

From Besieger to Gatekeeper? – An Insight into the Relationship between Hungary and Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey is an important partner for Hungary, primarily due to its geostrategic location, while for Ankara Hungary is primarily an important partner due to its EU membership. Turkey lies at the intersection of geopolitical fault lines, continents, and civilisations. From the point of view of Europe, for example, its role as an “insulator state” is particularly important in terms of stopping illegal migration from different regions (from the Middle East, Africa, Asia), while for energy transit, Turkey forms a key connecting link. In recent years, Turkey has become one of the key countries for Hungary’s interest-oriented and global-economy-focused foreign policy. Military-industrial cooperation has also increased. The two states and their citizens are likewise connected by many cultural and historical threads.

Keywords: Turkey, Hungary, migration, economy, cooperation

1. Introduction

Turkey regularly features in the European discourse on irregular migration, primarily as a transit country. However, in addition to the fight against illegal immigration, it also appears as a prominent strategic partner of Hungary in many other areas.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has stated on several occasions that Hungary is situated on a Berlin–Moscow–Istanbul triangle. In November 2021, for example, he put it as follows:

“One of the most important geopolitical lessons that we Hungarians have learned is that we need to look to three countries forming a triangle within which we live our lives. Our forefathers used to talk about Moscow, Berlin and Istanbul, but now we must replace the latter with Ankara. This is the triangle within which Hungarians live; and it is important for us to be in a friendly, strategic alliance with the Ankara side of this triangle.”¹

¹ CABINET OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER 2021.

Turkey's special importance for Hungary is also shown by the fact that it was mentioned in Hungary's National Security Strategy:

“The Republic of Turkey is a dynamically developing regional power and an Ally in NATO. Due to its geostrategic position, it plays an important role in the security of Europe and Hungary, exerting significant influence on the stability of regions including the Middle East and the Western Balkans. Turkey is also a key partner in handling the migration pressure aimed at our continent. It is in Hungary's interest to maximise the benefits of the potential inherent in Hungarian–Turkish political, economic, cultural and defence industry cooperation.”²

This study reviews some of the key aspects of Hungarian–Turkish relations from a Hungarian point of view. First, it briefly presents an evaluation of the relationship between Turkish and Hungarian government communication and policies on the migration issue, then reviews the bilateral economic relations (including trade, investments and energy policy aspects), as well as emerging military-industrial cooperation. Finally, it also covers the cultural links between the two countries.

2. Cooperation against illegal migration

According to UN data, there are still more than 3.7 million registered Syrian refugees and about 320,000 asylum seekers of other nationalities in Turkey.³ Since the beginning of the European migration and refugee crisis, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has emphasised Turkey's central role in the fight against mass illegal/irregular migration at every high-level Hungarian–Turkish meeting. On 30 June 2017, the Hungarian Prime Minister said the following in Ankara, at a joint press conference with the then Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım:

“Without Turkey we are unable to successfully take action against two major problems of the modern era: in this you are indispensable. One of these is the fight against terrorism, and the other is the need to address international migration.”⁴

He then added that Turkey not only protects Hungary, but also the entire European Union.

² MAGYAR KÖZLÖNY 2020.

³ UNHCR 2022.

⁴ CABINET OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER 2017.

“It would be as well for everyone else in Europe to also recognise this. We look upon you as a people who also protect us. Following from this, it is in our best interests for Turkey to be a strong and stable country, with clear leadership able to enforce its will. This is in the interest of both Hungary and Europe, and therefore we welcome the constitutional changes which you have introduced – although I should add that these are Turkey’s internal affairs, and therefore not for us to judge. But we believe that these changes, these constitutional changes, increase Turkey’s ability to defend Europe, and thereby Hungary. We wish you every success in seeing this process through; we also send heartfelt greetings to President Erdoğan.”⁵

Two years later, on 7 November 2019, Viktor Orbán said the following regarding migration cooperation after a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Budapest:

“From this it follows that Turkey is a strategic partner for Hungary in terms of both security issues and the issue of migration. In line with this, in our meeting today we conducted an overview of questions which are linked to security and migration. We expressed our recognition to Turkey of the fact that this year alone, up until the middle of October, it has detained some 350,000 people for illegally crossing its border. If it had not done this, all these people would be somewhere in the vicinity of Hungary’s southern border.”⁶

