non-governmental organizations (Özer, 2022). Yet it should be noted that illegal migration has become an apple of discord between Turkey and Austria: Vienna condemned Ankara for using refugees as a tool for blackmailing the EU.

Interaction between these countries and Turkey are not confined to energy and migration problems. In the current circumstances many political figures are looking for support from Ankara. A graphic example is the position of the Hungarian prime minister: after the escalation of the Ukraine crisis, despite religious differences, Orbán apparently began to see Erdoğan as a strong partner in criticizing the EU’s actions. Both leaders have their own trump cards to blackmail Brussels in pursuit of their own ends. As has been noted above,

while Orbán needs to regain access to EU structural funds by getting concessions from Brussels, Erdoğan intends to speed up the negotiation process, above all, on the renewal of the Customs Union with the EU, as well as on visa-free travel for Turkish citizens. Also, in a bid to consolidate the conservative-minded electorate, Orbán and Erdoğan have made similar statements about safeguarding traditional values, opposing LGBTQ+. Given the value-based split of Turkish society and Erdoğan's ability to come up from behind to score last-minute election victories, this is a significant factor in Turkey's political life (Starodubtsev, 2023).

In addition, the unity within the V4, especially between Hungary and Poland, was shaken loose after the start of the SMO, with Warsaw taking an unambiguous stance in support of the Ukrainian authorities and Budapest trying to pursue a more neutral foreign policy, different from that of most European countries. All these factors must have contributed to Orbán's even greater rapprochement with Erdoğan. Being NATO members but eager to advance their own interests, the two countries avoided ratifying Finland's NATO membership for a long time and are now blocking Sweden's efforts to join the alliance. At the same time, Hungary uses Turkey-centric platforms to publicly bring up its troublesome issues (Avatkov, 2023).

Since 2018, Hungary has been an observer country in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Budapest participated in two key summits in Istanbul and Samarkand, thus contributing to the OTS's further institutionalization. At the 2022 Samarkand Summit, Orbán voiced several ideas for which he was reproached by the EU. "The EU has taken very strict measures against Russia, and these measures are actually worsening the situation... We thought that this would weaken Russia and force it to make peace, but it has had the reverse results... Instead of weakening the Russian economy, this on the contrary, weakened the European economies..." Orbán said. (Organization of Turkic States, 2022).

In the first months after the start of the SMO, Austrian Chancellor Nehammer tried to play the role of a "bridge between the East and the West." He was one of the few European politicians who met personally

with the Russian president. He had also several telephone conversations with the Turkish president and met with him on the sidelines of a NATO summit in Madrid. In view of the 2023 general election in Turkey, such contacts were also important for Erdoğan, as Austria is home to one of Europe's largest Turkish diasporas, many of whose members are eligible to vote.

In the second half of the 2010s, as Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans became more balanced, political, trade, economic, cultural, and humanitarian cooperation between Turkey and Serbia intensified. Since the beginning of Vučić's presidency, the two leaders have made three reciprocal official/working visits, and trade turnover increased from \$1.2 billion to \$2.3 billion between 2017 and 2022 (IMF, 2023). The key institutions of Turkish public diplomacy—the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Turkish Maarif Foundation, the Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB)—have a strong presence in Serbia, and the Serbian authorities are quite willing to cooperate on such a sensitive issue for Erdoğan and his close associates as the “fight against Gulenism.”

At the same time, Ankara and Belgrade remain at odds over Kosovo and Metohija, as Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize the independence of the so-called Republic of Kosovo and now leads the way for its broader recognition. But the policy of balancing is ingrained in Serbian foreign policy practice, so cooperation with different actors, including such a strong regional player as Turkey, is considered necessary (Pivovarenko, 2021, p. 170).

Similarly, Dodik's rhetoric towards Turkey and the Turkish president has shifted from sharp criticism to approval. Few would have previously imagined that Republika Srpska's president would publicly call for supporting Erdoğan in Turkey's 2023 general election. This change may indicate that Dodik sees Turkey as an important mediator in resolving problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As he said earlier, Bosnia and Herzegovina's future depends on dialogue between local politicians and support from the leaders of Turkey, Serbia, and Croatia (Nurduhan, 2022). Orbán might have also facilitated dialogue between Erdoğan and Dodik by discussing the political crisis in Bosnia and

Herzegovina with the Turkish president on November 11, 2021, just a few days after Dodik had met with Erdogan (Habertürk TV, 2022).

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The Hungary-Serbia tandem, which has created unofficial trilateral mechanisms with Austria and Republika Srpska, relies on “partnership of necessity” as a tool for achieving the most urgent short-term goals (Bordachev et al., 2019), which can hardly be attained without using the factor of Russia and Turkey.

Moscow and Ankara make it possible for Hungary, Serbia, and Austria to ensure their energy security. Politicians taking a flexible foreign policy stance cannot ignore Russia and Turkey. In addition, a close partnership between Moscow and Ankara has been an additional factor in strengthening Serbia and Republika Srpska's cooperation with the Turkish authorities, as Russia has consistently rendered political and diplomatic support to these two actors in recent years (Entina, 2022, p. 534).

Although in the first few months after the start of the SMO Austria tried to play the role of a “bridge between the East and the West,” teaming up with Turkey, later Vienna decided to stay aloof, but continued to buy Russian energy resources. In contrast, Hungary occupied a position in between Russia, maintaining contact with it, and Turkey, interacting with it as a NATO member and an observer at the OTS.

One should not forget the “eastern track” (Shishelina, 2022) of the Hungarian-Serbian tandem's policy that envisages the development of relations with Russia, Turkey, China, India, Qatar, Iran, Azerbaijan, Central Asia, etc. Many of these countries are member states, observer countries or dialogue partners in influential “non-Western” associations, such as the EAEU, BRICS, and the SCO.

At present, Hungary is most active on this track, seeking to participate in the OTS, attract investment from China, and maintain the energy dialogue with Russia and communication with Iran. On August 20, 2023, the leaders of Serbia, Republika Srpska, Turkey, Qatar, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan visited

Budapest to participate in the celebrations of St. Stephen's Day—a national holiday marking the establishment of Hungarian statehood. Russia was represented by the head of the Republic of Tatarstan, Rustam Minnikhanov (Orbán, 2023). The Hungarian capital turned into a venue for numerous meetings of the state leaders.

At the same time, the question remains as to how sustainable the Hungary-Serbia tandem and the unofficial trilateral mechanisms built around it will be considering that the foreign policy strategies of the actors involved somewhat differ. Austria tries to retain room for maneuver within the EU, while Hungary hedges its foreign policy risks. Serbia pursues a balanced policy, trying to diversify its diplomatic and economic ties to maintain foreign policy maneuverability. As for Republika Srpska, Dodik's policy can be defined as one of aligning with its “strong brother”—Serbia, since Banja Luka is under Belgrade's strong influence and its current practical goal is to retain the entity's autonomous status within Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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