

The principled realism of Hungarian Christian Democracy: reflections on the Hungarian grand strategy

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May 2025

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Abstract: The formation of a Hungarian grand strategy is a key topic in Hungarian political and intellectual discourse. The Orbán government, based on the ideas of Viktor Orbán and Balázs Orbán, outlined the foundational principles of its foreign policy, which is grounded in a realist understanding of the current global situation. Nevertheless, certain pitfalls have occurred, which have caused and will continue to cause unintended negative political consequences. This paper aims to offer a corrective perspective that aligns closely with the government's ideological stance of Christian democracy. The most significant Hungarian Christian democrat, István Barankovics (1906-1974), and his forgotten foreign policy ideas, will be recalled to establish an ethically principled yet realistic perspective on Hungarian geopolitics in the 21st century.

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Introduction

In 2024, several prominent Hungarian politicians outlined their vision for Hungary's grand strategy, i.e., the primary goals, directions, priorities, and related strategies of Hungarian foreign policy. This is, of course, understandable: in addition to the long-term trends in international relations (e.g. the rise of China), the Russian-Ukrainian war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the (then possible) return of Donald Trump raised the question of where Hungary should be heading. Even if numerous politicians' speeches and writings can be cited on the issue, it is possible to reconstruct the foundations of the position based on the arguments of two leading politicians.

The first is the book of the Prime Minister's political director, Balázs Orbán, *The Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity*, which summarises the idea of 'connectivity.' The second one is, Viktor Orbán's speech at Tusványos 2024 where he —partly using the concept of connectivity and reflecting on the trends of European and world politics—proposed a new Hungarian grand strategy.

These two parallel visions have their merits: they are realist, based on a particular understanding of Hungarian history, and they are conceptually well-formulated — abstract yet detailed, intellectual yet political. Nevertheless, in their current form, they have introduced (or incremented) pitfalls, which have led and will continue to lead to adverse political consequences. Fortunately, incorporating a Hungarian source can help mitigate some of the negative tendencies. With this ambition in mind, this paper will revive the principled foreign policy realism of István Barankovics (1906-1974), the prime Christian Democrat in Hungary's history. Luckily, substantial ideological tensions will not occur with reinvoking Barankovics's ideas: Orbán has considered his governments to be Christian democratic for more than ten years, and the junior partner of the government, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP) originates itself from the

(Christian) Democratic People's Party, which existed between 1944 and 1949, and whose leader was Barankovics. This way, nothing extraordinary is necessary: just a closer alignment with the foundation.

The foundation

The political career of István Barankovics is relatively well-known in Hungary. As the author summarised his life in a previous paper,⁵ Barankovics was a zealous Catholic of rural origin and part of Hungary's new Catholic reform movement in the 1930s. Barankovics raised the problem of social injustices in the Horthy-system and later warned against the growing influence of Nazi Germany in Hungary. As a talented Christian intellectual, he quickly rose to the leadership of the Christian Democratic People's Party and then to the Democratic People's Party in 1945.

It is well-documented that several conflicts occurred during Barankovics's short political career: internal party conflicts with conservative Christians (e.g., József Pálffy), tensions with Cardinal Mindszenty, and – the most serious – antagonism with the communists (Mátyás Rákosi). Still, Barankovics (along with his fellows, obviously) managed to formulate Hungarian Christian democracy, which is inspired by Western European fundamentals (personalism, democratism, and popularism) while "crowned" with Hungarian concepts such as "evangelical socialism" and Hungarian Christian statehood. In the last elections before the stabilisation of the communist regime, even with the systematic fraud done by the communists, the "Barankovics party" finished second. As a member of the parliament, Barankovics, until his forced emigration in 1949, remained one of the last advocates of a Christian and democratic Hungary.

