

European Café: Dawn of a new world

Discussion with Péter Sztáray, State Secretary for Security Policy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Two weeks after the inauguration of the new U.S. president, a more militant foreign policy is taking shape, one for which the Hungarian government has already prepared, as the discussion revealed. The Hungarian government views most of these changes as value-based actions that correct previous U.S. foreign policy and align more closely with the values Hungary upholds. Budapest expects to benefit from strong personal relations and anticipates these ties will enhance the country's ability to advocate for its foreign policy interests. Maintaining the trust established after the 2016 elections has been a key priority for Hungarian diplomacy.

Regarding territorial claims and international disputes—such as those concerning the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Panama, Canada, and Greenland—the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CCM) does not find it necessary to take a stance. However, this passivity could be perceived as a lack of solidarity with allies, and it may bring attention to the double standards applied to value-based issues that Hungary frequently emphasizes. This is especially relevant in the case of Denmark, another EU Member State, raising additional questions.

Main security policy dilemmas

The Hungarian government is not concerned about the defense budget expectations set by the United States. At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, member states committed to spending 2% of their GDP on defense by 2024, a target Hungary has already met. The country's equipment procurement share exceeds 40%, placing Hungary among NATO's top performers. U.S. criticism is primarily aimed at countries that fall significantly short of this target, so Hungary has taken a more supportive stance on the issue.

The Hungarian government has been steadfast in supporting its military engagement in Chad, despite concerns from experts about the security risks of the mission. The planned size of the Hungarian contingent remains uncertain, and the local political situation adds further complexity. One of the primary justifications for the mission is to counterbalance Russian and Chinese influence in the region. For now, the lack of support from the Chadian parliament is being cited as the reason for the delay in the mission's start. However, given the country's undemocratic, presidential system, this is largely viewed as an excuse favorable to Hungary's position.

Hungary also considers its relations with Israel a success, particularly because it has managed to maintain good ties with Arab states as well. On the Gaza conflict, Hungary traditionally aligns with the U.S. stance, but it does not see the need to take a position on Trump's Gaza plan, which is considered a red line for Arab countries in the region.

Hungary's foreign policy focus

The Hungarian government believes that Ukraine's EU accession is not in the interest of the majority of EU member states, and Hungary is not alone in blocking the accession process. The issue of minority rights remains a priority for Hungarian diplomacy, but no meaningful progress has been made by Kyiv on this front.

Hungary views its European policy as highly successful. Through its sovereign foreign policy, Hungary has been able to play a larger role than its size would suggest, and it sees value in confronting challenges. However, there is a constant criticism that the EU, particularly the European Commission and the European Parliament, is increasingly delegitimizing minority opinions. Hungary believes that by linking enlargement to institutional reforms, which extend majority decision-making, the EU is effectively sidelining countries that represent minority viewpoints.

At the same time, the Hungarian government acknowledges that the current human and political conditions for effective Visegrad cooperation are lacking, which has diminished the significance of regional policies.

Criticism from the audience pointed out that Hungary's sovereign foreign policy and its strategy of seeking alliances often contradict each other and lack consistency. An example given was Hungary's cooperation with parties within the European Patriots party family, which had been among the most vocal opponents of the Minority Safepack initiative.

When asked whether it might be more effective to seek partners within existing alliance structures rather than constantly pursuing new alternatives, the State Secretary responded that Hungarian foreign policy is shaped by domestic policy, and emphasizing a sovereigntist position helped secure the government's election victory. However, Hungary follows the consensus in nearly 99% of EU decision-making and rarely takes an independent stance.

On the rule of law, the government remains firm, refusing to accept financial support at any cost. It also does not want to rigidly fix its foreign policy strategy, as it seeks to maintain flexibility and avoid unnecessary constraints.

Suggestions based on the discussion

- Hungary should reconsider its unconditional support for U.S. policy towards European allies. While the Hungarian government emphasizes neutrality, the actions of the U.S. clearly violate Denmark's sovereignty. A more appropriate position, in alignment with Denmark's stance, would be to support the Greenlanders' right to self-determination and the further expansion of their autonomy. This position would be consistent with decades of Hungarian foreign policy and would not constitute a radical opposition to U.S. policy.
- The current foreign policy leadership is attempting to present its transactional approach as a value-based one under various guises. However, the cost of this strategy is significant economic damage

caused by isolationism within the EU, which raises questions about the overall benefit of these transactions from a national economic perspective. If the Hungarian government insists on abandoning

EU subsidies, a more detailed analysis is needed to assess the long-term impact of such a decision on Hungary's economy, particularly in the 2027-2034 financial cycle.

- Given the evolving security environment and the ongoing expert criticisms, it would be prudent to commission an expert report on the feasibility and risks of Hungary's military engagement in Chad. This would ensure that political commitments do not endanger the lives of 200 Hungarian soldiers.
- Instead of a clear foreign policy or European strategy, decision-makers often present ad-hoc, short-term proposals, which could jeopardize Hungary's national interests in the long term. Experts believe it is necessary to develop an alternative foreign policy strategy that could guide either the current government or a future one post-2026.