

# **The Influence of Geopolitical Factors on Hungary's Policy at the Beginning of the Second World War**

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On the eve of World War II, a complex geopolitical concept determined Hungary's behaviour. Hungarian revision efforts were aimed not only at uniting the nation, in order to let the 3.2 million Hungarians who had been torn away from Hungary as a result of the Trianon Treaty finally return to the majority of the nation. During the revision, the government made efforts to create a new, more favourable geopolitical situation. This could mean the re-acquisition of huge economic resources, and the formulation of natural borders to the east and south, which were easy to defend. By penetrating the ring of the Little Entente, it was possible to create a common Polish–Hungarian border, which meant a huge progress from the point of view of security policy. In case revision was successful, Hungary could strengthen to be a determinative factor (regional middle power) in the Central Eastern European region (Zeidler, 2005:179-180).

Geopolitically, the Hungarian government kept on considering the Central European role of the Atlantic Powers of great importance. This was supported by the fact that the region's small states, the potential opponents (Rumania and Czechoslovakia), as well as the potential allies (Poland) showed explicit Western orientation. Czechoslovakia had a military co-operation agreement with France. Active presence of Western Powers was justified by the Munich Conference (29 September 1938), where upon Berlin's request, with reference to ethnic aspects, the German populated Sudetenland was reannexed from Czechoslovakia to Germany. In addition to the leaders of the German and Italian governments, the British and the French prime ministers also collaborated in making the decision (Dombrády, 2012:182).

Based on the foregoing, the Hungarian government hoped that Great Britain and France were willing to relocate the Czechoslovakian–Hungarian border, too, based on ethnic aspects, and the southern zone of Uplands (Felvidék), where Hungarians lived, would be reannexed to Hungary. The Western Powers refused it. Budapest could only turn to Germany and Italy, who in the course of the First Vienna Award (2 November 1938) partially fulfilled the Hungarian request. However, the standpoint of the West, mainly Great Britain kept on being an essential factor for the Hungarian diplomacy. Especially, after the case when in April 1939 the Western Powers guaranteed the borders of Poland and Rumania. With this they indicated that they were still interested in the Central European processes (Halecki, 1995:293; Romsics, 1999:199-200).

For the Hungarian government, the other geopolitical force line was the involvement of Italian politics. In Budapest, Italy was regarded to be an independent power factor, which had particular aspirations both on the Balkans and the Danube-

basin. After Austria's union with Germany (Anschluss), Hungary advanced into Rome's number one Central European partner. It strengthened the Hungarian–Italian relations even more, which had been good even before. That was why the Hungarian government asked for military support from Italy in autumn 1938, in the period of the First Vienna Award: if Czechoslovakia hindered the re-allocation of the area awarded to Hungary with weapons. And that was why it turned to Rome for support with respect to re-acquiring Subcarpathia, what was rejected by Germany during the Vienna decision (Réti, 1998: 135-136, 145-146).

In the late 1930-ies, Germany's influence gradually increased in the Central European area. Economic relations got tighter and tighter. In return to raw materials and food received from the region's small states, the Germans supplied industrial products and weapons. By merging Austria in March 1938, and acquiring Sudetenland in September 1938, Germany strengthened its positions even geographically in the region with Hungary, Yugoslavia and Italy, which became neighbouring countries. It was even more important that German politics already openly claimed direct control over the area's economic and political processes. In March 1939, by bursting Czechoslovakia and merging the Czech-Moravian areas, it increased its influence even further in Central and Eastern Europe (Ormos & Majoros, 1998:397-400).

Hungarian politics considered one more factor in the course of formulating its endeavours, namely the Soviet Union. The Hungarian political elite irreconcilably confronted communist ideology and the Bolshevik system. However, in 1934 the parties succeeded in settling the diplomatic relations between the two countries, and there were considerable commercial relations built up. The two states were not neighbours. Hungary did not have any territorial or other type of disputes with Moscow. The Soviet geostrategy did not show particular interest towards the Carpathian Basin until the end of the 1930-ies. Following traditional Russian imperial ambitions, the Soviet government gave primary focus to the Baltics, exit to the Baltic Sea, and to the South-East Balkans, exit to the Mediterranean Sea (Halecki, 1995:297-298).

The Hungarian government was formulating its foreign policy concept under the above described circumstances and in this geopolitical space in spring 1939. All the different Hungarian political forces took these factors into consideration, but they evaluated them differently. Prime minister, Béla Imrédy, who wanted to captivate radical forces and who applied radical elements even in his governing, clearly regarded Germany as the most important role player from the point of view of the Hungarian interests. That was why he tried to adjust the country's foreign policy to the German efforts. In February 1939, Hungary joined the Anti-Comintern Pact (in addition to Germany, Italy, and Japan). This raised condemnation in Great Britain, and the Soviet Union froze diplomatic contact for a time (Macartney, 1956:316-317).