And on 11 November 2021, in Ankara, the Hungarian Prime Minister highlighted the following:

“As far as the migration crisis is concerned, we Europeans are now under pressure from three directions: from the Mediterranean; through the Western Balkans; and now also from Belarus. In this situation Europe needs allies. It needs allies which can extend the ring of defence around Europe as widely as possible. If Europe has no ring of defence surrounding it, Europe will collapse. Turkey is providing Hungary with such a ring of defence by stopping migrants, and for this we cannot thank them enough.”⁷

Viktor Orbán then touched on some specific areas of cooperation related to migration. He announced that it had been agreed that Turkey would send 50 border guards to protect the Hungarian border, and underlined that the Hungarian government also argues the European Union that Turkey should be assisted to the greatest extent possible:

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ CABINET OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER 2019.

⁷ CABINET OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER 2021.

“We are urging the European Union to provide Turkey with as much financial support as possible in the fight against migration – not indirectly, but directly to the Turkish government. Let us support them financially. Our proposal is that the European Union should provide financial support for the southern and eastern border defence line. The European Union should not only pay the costs incurred by the Hungarians, Poles and Lithuanians in border defence and the building of fences, but also the costs incurred by Turkey – because this is in the interest of Europe. And Hungary is urging the European Union to provide substantial funds to help Turkey stabilise the northern Syrian region, so that Syrians can return home. This is extremely important for Europe.”⁸

Migration, and Turkey’s role as a protective bastion, have served as reference points on several occasions, with regard to certain issues arising in the European Union. In October 2019, tensions rose when Hungary prevented the EU from issuing a statement condemning Turkey’s military intervention in Syria, partly citing this. The statement was finally published half a day later – after the start of the Turkish offensive – as the position of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. The Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Péter Szijjártó, stated in relation to the specific case that, in his view, there were approximately 4 million refugees in Turkey, with whom the Turks were working to enable them to return to their homeland, and from a global perspective migration policy should serve this very purpose, thus he did not support the publication of a statement of condemnation.⁹

3. Economic relations: trade, investments, energy

Commerce

Turkey has become one of the key focuses of Hungarian foreign policy, with a foreign economic focus part of the “Opening to the East” policy.¹⁰ The development of trade has long been the engine of bilateral relations. In 2013, the Prime Ministers of Hungary and Turkey set the goal of increasing trade turnover to 5 billion dollars,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ HVG 2019.

¹⁰ For more about the global and eastern opening in relation to the Middle East, see: RÓZSA NAGYÉ 2016.

and in 2019 they raised this objective to 6 billion dollars. Bilateral trade has been continuously expanding in recent years, reaching 3.38 billion dollars in 2020. In the period between 2010 and 2020, Hungary conducted 1.05-1.47% of its annual trade with Turkey, which also shows that there is still room for progress.¹¹