What is less well known is that Barankovics had accurate insights, as well as mature arguments, on Hungarian foreign policy. These ideas, primarily found in his journal articles from the second half of the 1930s, are surprisingly realist (especially from an avowed Christian). Nevertheless, they are not without ethical (Christian) principles. Barankovics's Christian democratic background, combined with his extensive knowledge of European politics and understanding of the essence of Hungarian identity, makes him well-suited as a foreign policy advisor in the 21st century for Hungary. After a brief overview of the concept of connectivity and Hungarian grand strategy, it will become clear in what ways his political wisdom can guide us in the 21st century.

The Hungarian Grand Strategy

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the priority of Hungarian foreign policy was quite clear. Despite the numerous political conflicts of the 1990s and early 2000s, a consensus emerged among the Hungarian political elite: the country should join the Western bloc, specifically NATO and the European Community/Union, as soon as possible. This ambition and adaptation to the new situation determined the main thrust of Hungarian foreign policy for almost two decades.

Although the second Orbán government (2010-2014), considering the rise of the East, had proclaimed its policy of opening to the East for more than a decade, the concept of Hungarian grand strategy was only formed (or published) in 2024. This means that the recent year has brought a relatively comprehensive vision of the government on the great questions of Hungarian foreign policy.

Connectivity - Balázs Orbán's Hussar Cut

One of the most popular political buzzwords in right-wing circles in 2024 Hungary was the idea of connectivity.⁶ This concept was proposed in the most recent book of Balázs Orbán, the political director of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, titled *The Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity*. The book's introduction determines the two main goals Hungary has set for itself. As Balázs Orbán

proposes, 'to permanently join the camp of the most developed countries and become a regional middle power.'

A country must understand the current global order if it has such ambitions. The author depicts the situation as a post-liberal or post-institutional, multipolar world in which the global East is rising while the West is falling behind in most aspects (except in the military).⁸ In this situation, a grievous threat may occur (and has already occurred), argues Balázs Orbán, namely the idea of the West to divide the world into moral categories, namely 'good' and 'bad' countries, to retain its leadership. The task is 'not to strengthen connections, but to divide economies, infrastructure networks, and institutional systems into those inside and those outside the camp,' which easily leads to Cold War bloc-forming tendencies.⁹ A few signs and ambitions of this process are already present, ¹⁰ even if it is not helpful for the West: it separates itself from its markets and risks a major war.¹¹

Obviously, the book's primary concern is that a bloc-forming tendency does not serve the Hungarian interests, as it would lead to serious economic, political, and cultural disadvantages. This is why Balázs Orbán—building on international relations (IR) theories and dominant trends of the global world—aims to renew and apply the concept of connectivity to the current situation. Hungary should support connectivity and translate its essence into economic and political measures.¹² Furthermore, he is convinced that Hungary, building on its geographical advantages, national (intellectual and cultural) heritage, and traditional values, can —and should—become a 'keystone state' as the facilitator of international economic and political (including diplomatic) connectivity.¹³ Ultimately, he proposes the twelve rules of Hungarian connectivity, such as building on existing values, forging coalitions, inviting as many investors as possible, basing foreign policy on national interest, establishing security and supporting peace.¹⁴

The *Hussar Cut*, as a mixture of intellectual and political arguments, has sparked appreciation and criticism worldwide. Still, as the prominent political scientist Ivan Krastev argues in his recommendation, '[a]nyone who wants to know how the current Hungarian leadership sees the place of its country in the world and anybody who is interested to grasp Budapest's 'hussar cut' strategy should read Balázs Orbán's book.'¹⁵

Hungarian Grand Strategy by Viktor Orbán

As Balázs Orbán is the Political Director of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, it is evident that the latter uses the idea of connectivity. When Viktor Orbán arrived at the point of formulating Hungary's grand strategy at the end of his long speech in Tusványos in 2024, he explicitly referred to Balázs Orbán as follows: "Unusually, the Hungarian government has a political director whose job is actually to put together this grand strategy.' The Prime Minister mentioned that the grand strategy is not in the best shape, as the 'language being used is too intellectual', which goes against the political necessities and advantages. 17

