

BAFCLC

EXPEDITIONARY CULTURE  
**FIELD GUIDE**

**Hungary** 



U.S. AIR FORCE

# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.



The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on Eastern Europe.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes unique cultural features of Hungarian society. It applies culture-general concepts to help

increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.

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# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic because it represents the premium Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.

## Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.



We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature

in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to



perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a

society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems and others (see chart on next page) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the way a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

### **Social Behaviors across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival,

although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more complex market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.

### Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

### Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system assigns meaning, sets its universal



standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is evidence to

support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

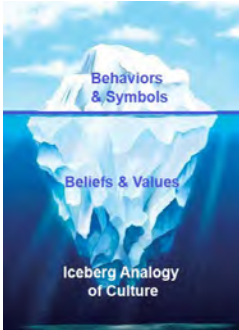
While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people

classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.



## Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model



for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective

when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.



As you travel through Eastern Europe, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

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# CULTURAL DOMAINS

## 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



Eastern Europe comprises 10 countries on the eastern side of the European continent: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Archaeological finds suggest people inhabited the region as early as 40,000 BC. From approximately 10,000-3,000 BC, hunter-gatherers formed semi-permanent settlements, sustained by agriculture and cattle herding. Slavic tribes settled in the plains of present-day Ukraine as early as 2000 BC, eventually moving west and south along the fertile basin of the Danube River. Notably, although short-lived, the Roman Empire's incorporation of much of the region's South in the early centuries AD significantly influenced culture in present-day Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovenia.

Over the following centuries, various migratory peoples from elsewhere in Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia continued to settle in the region, expelling, conquering, or mixing with the Slavs and other inhabitants. By the 10th century, loosely aligned settlements coalesced into large, powerful kingdoms, including the Bohemian Empire centered in present-day Czech Republic and the Kingdoms of Hungary, Poland, and Bulgaria. In the 14th century, much of the region fell to the Ottoman Empire, based in present-day Turkey, with many of the region's residents experiencing several centuries of Turkish raids.



While present-day Bulgaria and Romania remained under Ottoman rule for over 500 years, in the 16th century, many regions became subject to the rule of the Austrian House of Habsburg – one of Europe’s most influential royal dynasties that later joined Hungary to form the powerful Austro-Hungarian Empire. Meanwhile, Poland formed an independent state, eventually uniting with neighboring Lithuania to control large parts of the region, including Ukraine and Belarus.

Unable to repel persistent attacks from neighbors, the Polish-Lithuanian Empire disintegrated in the late 18th century, with Poland, Ukraine, and Belarus falling under Russian control for the next nearly 120 years. During this time, Russia violently quelled nationalist movements, suppressed regional languages,



and deported thousands of native inhabitants while encouraging Russian immigration into the region.

All 10 Eastern European states experienced substantial

conflict during World War I (WWI). Immediately following the war, most states enjoyed brief periods of independence. By contrast, the newly formed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) absorbed Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, all of which suffered severely under communist repression. Notably, after its defeat in WWI, the Austro-Hungarian Empire splintered. Hungary consequently lost nearly 2/3 of its territory and 3/5 of its people to neighboring nations.

With the onset of World War II (WWII), all 10 states again became battlegrounds. While some immediately sided with the Axis powers, others were unable to withstand German aggression. All 10 states suffered heavy casualties throughout the war. During its occupation of the region, Nazi Germany murdered, deported, or confined most of the region’s sizeable Jewish population and other “undesirables.”

At war’s end, the USSR either absorbed or heavily influenced the political, social, and economic systems of each Eastern

European state. Adopting communist tenets, each state nationalized private companies, appropriated private property, and rapidly expanded industrial development. Communist leaders also encouraged Russification in the region, violently repressing national languages, religions, and cultures.

In the late 1980s, democratic movements swept across the Soviet bloc, and within a few years, all 10 states had declared independence from the USSR. Further, they removed communist leaders, transformed their governments, and adopted market capitalism. Since then, all states but Belarus largely pivoted away from Russian influence to pursue political, military, and economic integration with the West.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social

relations are all the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community. All 10 Eastern European states are parliamentary republics led by an elected Prime Minister, President,



and legislature. In most states, Presidential powers are largely ceremonial with executive power vested in the Prime Minister, who leads the government together with the support of a Cabinet of Ministers. In most states, political parties typically form coalitions in order to attain and maintain power.