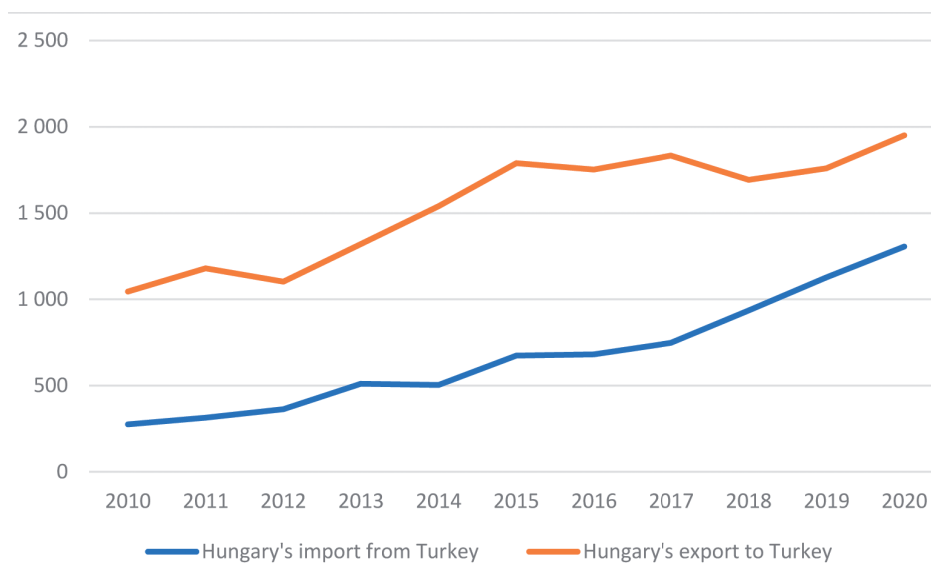


Figure 1: Hungarian-Turkish trade turnover (millions of dollars)¹²

In terms of the composition of trade, more than half of Hungarian imports from Turkey are electrical equipment (26.8%) and transport equipment (24.8%), followed by textile products (16%) and metals (12.9%), followed by the “plastic and rubber” category (6.3%) and processed goods (4.9%). Hungarian exports to Turkey are likewise led by electrical equipment (38.5%) and transport equipment (16.2%), followed by chemical products (10.9%) and products belonging to the plastic and rubber category (8.4%), followed by processed products (6.6%), and live animals or products of animal origin (5.4%).¹³

Investments

Several Turkish investment projects have been realised in Hungary in recent years. In 2020, 0.64% of foreign investment in Hungary came from Turkey, which was the second largest share since 2001, after 0.98% in 2011. The Turkish share

¹¹ Source: Hungarian Central Statistical Office (CSO).

¹² Hungarian imports from Turkey and Hungarian exports to Turkey. Source: CSO.

¹³ KÖVECSI-OLÁH et al. 2021.

of the Hungarian investment portfolio has grown continuously in recent years, accounting in 2020 for 0.122%.¹⁴

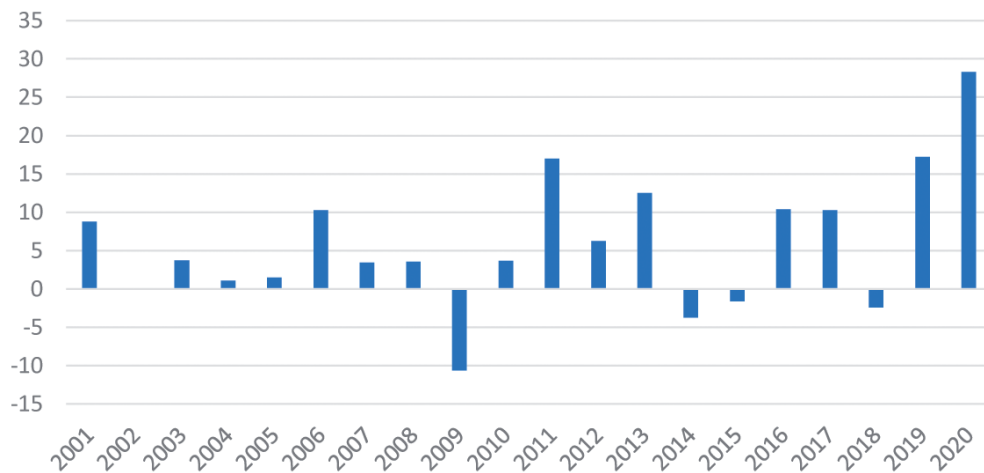


Figure 2 Turkish direct capital investments in Hungary (million euros)¹⁵

Among the largest Turkish investors in Hungary are the transport company Ekol Logistics, Çelebi Ground Handling Hungary Ltd. (which can be found at Liszt Ferenc International Airport), Metyx Hungary Kft. (which primarily deals with the production of glass and carbon fibre raw materials, and composite products made from them) and Yarış Kabin Hungary Kft. (which primarily manufactures safety cabins for tractors and construction machinery). In June 2021, it was announced that Şişecam would establish its first European glass packaging material factory in Kaposvár, which represents an investment worth 220 million euros. This is the largest investment ever made by a Turkish company in Hungary, for which the Hungarian government is providing 12.5 billion forints in non-refundable support, and as a result of which 330 new jobs will be created.¹⁶

As far as Hungarian investments in Turkey are concerned, Hungarian companies have in general tended to withdraw capital in recent years, though of course not exclusively. In February 2021, for example, it was announced that the Hungarian health industry company Medicor would build a factory in Ankara costing 800 million forints. The plant will manufacture medical devices for new-born babies. The Hungarian government will provide 480 million forints to support the investment.¹⁷ Among the Hungarian players present on the Turkish market, Béres

¹⁴ Source: HUNGARIAN NATIONAL BANK 2022.