Nevertheless, he stated that

'the essence of the grand strategy for Hungary – and now I will use intellectual language – is connectivity. This means that we will not allow ourselves to be locked into only one of either of the two emerging hemispheres in the world economy. The world economy will not be exclusively Western or Eastern. We have to be in both, in the Western and in the Eastern.'¹⁸

Explaining the central tenets of Hungarian grand strategy, Orbán refers to the spiritual foundations, namely the defence of sovereignty (also in economic terms), the defence of Hungarian society (with family benefits rather than viewing migration as a solution), and the protection of national, cultural, and religious distinctiveness.¹⁹ Furthermore, he shared some observations on the whole

concept. First, it should include the interests of the Hungarian minorities outside Hungary's borders (an argument that resonated well at the venue in Transylvania). Second, he suggested that a Hungarian grand strategy should consider the unique 'anthropological, genetic, and cultural characteristics of Hungarians', which he captures in the freedom to live an undisturbed life. ²⁰ Third, as grand strategies are designed for a more extended period, Orbán perceives that the implementation, especially its final stage, will remain for the next generation. Therefore, they are 'looking for courageous young fighters with a national spirit.'²¹

Although many of the elements above were already established as government priorities in recent years, the gradual shift, related to our topic, can be understood in the sense that Viktor Orbán has framed these issues within the concept of grand strategy. In this way, a relatively comprehensive concept emerged on which, beyond his domestic and international opposition, Hungarian right-wing intellectuals could also reflect. Fidesz veteran and Atlanticist MP Zsolt Németh even proposed a call for a discussion on Hungary's grand strategy in the columns of a small journal, Országút, last August. ²² This prompted a series of high-quality articles from generally right-wing intellectuals, including politicians, diplomats, and experts. ²³ Generally, the reflections were well-intentioned but critical. This article, though in a milder form, takes the same position.

Barankovics as a realist advisor

Interest or values?

Although Viktor Orbán cannot be accused of naive idealism over the past fifteen years, the concept of connectivity directly addresses the issue of (the lack of) ideals in politics. As emphasised, Balázs Orbán criticised that the West employs moral terms (good vs. bad country) for political purposes. Instead of this hypocrisy, the concept of connectivity is proposed, which framework enables nations to cooperate freely economically and politically. The primary criterion for connection

is Hungarian interest, rather than moral principles. If the East is rising, Hungary should turn east. If Trump wins the election, Hungary should make a deal. If the EU is no longer beneficial, Hungary should consider leaving it.

The concept of Christian Hungarian statehood proposed by Barankovics can provide an ethically solid foundation for the highly instrumentalised idea of connectivity. One of Barankovics's main arguments was that Hungary must follow in the legacy of Saint Stephen, who was arguably the most remarkable political genius in Hungary's history. ²⁴ This legacy is an 'inseparable unity of the Hungarian nation with Western Christianity and European civilisation', which 'saved our Hungarian nation because it ensured the possibility of existing as Hungarians. ²⁵ He also argues that as a member of the great Christian family, Hungary has 'become the heir, the worker and the defender of European civilisation. ²⁶ Although in a milder form, the government professes almost the same points.

The difference occurs when Barankovics turns into a die-hard Christian. The unity of Christianity and Hungary is so inseparable in his thought that he argues that Hungarian policies can only be good—or in other words, Hungary's existence is only guaranteed—if Christianity is not opposed and if the demands of Hungarian national genius are not in contradiction with the commandments of Christianity.²⁷ This means that Barankovics's criterion for success is not interest but values. Interestingly, these ideals do not lead to sentimental idealism, as they are not focused on the future (thus they are not utopian), but rather on the existing Hungarian history. Consequently, what is proposed is a mixture of values and interests, a Hungarian connectivity, where 'Hungarian' refers to the unity of Hungary and Christianity.

Hungarian uniqueness

The Orbán government is – rightly – keen to emphasise the Hungarian elements in formulating the grand strategy. Balázs Orbán mentions traditional Hungarian values as a basis, and the examples he provides to complement his arguments are mostly drawn from Hungarian history. It is also clear that Viktor Orbán aims to defend the essence of Hungary and emphasises the idea of freedom as a distinctive characteristic.