With most having suffered crippling dictatorial rule for much of the late 20th century, each Eastern European state emerged in the 1990s with new political, social, and economic structures. While some states have since created relatively stable, well-run democracies, others face challenges to the democratic process. Corruption is a prevalent problem in the region. In some cases, governments' inability to adequately curb widespread corruption results in frequent public protests, causes distrust of public

officials, and creates an overall skepticism of the democratic process. Moreover, weakened by overly broad and at times differing ideological profiles, ruling political coalitions and parties tend to dissolve frequently, resulting in a political landscape marked by infighting and successive changes of government.

Most states are members of strong regional alliances, such as the European Union (EU) and NATO. Although somewhat fraught with political instability, most states remain committed to improving democratic processes, serving as advocates of a democratic and pro-Western agenda in the region. By contrast, Belarus is politically aligned with Russia, while Ukraine and Bulgaria have historically attempted to balance relations between the West and Russia, at times resulting in internal tension between ideologically opposing political groups.



With the exception of Belarus, the states rely on NATO, the EU, the US, and other international support to defend against external, state-level threats. Russia's recent aggression in the region, notably 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has significantly heightened regional tensions and consequently dominates the states' security environment.

The region exhibits differing levels of ethnic diversity. Poland, for example, is largely homogenous, with ethnic Poles comprising 99% of the population. By contrast, the native populations of Ukraine and Czech Republic are significantly lower, 78% and 57%, respectively. Notably, the Roma and other ethnic minorities suffer significant social division, discrimination, and stigmatization across Eastern Europe.

### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also

create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

Early residents of Eastern Europe practiced a variety of indigenous religions, venerating multiple deities and spirits who inhabited the natural world. Romans introduced Christianity as early as the 1st century. By the 10th century, many Eastern European kingdoms had adopted Christianity as a state religion. In the early 11th century, theological differences between western and eastern branches of the Christian movement forced a permanent divide between the Roman Catholic Church centered in Rome and the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the Byzantine Empire. Over subsequent centuries, both branches of Christianity flourished in the region. Later, as the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe, some states saw the Catholic

Church reorganize under Lutheran authority. Across the region, Christianity became closely linked to national identity.

In Poland, for example, the Catholic Church became entrenched



in daily life, influencing education, social services, and remaining politically influential even today. Throughout the centuries, Judaism also enjoyed growth in the region, with among others, Polish and Czech Jewish communities growing significantly until their annihilation during WWII.

During their years of occupation and influence, the Soviets suppressed all religious institutions and activities in the states, while simultaneously cultivating atheism and encouraging the devout to abandon long-held religious beliefs. To do so, the states' communist governments carefully regulated religious affairs and deported clergy, while destroying or converting most churches and synagogues for other uses. Consequently, membership in religious organizations decreased significantly over the years. Nevertheless, most states saw a resurgence in

religiosity once religious freedom was restored following the fall of communism.

Today, some of the region's inhabitants are Orthodox Christian, while others – including the majority of Poles (85%), Slovaks (56%), Slovenes (71%), and Hungarians (30%) – are Roman Catholic. Notably, while most Eastern Europeans retain deep religious convictions, others remain religiously unaffiliated. For example, only about 78% of Belarusians claim a religious affiliation – the lowest rate in the region -- while large numbers of Slovenes, Slovaks, and Czechs are atheist. In parts of the region, small Jewish and Muslim communities are experiencing some growth. One notable exception is Bulgaria, where a relatively large Muslim community (10% of the population) traces back to the early 14th century.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are highly valued within Eastern European societies. Residents maintain strong connections with both immediate and extended family



members, supporting them emotionally and financially and providing physical care for elderly or ailing kin if needed. Most households comprise 2 parents and their children (nuclear family), with many families choosing to have just 1 or 2 children. Nevertheless, extended kin on both sides of the family often live nearby and are significantly influential in family matters.

Rapid urbanization has changed family life in recent years, as urban inhabitants marry later or cohabit (live in long-term, unmarried partnership) and have fewer children. Consequently,

while the traditional family structure remains common in rural areas, it is more diverse in urban centers.