The new prime minister, Pál Teleki nominated in March also took it into consideration that German politics formulated the region's structure and force lines the most actively. He also made efforts to utilise it in order to succeed with the Hungarian revision. He saw however the risks of an overwhelming German presence. That was why he aimed at maintaining a somewhat delicate balance. He regarded it unavoidable to strengthen the relationship with Germany, but he did not want to confront British politics. He also thought that nurturing the good Italian-Hungarian relationship was important, because he hoped that Rome might help us facing immoderate German demands (Czettler, 2008:32).

After Teleki had come into power, the first important foreign policy act was to prepare the recovery of Subcarpathia. Earlier Germany definitely rejected it. The Hungarian government hoped to get diplomatic support from Rome. Italy, however, already did not dare to take an open commitment against Hitler. Teleki wrote a letter to the four high powers and supported the Hungarian requests concerning Subcarpathia with convincing arguments. In the mean time the government had prepared for an independent military action (Györi Szabó, 2011:103-104).

The German troops marched in Czechoslovakia on 14 March 1939, and the western areas were annexed to the Third Reich. Slovakia declared its independence, what was immediately acknowledged by Berlin. In Subcarpathia, the Ruthenian government led by Augustin Voloshin prime minister made an attempt to declare Carpatho-Ukraine independent, and he also requested German protection. However Berlin held back its decision. Having utilised this opportunity, the Hungarian army reoccupied the area between 15 and 18 March. There was no remarkable fight. The higher portion of the population did not oppose to get back under the rule of the Hungarian state (Körner-Lakatos, 2011:318-319).

By the reannexation of Subcarpathia, the long-desired Polish-Hungarian border had been implemented; Hungary got enriched with considerable raw material resources, and it also took control of the main railway line going to the East. The new Hungarian–Slovakian border did not have any historical antecedents. From security point of view it was very disadvantageous with respect to Hungary, because it was situated directly by the public road and railway main lines in the valley of Ung. The Hungarian government wanted to create a ready situation in this matter. On 23 March, the army intruded in Slovakian territories and occupied the western side of the valley of Ung. After some days of fierce fighting, negotiations were started. The conflict lasted until 4 April, and then a treaty was signed about the extended Hungarian borders (Janek, 2001:307-308).

In summer 1939, the geopolitical power relations changed considerably in Central-Eastern Europe. Germany signed a secret treaty with the Soviet Union (Molotov-Ribbentrop pact) about not hindering each other's expansive plans. At the same time they also agreed about repartitioning Eastern Europe. After this, Germany attacked Poland. It also asked for the co-operation of the Hungarian government, the use of the railway lines. But Hungary rejected this request. As a result of the fast German push forward, the Polish government gave up its hopeless opposition on 17 September. On the same day, Soviet troops pushed in Poland's eastern zones. Based on the secret treaty signed with the Germans, they occupied some part of the country. With Poland's failure, Hungary not only lost its best ally, but also became the direct neighbour of the Soviet Union (Nebelin, 1989:66; Dreisziger, 1998:63).

In spring 1940, the German army started an attack on the West, and during a few months it occupied Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and the northern part of France. It started a large-scale air raid series against Great Britain. As a result of this, the influence of the western powers on the Central-Eastern European region significantly declined. But they could not be by-passed entirely from the geopolitical arena here. The English standpoint and the United States being behind Great Britain were still very important for the Hungarian government. At that time, the USA was still formally neutral, but it introduced several measures to support anti-German states. In the eastern region, Greece openly pursued an English-friendly policy, while Yugoslavia tried to keep balance between the West and Germany (Ormos & Majoros, 1998:432-434).

The Soviet Union also had an important role in the change of the Central-Eastern European geopolitical power relations. After acquiring the eastern territories of Poland, Moscow also occupied territories from its other European neighbours. It acquired the southern territories of Finland in the “winter war”. Using the internal communist forces, it forced the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to join. By a military pressure, it took North-Bukovina and Bessarabia back from Rumania. As a result the Soviet Union relocated the European borders by two hundred kilometres to the West. The Soviet geostrategy had also changed. While Moscow earlier exclusively focused on the acquisition of the Baltic and Mediterranean Sea exits, starting from 1940 it showed already interest towards particular continental directions, too, first of all towards the valley of Danube and Subcarpathia (Sági, 1997:136; Kolontári, 2009:306-307).