¹⁵ Source: Ibid.

¹⁶ GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY 2021a.

¹⁷ GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY 2021b.

Pharmaceuticals Ltd., Egis Pharmaceuticals PLC. and Hunland Trade Kft. are the most notable.

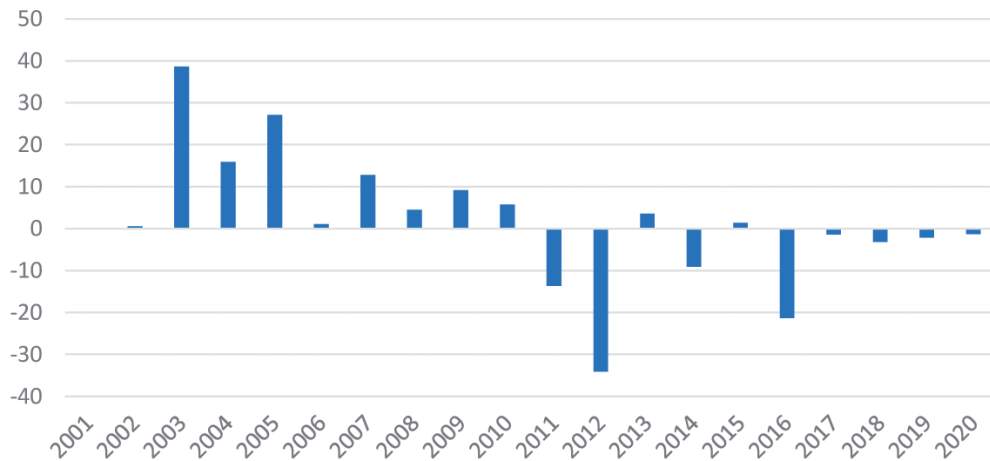


Figure 3 Hungarian direct capital investments in Turkey (million euros)¹⁸

We should also mention the “Go Africa” (“*Irány Afrika*”) project, a Hungarian–Turkish cooperation in connection with investments in Africa. On 25 February 2021, after a meeting with the Turkish Foreign Minister, Péter Szijjártó announced:

“We have also achieved the first success in our economic cooperation in Africa: Hungarian and Turkish companies are jointly equipping seven Ghanaian hospitals with oncology equipment as part of a project worth 100 million dollars. All of this is jointly financed by the Hungarian–Turkish Eximbank.”¹⁹

Energy policy

Looking at the strategic aspects of Hungarian–Turkish relations, we can also highlight energy policy. „According to the new long-term (10+5 year) gas purchase contract signed with Russia in September 2021, of the 4.5 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year, 3.5 billion cubic metres will come from the south, via the TurkStream natural gas pipeline to Hungary. The Serbian–Hungarian interconnector came into operation on 1 October that year.²⁰

¹⁸ Source: HUNGARIAN NATIONAL BANK 2022.

¹⁹ GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY 2021c.

²⁰ GOVERNMENT OF HUNGARY 2021d.

One priority area of cooperation for the Hungarian government is scientific, research and training cooperation in the field of nuclear energy. After the fifth meeting of the *Hungarian-Turkish High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council* in November 2021, at the joint press conference with Erdoğan, the Hungarian Prime Minister said that the number of Hungarian scholarships available to Turkish students would be increased from 150 to 200, “and I have asked the President to make a certain ratio within this available specifically for nuclear specialists – for those pursuing studies related to nuclear energy”, Prime Minister Orbán added.²¹

4. Military industrial cooperation

In the field of Hungarian–Turkish military cooperation, the most significant element so far is clearly the Hungarian purchase of Turkish-made four-wheel-drive (4x4) armoured, multi-purpose (e.g. transport, patrol, reconnaissance, fire support) combat vehicles with increased mine protection, as well as an agreement on the production of these vehicles in Hungary, based on a Turkish license.