While historically marriage was an arranged union, today Eastern Europeans typically choose their own partners. Couples may spend several years dating, live together, and have children before choosing to marry. In some states, divorce is increasingly prevalent among younger generations, with rates comparable to the US. Still in others, the practice is relatively uncommon and carries social stigma.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

The Eastern European states' historically patriarchal culture privileged men as leaders and providers. While some of the region's inhabitants continue to adhere to traditional values – men as breadwinners and heads of household and women as mothers and wives – gender roles and responsibilities began to transform during the Soviet era and continue to change today, particularly among younger generations.



Although women hold equal rights under the law, political, social, and economic inequalities between the genders remain. For example, women often face discrimination in the hiring and promotion process, routinely receive lower wages than their male counterparts, and suffer from sexual harassment in the workplace.

Despite these barriers, the number of women serving in the political sector across the region has increased over the past few decades. Eastern European women hold a significant proportion of national and sub-national government positions, with most

states maintaining similar or higher female participation rates in their national legislatures as the US.

Notably, the region's women suffer high rates of gender-based violence (GBV), particularly domestic abuse and rape. Often considered private matters, many incidences of GBV go unreported. If cases are reported, the prosecution of perpetrators is rare. Although homosexuality is legal throughout the region, homosexuals still suffer discrimination, stigmatization, and violence in some areas.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally. Most of the region's languages

derive from the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family, while Moldovan and Romanian belong to the same family's Eastern Romance branch. A member of the Uralic family, Hungarian is the region's only language



not part of the Indo-European family. Notably, the Bulgarian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian languages are written in the Cyrillic alphabet. By contrast, all other state languages employ the Latin script.

Some states managed to largely avoid harsh Russification policies during the Soviet era. Others suffered years of linguistic repression when Russian became the predominant language in education, the media, and government proceedings. Today, with the exception of Belarus, Russian is no longer the region's main language. Instead, native languages have largely supplanted Russian, though some residents continue to use Russian in business and everyday life. The states are also home to native speakers of other languages, notably Romani (the language of the Roma), Turkish, German, and other regional languages.

English has become increasingly popular over the last several decades and is spoken widely in business and by young, urban residents.

Generally, the region's residents demonstrate respect, privacy, and candor in their communication practices. In some states, communications reflect notable emotion and engagement. By contrast, others typically refrain from displaying strong emotions in public, feel comfortable in silence, and prefer quiet speech. Across the region, residents usually share personal information only with family or close friends and are reserved when interacting with strangers.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized

systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Prior to the 14th century, most formal education in the region occurred in religious institutions where clergymen taught religion and



basic literacy. Notably, while Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic had established universities as early as the 14th century, secular centers of higher academic learning were slow to develop elsewhere in the region. Nevertheless, by the late 1800s, extensive public school networks administered both religious and secular curricula to millions of students across the region.

Most Eastern European governments established free and compulsory public education systems in the early 20th century.



The subsequent Soviet occupation and influence brought significant changes to schools and curricula. During that period, the education system promoted Soviet ideology and communist tenets and emphasized Russian culture and language. It also prioritized vocational instruction, while simultaneously suppressing Eastern European languages and culture.

Today, most Eastern European students receive free and compulsory schooling at the primary and secondary levels. School enrollment rates are high, and nearly 100% of Eastern European residents are literate. Challenges to the education systems include low teacher salaries, rural school closures, and disparities in educational attainment between majority groups and linguistic and ethnic minorities.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. As in most Western cultures, Eastern Europeans tend to be preoccupied more with time management than relationship-building. They too value punctuality, a sense of responsibility, and candid professional interactions. Within their personal lives, however, most Eastern Europeans invest significant time into establishing and maintaining relationships.

They also like to build relations before conducting business, which tends to move more slowly in Eastern Europe than in the US. Throughout the region, residents usually begin discussions with light



conversation. Most communication is explicit and direct, with frequent eye contact. Eastern Europeans generally require less personal space when conversing than is common in the US. One exception is in Slovenia, where residents maintain about the same personal distance as in the US.

Eastern European states observe a number of public holidays such as Christmas, Easter, and their respective independence

day. Further, all Eastern European states commemorate both the end of World War II and the Soviet era, as well as unique seasonal or harvest holidays.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most Eastern European forms of artistic expression – including art, architecture, dance, music, and theater – reflect the region’s rural peasant past, history of foreign presence, and modern global trends.