In summer 1940, the attention of the Hungarian government was engaged by reacquiring Transylvania. The army got prepared to recapture this territory by a military action. Transylvania was a dominant element of the entire Hungarian nation awareness, which was strongly idealised by the governmental propaganda. Transylvania’s recovery would have provided the country with extremely outstanding economic resources, and it would have created well defensible natural borders towards the East. At the same time, Transylvania’s reannexation also played an important legitimating role, strengthened the government’s position, as well as the position of the moderate conservative forces being in power. The Hungarian–Rumanian negotiations started about the question of Transylvania fell flat. The Hungarian government determined to start an attack (Dombrády, 2012:202-203).

However Germany who had the region more and more under its control did not want that two of its allies had a war against each other. Therefore it forced them to have negotiations in Vienna again, and made them accept the division of Transylvania. As a result of the Second Vienna Award, North-Transylvania was reannexed to Hungary, and Rumania could keep South-Transylvania. Hitler promised to both parties, if they helped to realise its military plans, after the war he would give them the whole of Transylvania. The principle of “divide and rule” made Hungary and Rumania take Germany’s will into consideration in each of their foreign policy steps (Körner-Lakatos, 2011:332-333).

The Hungarian government had another trial. It tried to get a promise from Great Britain: in case Hungary dissociated itself from the German efforts, London would support the Hungarian requests concerning Transylvania upon the end of the war. The British politics, however, did not commit itself in any way for the territorial aspirations. Thus Hungary had to adjust its steps more and more to Berlin. In the new geopolitical situation, there remained only one chance for Budapest. It tried to tighten its relations with Yugoslavia. The Hungarian–Yugoslavian–Italian co-operation gave Budapest the hope that although it could not set its face openly against Germany, but a joint countenance may perhaps weaken the one-sided German influence, and could help to preserve a particular degree of neutrality. The Belgrade government also had similar ideas. Therefore in December 1940, Hungary and Yugoslavia signed a long-term amity convention (from “eternal friendship”). They agreed that they would settle their disputes, the Hungarian territorial requests concerning the reannexation of Southernland (Délvidék) amicably by discussions (Dreiszigler, 1998:63-64).

In spring 1941, Germany was already preparing for the attack of the Soviet Union. It was evident that none of the parties thought to keep the German–Soviet pact on a long-term basis. Both of them wanted to gain time for their preparation. But before

the eastern campaign, Hitler had to stabilize the Balkans and reckon with Greece. In order to do that, he needed Yugoslavia's collaboration. By German pressure, the Yugoslavian government was willing to join in. However, there was a military putsch in Belgrade, an English-friendly political turn took place. In turn, Hitler immediately ordered the invasion of Yugoslavia. In order to achieve a quick success, he requested the neighbours of Yugoslavia: Italy, Bulgaria, and Hungary to take part in the attack (Megargee, 2000:100-101).

This German request landed Hungary in very hard difficulty. Upon an open rejection, the Germans could have occupied the country. But if it took part in the campaign, it would disregard the amity convention. This way Hungary lost its last ally and openly confronted Great Britain. Under this political and moral pressure, Teleki prime minister collapsed and committed suicide. On 6 April, the German army attacked Yugoslavia. But for the time being, the Hungarian army did not move. The Hungarian soldiers only crossed the border after 10 April when Croatia declared its independence and as a consequence the former Yugoslavian state (with which Hungary signed an amity convention) disintegrated. Nonetheless. The western powers disapproved the Hungarian action. Great Britain terminated the diplomatic relations. There was no declaration of war, however, as London also saw that the Hungarian government acted under German pressure (Dombrády, 2012:229-230).

On 22 June 1941, the German military forces started an attack against the Soviet Union. Within a few days, Finland, Slovakia, Rumania, and Italy also joined the operations. The Hungarian government terminated the diplomatic relations with Moscow, but it did not want to participate in the war. It did not have any territorial claims towards the Soviet Union and it did not want to sacrifice its army being still under development. However, it was clear that it would commit itself with this action for good and all for Germany. On behalf of Germany, there was bigger and bigger pressure on the Hungarian government, and both the Hungarian extreme right and the army leaders urged for entering the war, too (Dreisziger, 1998:66-67).

On 26 June, however, unidentified aircrafts made a serious bombing attack against Kassa (Kosice). The Hungarian leaders, under huge political pressure, without a thorough investigation accepted that the attack was performed by Soviet aircrafts. This was regarded as a reason (excuse) enough for entering the war (Romsics, 1999:204-205).

In summer 1941, it already became impossible for the Hungarian government to continue the policy of neutrality announced by it in 1939. Under the highly transforming geopolitical power relations, the Hungarian leadership also committed itself to Germany. Weakening of the regional role of the western powers, the gradually strengthening German economic and military influence, and the occupation of the Central-Eastern European countries or their getting under German control deprived Hungary from the foreign policy alternatives, and each of its potential allies. The German and Soviet expansive efforts seriously jeopardised the security of the country. Under such circumstances, the policy of "armed neutrality" already could not be maintained in its former form.

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