

From Cultural Ties to Strategic Vision: Hungary's Turkic Strategy Explained



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Hungary, due to its linguistic, cultural, and ethnic affinity with the Turkic world, joined the Turkic Council at the 6th Summit in Cholpon-Ata in 2018 and received observer status in the Council (OTS, s.a.).

This was an important point as the Turkic Council expanded its geography wider into Europe. In addition, the European Office of the Turkic Council was opened in Budapest, which has since shouldered the responsibility of establishing political, economic, and cultural ties with the European institutions and peoples. Hungary, as the first EU country in the Turkic Council and the second NATO member after Türkiye, has become a symbolic bridge between Europe and the Turkic States.

The roots of Hungary's Turkic orientation

Hungary's current Turkic-centered orientation is the result of a long-term evolution shaped by both ideological and domestic reforms. These internal adjustments aimed to diversify Hungary's foreign policy vision by shifting it from a purely EU-focused framework toward a broader geopolitical outlook that emphasizes closer political and economic cooperation with Asia. This strategic redirection reflects Budapest's effort to position itself as a bridge between Europe and the Turkic world, leveraging shared cultural narratives and pragmatic economic interests to extend its influence beyond traditional Western spheres.

The ruling FIDESZ Party initiated the reforms in the economy, which rendered positive results. After 2010, FIDESZ launched the ‘Global Opening,’ which was later rebranded as the ‘Eastern Opening,’ marking Hungary’s effort to deepen relations with non-EU countries. The main idea of the Government behind this strategy is to increase the relations of Hungary with Asian countries, attract foreign investors from a broad range of regions like Central Asia to the Far East, from the Middle East to the Caucasus, and to find new markets for the Hungarian export-oriented economy. The Eastern Opening policy has further objectives. One of these goals is to turn Hungary into a base for logistics and transportation between Europe and Asia, leveraging Hungary’s strategic geographic location, which has easy access to Asia and the former Soviet countries.

Hungary and the Organisation of Turkic States

In recent years, Viktor Orbán’s policy has shown a clear interest in strengthening ties with Turkic states, as reflected in Hungary’s active participation in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). The opening of the European Office of the Turkic Council in Budapest was also a message by Hungary, through which Budapest committed itself to representing the interests of the Organization of Turkic States in Europe.

The benefits of Hungary’s joining the OTS are manifold. As the OTS is operating in many fields on a project basis, Hungary has started to reach positive outcomes since 2019 on a wide range of issues from politics to the economy, transport, customs, tourism, culture, education, and sports. With the initiation of the activities of the Representation Office, the relations between the OTS member states and Hungary have started to increase rapidly. After the Representation Office became operational in 2019, it began organizing a range of events focusing not only on politics, the economy, and transportation, but also on soft power and cultural diplomacy. Despite its geographical distance from Central Asia, Budapest has achieved a noticeable degree of influence within the organization, despite holding only observer status.

Since this policy went into effect, trade between Hungary and Central Asian countries has been steadily rising. Commerce with Uzbekistan has grown fourfold, with two-thirds of that growth occurring over the past five years. Furthermore, trade between the two countries tripled from 2018 to 2023. Bilateral trade with Kazakhstan follows a similar trend: its volume grew by almost 20% in 2022, exceeding \$200 million in 2023. The Hungarian energy company MOL Group is also investing more than \$192 million in developing the Rozhkovskoye gas field in Kazakhstan. Hungary has also expressed interest in advancing nuclear energy cooperation with Central Asian states, indicating an intention to expand its technological and energy presence in the region.

Strategic partnerships with Azerbaijan Türkiye

Building strong ties and a cooperative relationship with Türkiye and Azerbaijan is another important component of Hungary’s eastern strategy. The relationship between Budapest and Ankara is at its best today, despite long-standing cultural and historical ties. Both nations maintain promising military cooperation and are members of NATO.

One particularly important component of this partnership is energy collaboration. Under the agreement signed in May 2025, Hungary’s MOL Group and Türkiye’s state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation (TPAO) will start joint oil and gas exploration and production at two locations in Hungary in May 2025. Additionally, Turkish investments in Central Europe are strategically facilitated by Hungary’s EU membership. The existing EU–Türkiye framework of free trade promotes the expansion of commerce without significant restrictions, further reinforcing economic interdependence between the two nations.

Similar trends can be seen in Hungary's relationship with Azerbaijan, which has been characterized by Budapest's unwavering support for Baku both during and after the Karabakh conflict. This partnership has been further strengthened by the close personal rapport between President Ilham Aliyev and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, turning it into a model of political alignment and trust.

The foundation of bilateral relations continues to be energy cooperation. By purchasing an 8.9% stake in the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, which transports crude oil to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, and a 9.57% stake in the Azeri–Chirag–Gunashli (ACG) oil field, Hungary's MOL Group made its debut in the Azerbaijani market in 2019. Orbán has frequently referred to Azerbaijan as a vital energy partner and a "game-changer" for the EU, stating that "Azerbaijan is the EU's golden reserve, as we face many energy challenges while you are rich in resources, cooperative, and have stable, effective leadership."

Through interpersonal diplomacy, educational exchanges, and cultural cooperation, the relationship between Azerbaijan and Hungary also represents a strong spiritual and cultural bond. The two countries' shared vision of stability, mutual respect, and a long-term partnership is reflected in this multifaceted engagement, in addition to economic pragmatism. At the 12th Summit of the Council of Heads of State of the Organization of Turkic States in Gabala, Hungary announced that it would build a school in Jabrayil, thereby continuing the tradition established by the Central Asian countries, all of which have constructed schools in Karabakh.

Hungary's active participation in the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) demonstrates a broader geoeconomic strategy alongside a symbolic identification with the Turkic world. Budapest places a strong emphasis on its historical and cultural connections to Turkic countries, yet its long-term strategic planning goes beyond cultural diplomacy to establish itself as a major hub for infrastructure and trade between Europe and Asia. Hungary's desire to enhance its proximity and cooperation with China, which borders several OTS member states, is the less obvious but equally significant geographic aspect of its foreign policy. In this regard, the Middle Corridor—which connects Central Asia and Europe via Türkiye and the South Caucasus—emerges as an essential route that is in line with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The fact that Hungary was the first European nation to sign a cooperation agreement with China under the BRI is no accident. Hungary has attracted more Chinese foreign investment than any other Central and Eastern European state in recent years due to its unwavering dedication to the BRI framework. Hungary wants to become a major hub for trade and energy transit between Western and Eastern Europe as part of the Middle Corridor. The Green Energy Corridor: Caspian–Black Sea–Europe project has already been implemented, marking the first step in this direction. Continuous transmission of renewable energy from Central Asia to Central Europe and beyond may be possible if this network is further integrated with the newly formed "Green Energy Hub: Azerbaijan- Kazakhstan - Uzbekistan" signed on the sidelines of COP29.

This arrangement, which covers the territories of OTS member states, illustrates that Hungary's involvement in the Turkic framework is not merely cultural or diplomatic, but also as part of a well-thought-out geoeconomic plan to integrate Hungary into the larger transcontinental energy and trade network of Eurasia. This strategy has been built step by step and can only succeed with the strong partnerships with the main actors of OTS.