Traditional music and dance in Eastern Europe typically promote themes such as nature, the seasons, rural life, and love. Folk songs, festivals, and dance are particularly popular in rural areas, often utilizing traditional instruments. Most common dances are performed in pairs, circles, or lines. Under Russian and Soviet influence, classical ballet became a common form of dance across the region. Classical music and opera remain popular, as well as rock, jazz, and international pop music. Government financing for the arts largely declined after the



Soviet era, yet artistic freedom has increased significantly.

Rural landscapes and geometric designs are common themes in visual arts. Eastern Europeans also practice various traditional handicrafts

and folk art that reflect the region’s rich peasant history, along with Christian or ancient pagan motifs. Common handicrafts include pottery, embroidery, and baskets. Soccer is the most widely followed sport in the region, followed by basketball, volleyball, and gymnastics. During the winter, residents also enjoy ice hockey, skiing, and ice skating.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures, and economics. Theories of disease

and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

Eastern European dishes tend to be simple, hearty, and mildly seasoned. Most meals consist of a staple, such as potatoes, oats, or barley served with a meat, fresh salad, and various breads. While beer is the most popular alcoholic beverage, some residents enjoy unique herbal liquors or vodka. Notably, the region also has a rich history of wine production, dating back to the 1st century BC.



Health in Eastern Europe has improved significantly in recent decades, evidenced by decreased infant and maternal mortality rates and longer life expectancies. Most residents have access to free, state-funded healthcare in modern facilities.

Nevertheless, the region's healthcare systems face several challenges. The quality of care varies significantly between private/public and urban/rural facilities. Generally, public facilities concentrate in cities and are ill-equipped, overcrowded, understaffed, and plagued by corruption. Meanwhile, private facilities offer first-rate care mostly to the wealthy. Finally, a shrinking yet aging population threatens to burden already overloaded national healthcare services in many states.

Non-communicable "lifestyle" diseases such as cardiovascular, cancer, respiratory, liver and diabetes account for the majority of deaths across Eastern Europe. In addition, the region's residents suffer from high rates of suicide and alcohol poisoning. Mostly a result of Soviet-era industrial policies, pollution is a widespread hazard throughout Eastern Europe, causing further health-related issues.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services.

Prior to the 19th century, the Eastern European states maintained largely agrarian economies, with residents engaging in subsistence agriculture or laboring as serfs on large elite landholdings.

During the 1800s, several states began to industrialize, while Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, and Slovenia remained primarily agrarian. Industrialization intensified throughout the region in the Soviet era, when all states followed a centrally-controlled and



planned economic system, establishing large collective farms and developing various heavy industries.

Following the end of communism, the states immediately sought to decentralize their economies and adopt liberal, free market systems. While the transition initially caused their economies to contract, by the early 2000s, all 10 nations experienced growth. For most states, accession into the EU further spurred economic expansion. In 2008, the global financial crisis slowed investment in the region, reducing demand for exports and causing severe economic contractions in every state except Poland and Belarus.

Some of the states reacted quickly to the crisis with strict internal reforms which allowed their economies to rebound within a few years. Others were slow to respond and suffered a protracted recession. Notably, the crisis in Ukraine has hurt that country's recent economic growth, while Belarus continues to experience economic stagnation.

The economic outlook in the region is varied. Some states such as Romania, Czech Republic, and Slovenia appear poised to maintain stable growth rates. The non-EU member states of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova are impacted the most by geopolitical events in Russia. All 10 states are vulnerable to economic fluctuations due to their export-oriented economies. Some common economic challenges include persistent corruption, aging populations, and emigration of skilled workers.

The EU is by far the region's largest trading partner, except for Belarus, which heavily relies on trade with Russia. As EU members, most Eastern European states benefit from a secure business environment and free movement of goods and services.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. All 10 Eastern European states have invested in extensive road networks and efficient public transportation systems, particularly in urban areas. While Slovenia maintains the region's best roads, Ukraine and Romania have some of the world's worst. Rural infrastructure is typically less developed, and corruption often impedes progress on road and rail projects.

Generally in better condition than roads, railways connect major cities throughout the



region, though some services are slow and inefficient. The Black Sea and major rivers, notably the Danube, host important ports. Although modern information technology is available in all states, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Bulgaria, and Romania have some of Europe's least developed networks. Internet use also varies widely, with 90% of Belarussians using the Internet at home compared to approximately 79% of Bulgarians.