This general attitude and even the essentiality of freedom are key elements for Barankovics as well.²⁸ He professed the uniqueness of the Hungarians and the Hungarian nation, firmly believing that it is reflected in Hungarian history. The Hungarian understanding of freedom, which differs from that of other countries, embodies the notion of independence, defending its right to rule within its own dominion without harming others. This is eerily the same idea Viktor Orbán proposed in Tusványos 2024.²⁹

The key difference between the current interpretations and Barankovics can be captured in the distinction between a nationalist, history-based Hungarianness and an exceptional understanding of the Hungarian spirit. The first is more focused on rights: what is due to Hungary and Hungarians based on their Hungarian identity. At the same time, the second is more concentrated on responsibilities: what is due to Hungary from Hungarians. The second, no matter how strongly praises Hungarianness (Baranokvics uses the term 'quality-folk'), will hardly fall into the feeling of superiority over others since it is internal. Instead, it induces a special responsibility for Hungarians to act as 'Hungarianness' expects them. If 'Hungarian quality' is maintained, it will be able to follow the historical past of remaining autonomous and independent. In this way, this framework embodies national glory without succumbing to national pride, which is often a temptation for nationalists.

Hungary and foreign influence

Hungary – especially in the past one hundred years – has often faced the problem of foreign influence. In Hungarian grand strategy, it is implied that Hungary, following its heritage, should strive to remain as sovereign as possible in a global world where the nature of influence has, in terms of technology, undergone radical changes. One of the key forms of influence that concerns the Hungarian government is the post-modern leftist-liberal ideological tendencies of the United States and Western Europe.

Barankovics also perceived the problem of foreign influence in Hungary as a serious issue. The first significant symptom that concerned him in this respect was the German Nazi influence in Hungary, which became more and more noticeable in the 1930s, especially in the second half of the decade. He rejected following foreign models, partly based on the richness of Hungary's historical tradition mentioned above.

Nevertheless, Barankovics maintained that Hungarian culture is not isolated, and 'without the reception and transmission of foreign influences, culture cannot survive.'³⁰ One must always see the values of a living culture, and European Christian culture, which Barankovics treats as the highest achievement of humankind, is a 'wonderful mosaic' with different national cultures. Total isolation would result in death, but the 'over-enthusiastic door-openers who want to falsify the distinctiveness of the Hungarian...' specificity should be stopped.³¹ In short, Hungary is not equal to Christian Europe because it has a unique national character, but 'without Christianity and Europeanism, there is no whole Hungary.'³²

In terms of pragmatism, after the Anschluss, Barankovics argued for maintaining the policy of freedom, as Hungary would never relinquish its independence and freedom, which was the primary aim of its foreign policy. Building friendly relations based on each other's identity and mutual respect for the real political interests of the other is preferable, which practically means that the relationship with Germany can be maintained, but the dictatorship is rejected. Ultimately, he argued that the 'Hungarian foreign policy attitude is friendship, not servitude.'³³

How is this different from the current understanding? In two ways. First, Barankovics puts more emphasis on Europe as a value that positively influenced Hungary. In Hungarian grand strategy, Europe remains highly present, but its Western part is seen as the source of corruption. It might be argued that it is due to the different historical situation, but still, how the alleged or existing foreign influence is handled also matters. Barankovics proposes a firm conviction but mitigates conflict rather than enforcing it (generally, Christian democratic parties are built on the principle of inclusion). At the same time, the current Hungarian foreign policy follows different paths: between the emerging blocs, it advocates for peace and coordination, but within its relations with allies, it fuels conflicts.³⁴

Geopolitical realities of small nations

How should a historically great nation act when, in fact, it is small? This was the question when Barankovics lived. Of course, most Hungarians hoped to reclaim the Hungarian land (or at least most of it), and irredentism was dominant in Hungarian politics; under the Second World War, Barankovics wisely emphasised the specificities of small nations and he is able to prove his realist instincts.³⁵

