

The political geography of relations between Hungary and Bosnia and Herzegovina

Aims and scope

In our paper we intend to map and analyse the rapidly increasing Hungarian involvement in the Western Balkans and in Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular. Bosnia and Herzegovina has not been among the top partners of Hungary, but recently several events, meetings, (non-)papers and economic moves have been reported which worth investigating. Since Bosnia and Herzegovina is the most unstable but at the same time a strategically important state it adds to the reasons why the issue should be addressed. On the other hand this increase is not without context, Hungary constantly increases its activity in the wider Western Balkans region.

Background

Hungary, like any state, has different and changing interests towards the processes and actors of its wider and narrower region. The most significant of these are, of course, those that link Hungary to the geographically closest neighbouring regions. However, as a Central European small country, its resources for influencing international relations are limited. One of the most exciting changes of the last decade in this respect has been the change of strategy towards the Western Balkans, the activation of relations in a region where Hungary has vital interests in terms of security, economy, culture and national policy, among others.

Historically, Hungary's relations with the Balkans have been one of the most dynamic, periods of Balkan structures penetrating into the Carpathian Basin (e.g. the period of Turkish occupation) followed by Hungarian influence extending into the Balkans (e.g. the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). The changing global and regional geopolitical conditions of the first decades of the 21st century have also had a significant impact on the Balkans, where the end of the 20th century had already brought drastic political geographic changes, such as the break-up of Yugoslavia and the new territorial order of the region. In what has been called the 'new Cold War', a multi-player global power struggle between the major powers (US, China, Russia) and the regional powers with interests in the region (Turkey, Gulf states, EU) has also led to confrontations in the Balkans. In many cases, external actors have gained influence through various means of asserting their interests (infrastructure development, trade, culture, energy, etc.), but none of them has been able to establish a hegemonic role.

In this specific state of balance of power, Hungary has increased its presence in the Western Balkans since the 2010s, which can be seen in the political (e.g. between 2010 and 2010 the Hungarian prime minister met the most with politicians from the region), economic (Hungary has become a significant economic player with a decisive influence in certain sectors) and security (active role in military missions, border protection cooperation) spheres. Ethnic Hungarian communities beyond the borders also occupy an important place in this system through kin-state politics. At the same time, Hungarian activity is not without controversies, if we only consider the supposed Hungarian role in the so called 'non-paper' that have come to light in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or the infrastructure developments with Serbia (Chinese railways, Russian gas pipeline).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is in itself the most complex and unstable state in the Western Balkans. Following the end of the Cold War, one of the longest and most violent armed conflict so far was the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which, in some respects, is still an ongoing process if one considers the status of Kosovo or Bosnia and Herzegovina. Among the multiple wars of the breakup of Yugoslavia the Bosnian conflict was the longest and most devastating, in which the fault lines between the opposing factions were essentially (though not always) ethnic. Only international intervention and peace-building efforts could stop the war, which also meant that the opposing parties remained in the same territorial state, and the political conflict behind the war remained unresolved. Therefore the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which formally ended the war, had to create an extremely complex political system and power has been largely shared along ethnic divisions ever since. The DPA, signed more than a quarter of a century ago, decentralised the state along ethnic fault lines (some pre-war, but many a consequence of the large scale ethnic-based forced migrations), and it also granted territorial political rights to ethnic groups. Territorial decentralisation of the state was a precondition for peace, but today the two parts of the country (the entity of Republika Srpska – RS, and the entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina – FBiH), established by the DPA, are on divergent paths in many respects. In the RS (48% of BiH territory, 35% of BiH population), approximately 83% of the population is of Serb ethnicity, 12.7% are Bosniaks and 2.3% are Croats. In the Brčko District (1% of BiH territory, 2.5% of BiH population) 42.4% of the population is Bosniak, 34.6% is Serb and 20.7% is of Croat origin. In the Federation (51% of BiH territory, 62.5% of BiH population), Bosniaks are the largest ethnic group with 70.4%, Croats account for 22.4% and Serbs for 2.6%, while the Bosniak population in the country as a whole has now reached an absolute majority (50.1%).

Research questions:

We attempt to use a critical approach to explore the (1) background, context, (2) components and characteristics, (3) external drivers, and (4) consequences of the growth of Hungarian activity in the Western Balkans, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We do not aim to analyse the domestic policy context in Hungary, only insofar as this is necessary to understand the changing preferences in Hungarian aims. We start primarily from Hungary's (geographical) characteristics, such as resources, location, socio-economic conditions, spatial location and geopolitical position. This is complemented by the recent changing pattern of relations between Hungary and Bosnia and Herzegovina as a historical context. A strong emphasis is placed on the ongoing changes in the country's geopolitical situation, which is also a consequence of the changing global balance of power and internal dynamics. Obviously, the events in Ukraine, which are still unfolding at the time of writing this extended abstract, will have a major impact on the region and the topic under study, but we cannot at this stage formulate this into a research agenda more precisely than this, but we consider it necessary to examine its changing effects on Bosnia and Herzegovina (e.g. we expect a decreasing Russian influence), on the Hungaro-Bosnian relations (e.g. we expect a decreasing Hungarian involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Based on measurable and analysable indicators (political meetings, economic contacts, declarations...) of the transformation of the relationship, we will try to map the direction, extent and significance of the changes between the two countries.

Methods:

Given the complexity of the problem, we apply a complex methodology in our research. We apply both the results of small-state geopolitics as a theoretical framework and a critical geopolitics approach. Above all, we will use literature analysis, media and discourse analysis and statistical (e.g. economic) data processing to explore the contextual framework. In analysing the components and consequences of Hungarian-Bosnian relations, the above methods will be complemented by interviews with staff of policy making institutions and think tanks on Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkans (e.g. the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade) and diplomatic bodies (the Western Balkans Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hungarian embassies). In addition, to understand the reception of the increased involvement of Hungary in the region, interviews will be conducted with experts from Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as with some non-Hungarian experts on the Balkans in the Visegrad region, and an analysis of the local press will be used to identify the prevailing narratives.