While Poland relies on fossil fuels for 73% of its energy needs, nuclear fuels account for 44% of Hungary's energy production. Most Eastern European states depend on imported natural gas and oil from Russia and the Middle East. Governments throughout the region have announced their intention to increase the use of renewable resources such as hydroelectric plants, wind, and other renewables.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Eastern European society at large, we will focus on specific features of Hungarian society.

## PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

### 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

#### Overview

Tracing its founding to 896, Hungary experienced 600 years of independent statehood followed by some 350 years of foreign domination. Hungary regained its sovereignty in a dual Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867, then lost some two-thirds of its territory and population following World War I.

At the end of World War II, Hungary's communist leaders closely aligned it with the Soviet Union. Since 1989, Hungary has transformed its government into a democracy, adopted market capitalism and joined the European Union (EU).



#### Early History

After 1000 BC, the area was home to Illyrians, Thracians, Scythians, Celts, and Dacians. Between 35-9 BC, the Romans (who had begun building their empire in central Italy around 500 BC) conquered much of the region. Over some 4 centuries, they built new or expanded existing settlements, while also constructing roads, thermal spas, and temples.

**The Great Migrations:** Beginning in the 4th century AD, various nomadic tribes moved south and west to invade the Roman Empire, eventually causing its collapse. Subsequently, Hungary was occupied by several other groups, notably the Huns, Goths, Ostrogoths, Slavs, and Avars. By the 9th century, a variety of foreign powers held various parts of Hungary, which was populated primarily by Turkic, Germanic, and Slavic groups.

## The Arrival of the Magyars (Hungarians)

Meanwhile, a semi-nomadic group called the Magyars (a Finno-Ugric people – see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*) lived among Turkic tribes along the Volga River in what is today Russia and Ukraine. Under a leader named Árpád, seven Magyar tribes united and then allied with three Turkic Khazar tribes. This federation became known by the Turkic term **On-Ongur** (“Ten Arrows” or “Ten Tribes”), from which the English name “Hungary” eventually developed.

Under enemy attack, the Magyars migrated westward. Around 896, they crossed Central Europe’s Carpathian Mountains and entered the plains of Hungary, easily conquering the sparsely-populated region and settling into agricultural communities. Over the next 60 years, the Magyars raided and plundered as far as Germany and Italy before a decisive defeat in 955, when their expansion efforts to the west were halted by the Holy Roman Empire, an alliance of primarily German-speaking kingdoms and dukedoms in Central and Western Europe.

Subsequent defeats by the Byzantine (Eastern Roman) Empire centered in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) further weakened the Magyars. Seeking support from other sources, Prince Géza (Árpád’s great-grandson) invited missionaries from the Holy Roman Empire to introduce Christianity to the region in 973. Subsequently, Géza was baptized into the new faith along with his son, Vajk, who took the Christian name Stephen (István in Hungarian).



## The Kingdom of Hungary

To assert his standing as ruler of the Magyars after his father’s death, Prince Stephen appealed for recognition from the Pope, the leader of the Catholic Church in Rome. The Pope obliged, sending Stephen a

jeweled crown. Displayed in Hungary’s Parliament today, this Holy Crown remains a powerful symbol of Hungarian nationhood.

On Christmas Day in the year 1000, Stephen was crowned King of Hungary. The 38 years of Stephen's rule resulted in peaceful consolidation of his kingdom and the spread of Christianity. The Pope declared Stephen a saint in 1083, and he Hungary's patron saint today.

**The Early Kings:** For almost 2 centuries following Stephen's 1038 death, the kingdom experienced significant internal conflict. Nevertheless, Hungary was able to extend its territory into modern-day Croatia and Transylvania (a region of Romania today). Hungary's population swelled through natural growth and immigration, making it a multi-ethnic state, though the noble class was limited to Magyars. Succession conflicts ended with Andrew II's long rule (1205-35), although his poor leadership led to significant economic woes and widespread rebellion. In 1222, the nobles forced Andrew to issue the so-called Golden Bull (often compared to England's Magna Carta), which restricted the King's power while reaffirming the rights of nobles.

**The Mongol Invasion:** Andrew II's son Béla IV (r. 1235-70) faced a new challenge. In 1206, Genghis Khan had united the Mongols in the steppe north of China. In subsequent decades, he began his conquests of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. In 1241, the Mongols reached Hungary, overrunning its defenses, devastating the countryside, and killing about half the population before retreating again.