Speculations about the purchase started in May 2019, at a show organised on the occasion of National Defence Day at the Budaörs airport, when the Turkish Ejder Yalçın and NMS 4x4 (also known as Yörük) vehicles, with Hungarian insignia, unexpectedly appeared among the displayed military equipment. In December 2020 it was announced that the Hungarian Armed Forces will introduce more than 300 4x4 wheeled armoured military vehicles in the near future.²² As a first step, the Turkish company Nurol Makina will deliver these armoured vehicles to Hungary, and in the second phase of the programme, based on the Turkish license, they will be manufactured, rebuilt, and further developed in Hungary in cooperation with the German company Rheinmetall.²³ The first ten Ejder Yalçın, which have been renamed Gidrán (after a Hungarian breed of horse), were handed over to the Tata MH 25th Klapka Rifle Brigade in February 2021. According to the announcement at the end of 2020, another 40 4x4 vehicles will arrive from Turkey in the near future, and the agreement for this has already been signed.²⁴

²¹ CABINET OFFICE OF THE PRIME MINISTER 2021.

²² HUSZÁK 2021a.

²³ Gáspár Maróth stated that the Turkish vehicles will serve merely as the starting point for domestically produced 4x4 vehicles, which will be made to Hungarian and German specifications. HUSZÁK 2021b.

²⁴ MTI 2020.

Hungary is the sixth country in the world and the first country in the European Union to purchase this particular vehicle.

Regarding the future, the acquisition of additional Turkish military equipment cannot be ruled out. For now, however, in the absence of official announcements, we can only speculate. It has been suggested in expert circles that the Karayel-SU drone of the Turkish company Vestel could be next, after the unmanned aerial vehicle was exhibited at the Kecskemét flight day in August 2021, and appeared in Pápa in November 2021, where it performed a test flight.²⁵ In an interview with *Hír TV* in May 2021, Gáspár Maróth, the government commissioner responsible for defence procurement, stated that Hungary had been monitoring Turkish drones for years, and that they are in contact with several Turkish companies, having visited Turkey several times to test these devices.²⁶

In addition to military procurement, there are several forms of military cooperation between the two countries. Hungarian and Turkish soldiers serve together, for example, in Kosovo, as part of the NATO KFOR operation, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as part of the EUFOR ALTHEA operation. (The stability of the Balkans is a priority interest of both countries.) In September 2014, a Turkish contingent also participated in the *Cooperative Sarex* international search and rescue exercise in Pápa. And in February 2021, Turkey expressed its intention to join the work of the Central European Multinational Division Centre (HQ MND-C), which officially began its work in Székesfehérvár in August 2020.²⁷

5. Cultural relations

The Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Institute has been operating in Budapest since 2013, and the Hungarian Cultural Centre (re)opened in Istanbul in the same year. Those interested can also study Turkology in Hungary and Hungarian studies in Turkey. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) is also active in Hungary.²⁸ After the November 2021 meeting of the Hungarian-Turkish High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council, it was announced that 2024 would be the Hungarian-Turkish year of culture.

²⁵ IHSN.HU 2021.

²⁶ HírTV 2021.

²⁷ SNOJ 2021.

²⁸ For more information on projects and activities, see: TİKA 2015.

The two countries and peoples are connected by many threads. One may cite, for example, the many Turkish loanwords present in the Hungarian language. Most of them (in the order of hundreds) date back to the time before the Hungarians settled in the Carpathian Basin. Examples of such early Turkic words include the Hungarian terms for ox, goat, barley and apple. There are also Turkish loanwords from the time of Hungary's subjugation by the Ottoman Turks (amounting to some 60–70 Hungarian words, of which about 15–20 are in common modern use) including words for coffee or slippers.²⁹

Throughout history, the Ottoman Empire hosted many Hungarians who were forced to flee their homeland. The memory of Ferenc Rákóczi's exile is preserved today in the Ferenc Rákóczi II Memorial House and Museum in Rodosto. Imre Thököly and his wife Ilona Zrínyi lived in İzmit from 1701 until their death (where there is also a memorial house today). Lajos Kossuth stayed in the Ottoman Empire between 1849 and 1851 as a political refugee (and today, the Lajos Kossuth Memorial Museum in Kütahya preserves traces of this).³⁰ Several military leaders of the 1848–1849 Hungarian War of Independence also found refuge in the Ottoman Empire. Later, several of them served in the Ottoman army, such as József Bem (Pasha Murad), György Kmety (Pasha Ismail) or Richárd Guyon (Pasha Hursid).³¹

From a historical perspective, the Turks owe many things to Hungarian specialists. Born in what was then Kolozsvár, Transylvania, Ibrahim Müteferrika (his Hungarian name is unknown) founded the first printing house of the Ottoman Empire in 1727. In 1874, Ödön Széchenyi (the youngest son of István Széchenyi) was entrusted with the establishment of the Constantinople (Istanbul) fire department, and in recognition of his merits, later became the first Christian to be named Pasha. Antal Réthly (1879–1975) established Turkey's first Meteorological Institute on behalf of the Turkish government.