In his article *The Responsibility of Small Nations* published in 1943, Barankovics maintains that small nations should emphasise the distinction in responsibility between big and small nations: the origins of the war, the economic links underlying the war, or the magnitude of the destruction do not depend on small nations. Furthermore, they are limited in their freedom as they need to follow significant trends, often leading to a choice between two great powers; meanwhile, their main ambition is frequently not more than avoiding diminution.³⁶ In *'Peace*

and Sovereignty of Small Nations,' published in the same year, Barankovics warns that small nations are urged to make peace plans, as they know that their voices will only be heard until those decisions are made; afterwards, they can only decide to join or remain passive. Thus, they should engage in the discussion and use their 'main weapon, intellectual reasoning.'³⁷ In fact, both elements —i.e., the limits of small nations and the advocacy of peace —are present in Hungary's grand strategy. From 2010, the Orbán government promoted the idea of Hungary as a strong nation, partly based on its history. Generally, it did not lead to unrealistic expectations in Hungarian grand strategy; for instance, *The Hussar Cut* also proposes an optimistic yet reasonable aim for a regional middle power.

Nonetheless, the Hungarian grand strategy places an immense focus on sovereignty, which often conflicts with international institutions, such as the European Union and the International Criminal Court. Barankovics generally supports international institutions and calls attention to the idea that small nations are protected by respect for their rights and not by 'naked power realities.' He is straightforward:

'(i)n international life, the state remains the wolf of the state. The irresponsibility of sovereignty has become the cancer of international life. It is certain that the durability and justice of the new peace will depend to a large extent on the ability of nations to reconcile the ideal of sovereignty necessary for the development of their individuality with an international legal order based on moral law and the principle of international responsibility.'³⁹

Conclusion

Hungarian grand strategy, initiated by Viktor Orbán and supported by Balázs Orbán's concept of connectivity, has occurred as a novel phenomenon in 2024 Hungary. The topic is essential in itself and worth an extensive examination by other politicians and intellectuals. This article aimed to contribute to the discussion by presenting a principled, Christian democratic realism grounded in the ideas of István Barankovics. Politics, especially international politics, is predominantly based on power. Barankovics knew this, and its consequences on small nations:

"Politics, while not without ideals, is a world of harsher realities. Politics has to count not only on ideals but also on power, often human power in the service of national goals. Small nations would be irresponsible towards themselves if they did not also count on the serious fallibility of human nature in international life."⁴⁰

Still, he insists on certain moral principles. If someone does not, or is ineffective, politics, especially international politics, will only be based on power.

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¹ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity' (Budapest: MCC Press, 2024)

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⁴ See for instance: Orbán Viktor beszéd a XXIX. Bálványosi Nyári Szabadegyetem és Diáktáborban (2018.07.28), https://www.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-a-xxix-balvanyosi-nyari-szabadegyetem-es-diaktaborban/, 2021.12.14. [English-version: Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp (28 July 2018) https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-open-university-and-student-camp/] accessed 9 May 2025.

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⁷ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 12.

⁸ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 107.

⁹ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 15.

¹⁰ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 75.

¹¹ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 91-101.

¹² Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 184-185.

¹³ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 191.

¹⁴ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 221-231.

¹⁵ Balázs Orbán, 'Hussar Cut', 2.

¹⁶ Viktor Orbán, 'Lecutre of of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 33rd Bálványos...'

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- ²⁶ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 29-30.
- ²⁷ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 32.
- ²⁸ The most comprehensive compilation of his articles and speeches can be found in István Barankovics (edited by Zoltán Kovács K. Miklós Gyorgyevics), 'Híven önmagunkhoz: Barankovics István összegyűjtött írásai a kereszténydemokráciáról' (Budapest: Barankovics Örökség Alapítvány)
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- ³⁰ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 32.
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- ³² István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 33.
- ³³ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 232.
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- ³⁵ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 209-218.
- ³⁶ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 211-213.
- ³⁷ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 215.
- ³⁸ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 216.
- ³⁹ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 210.
- ⁴⁰ István Barankovics, 'Híven önmagunkhoz', 210.