In response, King Béla IV reorganized the army, constructed new fortresses, and invited new, non-Magyar settlers to repopulate the country. Over the remainder of his rule, towns flourished, and the standard of living improved due to new farming and mining methods, all of which earned him the label of Hungary's "second founding father" after Stephen.



### **Hungary under Foreign Kings**

Many of Hungary's subsequent kings were foreigners, oftentimes monarchs, who simultaneously occupied at least one



other throne. Because of their divided interests, some of these monarchs neglected or exploited Hungary. Under Louis I the Great (r. 1342-82), who was also King of Poland, and Sigismund of Luxembourg (r. 1387-1437), Hungary extended its territory as trade grew, the arts flourished, and cities saw impressive new castles and cathedrals. However, after Sigismund also ascended the thrones of Germany and Bohemia (in the present-day Czech Republic) and then became Holy Roman Emperor, discontent grew. Unrest was further spurred by the arrival of the radical Hussite religious reform movement from Bohemia.

Meanwhile, Hungary faced a new threat from the South. In the late 13th century, a Turkic dynasty in the territory of present-day Turkey founded the Ottoman Empire. By the mid-14th century, the Muslim Ottoman Turks were expanding rapidly and threatening Hungary's southern territories. In response, Sigismund organized a crusade against the Ottomans. Yet at the 1396 Battle of Nicopolis (in Bulgaria), the Ottomans soundly defeated a combined army of Hungarians, Bulgarians, French, Croats, English and others. From their new territory on the Balkan Peninsula, the Ottomans repeatedly raided Hungarian territories in the early 15th century.

## Hungary under János Hunyadi and Matthias I

Succession conflicts flared following Sigismund's 1437 death. In



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1444, the Hungarian nobles acknowledged an infant as the Hungarian King, then elected Gen János Hunyadi as governor to rule so long the child was underage. Besides restoring order in the kingdom, Hunyadi led an army of mercenaries to break the 1456 Ottoman siege of Belgrade (a Hungarian outpost then and capital of Serbia today), thus temporarily keeping the Ottomans at bay.

In a sign of their devotion to Hunyadi, the nobles proclaimed his son, Matthias, King in 1458.

Over the course of his long reign (1458-90), King Matthias I

became a patron of the arts, turning the Hungarian court into a center of Renaissance culture and scholarship. He also reformed the legal system, while convening the Diet (Parliament) regularly. Increased taxation supported a large standing army, which he used both against domestic enemies and abroad to expand the kingdom, making Hungary one of Central Europe's leading powers.

### **National Decay, Rebellion, and Invasion**

When Matthias died without an heir, the nobles purposely chose a weak successor, Vladislas II, King of Bohemia. The nobles allowed the standing army to disband and cancelled most of Matthias' reforms, while ruthlessly repressing the peasants. These policies sparked a major uprising in 1514 that the authorities brutally suppressed, torturing and executing some 70,000 peasants. As further punishment, the authorities abolished the peasants' right to migrate, tying them as serfs to the land owned by the nobility. Following Vladislas' 1516 death, his 9-year-old son, Louis II, was proclaimed King. Noting Hungary's weakness, the Ottoman sultan (leader) Süleyman the Magnificent advanced on and took Belgrade.



**The Battle of Mohács:** In 1526, the Ottomans continued their advance. Leading a force of some 25,000 men, 20-year-old King Louis II confronted the Ottoman army at Mohács, near modern-day Hungary's border with Croatia and Serbia. Outnumbered by roughly four to one, the Hungarian forces were almost annihilated. Further, King Louis II drowned while trying to retreat across a stream. Subsequently, the Ottomans advanced to Buda (the communities of Buda, Pest, and Óbuda would join as Budapest in 1873). Fearing the Hungarians would mount an aggressive response, the Ottomans soon retreated, though they took with them some 100,000 Hungarian captives.

Succession conflict followed King Louis II's death. Rival factions of nobles elected two different kings – John (János Zápolya in

Hungarian) of Transylvania and Ferdinand I of the House of Habsburg (one of Central Europe's most influential royal dynasties based in Vienna, Austria). As the succession dispute continued, Hungary fell into civil war.

Seeking an advantage, John negotiated an agreement with the Ottomans in 1538 that divided Hungary: Ferdinand would receive western Hungary and Croatia and John the remaining two-thirds. Following John's 1540 death, the Ottomans claimed his portion, incorporating the country's central wedge (including Buda) into their empire as "Turkish Hungary" and overseeing the transition of Transylvania into a semi-autonomous state under elected Hungarian princes. Meanwhile, the country's northern and western fringes (including Croatia) became "Royal Hungary" under Habsburg rule. Hungary would remain partitioned this way for about 150 years.