Many buildings and monuments from the Ottoman Turkish era have survived in Hungary. These include the mosque of Pasha Gazi Kasim (now familiar as the Inner City Parish Church in Pest), the Pasha Yakovali Hassan Mosque in Pécs, the tomb of Gül Baba in Buda (which is the northernmost Turkish pilgrimage site), four spas in Buda (Király, Rác, Rudas, and Veli Bej), and the minaret of Eger. One of the most significant archaeological sensations of recent years was when a research group led by Norbert Pap and Pál Fodor successfully located and

²⁹ KAKUK 1987.

³⁰ LISZT INSTITUTE – HUNGARIAN CULTURAL CENTRE 2022.

³¹ HÓVÁRI 2013.

excavated the tomb of Sultan Suleiman the Great / The Lawgiver (1494–1566) and the complex connected to it in Szigetvár (on a vine-clad hill in Turbék).³²

The number of Turks living in Hungary today is around 3,000 (although their visibility in Budapest is much higher, mainly thanks to the many Turkish restaurants). Most came to the country after the end of the Cold War, typically as university students or entrepreneurs. According to Turkish statistics, during the parliamentary elections in Turkey in June 2018, there were 2,156 eligible Turkish voters in Hungary (970 of whom participated in the vote, with a majority voting for Turkish opposition parties).³³

Turkey is a popular destination for Hungarian tourists. In 2019, the year before the coronavirus pandemic, nearly 150,000 Hungarians visited Turkey. Due to COVID-19, this number fell to 16,563 in 2020, and although it began to grow strongly in 2021, it has not yet approached the pre-pandemic level.³⁴

6. Summary

For Hungary, Turkey is primarily an important partner due to its geostrategic location, while for Ankara Hungary is primarily an important partner due to its EU membership.³⁵ Turkey is located at the intersection of geopolitical fault lines, continents, and civilisations. From a European perspective, for instance, its role as an insulator state is particularly important in terms of stopping illegal migration from various regions (including the Middle East, Africa, and Asia), while for fossil fuel transit, Turkey is a key connecting link. There is a slight irony in the fact that while the Kingdom of Hungary was the “bulwark of Christianity” against the Ottoman Empire, today Turkey has come to act as a sort of “bulwark” for Europe.

In recent years, Turkey has become one of the key countries for Hungary’s interest-oriented and global-economy-focused foreign policy. The value-based approach and criticism of the increasingly authoritarian processes in Turkey typically only appeared on the left of centre side of the Hungarian political spectrum. The clash of the two approaches within the European Union has led to tensions

³² For more information visit the homepage of: MTA BÖLCSÉSZETTUDOMÁNYI KUTATÓKÖZPONT 2022.

³³ T.C. YÜKSEK SEÇİM KURULU 2018.

³⁴ ERGÖÇÜN 2021.

³⁵ For more information on the Hungarian perspective regarding Turkish EU accession, see: EGERESI – SZIGETVÁRI 2017.

between member states on more than one occasion. Increasing bilateral trade and investment is the declared goal of the Hungarian government. In addition, military industrial cooperation between the two NATO allies has also increased. Hungary has become the first EU state to purchase Turkish-made Ejder Yalçın armoured fighting vehicles.

The two states and their citizens are likewise connected by many cultural and historical threads. The image of Turks in Hungarian popular culture is generally not hostile, despite the fact that the renovation of Ottoman-era memorials or, for example, the popular television series *Magnificent Century* (known in Hungary as *Szulejmán*) evokes the period of the conquest of historical Hungary. One of the probable reasons for this is the good relationship that later developed: the Ottoman Empire gave shelter to such exiled Hungarian national heroes as Ferenc Rákóczi and Lajos Kossuth, and the parties fought on the same side in the First World War, which is also preserved in historical memory. The appearance of the intellectual current known as Turanism, which emphasises the common, eastern origin of the Hungarians and the Turks, and the similarities between the two peoples, has further strengthened the positive image of Turkey.³⁶

³⁶ EGERESI – PÉNZVÁLTÓ 2021.

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