### The Period of Partition

During the 16th-17th centuries, semi-autonomous Transylvania flourished as a trading center between the Ottomans and House of Habsburg despite religious strife between Catholic Habsburgs and Protestant Hungarians. Eventually, Transylvania was



recognized as a Protestant state and became the center of a Hungarian movement against both the Habsburgs and the Ottomans.

Meanwhile, conflict and slave raiding significantly reduced the population of much of Turkish Hungary.

In the countryside, Ottoman officials and soldiers seized agricultural estates and exploited the Hungarian peasants. Conditions were somewhat better in towns, where Hungarians enjoyed some protection under the Ottoman administration.

In Royal Hungary, the Habsburgs brought in foreign mercenaries to staff a new chain of fortifications intended as protection against the Ottomans. Resentment of the Habsburgs gradually

grew, spurred somewhat by religious discord between the Catholic Habsburgs and Protestant Hungarian peasants.

### War and the End of Partition

Anti-Habsburg sentiment in Transylvania and Royal Hungary reached its peak in the late 17th century. Recognizing an opportunity to gain more territory, the Ottomans dispatched a vast army that besieged the Habsburg capital of Vienna in 1683. Yet with the help of the Polish army, Austrian and Hungarian forces managed to dislodge the Ottomans from Austria and most of western and central Hungary by 1686. In the 1699 Treaty of Karlowitz, the Ottomans officially relinquished Turkish Hungary to the Habsburgs. The treaty also gave Habsburg-controlled Hungary direct rule over Transylvania.

### Habsburg Rule

The dictatorial Habsburg also controlled present-day Slovakia, most of Croatia, and parts of Ukraine, Serbia, Romania, and Austria. Hungary's Diet was forced to declare the Hungarian crown the hereditary property of the Habsburgs, who also began confiscating lands from Protestant Hungarians. A 1703 peasant uprising sparked an 8-year rebellion led by a Transylvanian prince that united Hungarians, Romanians, and Slovaks against the Habsburgs. Although the movement failed, the new Habsburg ruler, Charles III, subsequently ended his administration's worst abuses, though he introduced measures to reestablish Catholicism (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Following her 1740 accession to the Austrian and Hungarian thrones, Empress Maria Theresa continued the anti-Protestant policies, while excluding Hungary from the subsidized industrialization customary in other parts of the Empire. Additionally, she launched reforms such as improved education and fairer taxes which her son and successor, Joseph II, extended. Joseph II also abolished serfdom and granted limited religious tolerance.



To fill agricultural labor needs, the Habsburgs invited Romanian, Slovakian, Serbian, Croatian, and German peasants to settle in Hungary, tripling the population between 1720-87.

### National Awakening

Reacting to centuries of foreign oppression and inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, Hungarian academics and artists in the 19th century began to advocate national pride, while fostering Hungarian culture and language (see p. 1 of *Language and Communication*). Their activities troubled Hungary's other residents, namely Croats, Slovaks, Serbs, and



Romanians, who had all experienced their own national awakenings.

**Revolution of 1848:** In 1848, Europe was rocked by a wave of revolutionary ideas just as the Habsburg Empire began to weaken. Threatened by other ethnicities' nationalist

movements and seeking their own independent state, Hungarians revolted. Following a series of defeats by the Hungarians, the Habsburgs requested help from Russia. Their combined counteroffensive then crushed the Hungarian revolution.

### The Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary

Despite harsh reprisals from the Habsburgs, Hungarian separatists continued to advocate their cause. Weakened after losing a series of wars, the Habsburgs agreed to a compromise with the Hungarians in 1867 that reestablished the Kingdom of Hungary's sovereignty within a dual Austro-Hungarian Empire. Subsequently, Hungary granted its Croatian territories some autonomy but instituted a policy of Magyarization, or the imposition of Hungarian culture and language, in Transylvania. Nevertheless, rapid population growth and lack of employment resulted in high poverty and emigration rates. Despite laws protecting minority languages, the intensification of Hungarian nationalism, combined with Magyarization policies, continued to alienate the non-Hungarian populations.

## World War I (WWI)

In 1914, WWI broke out between the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and the Allies (Britain, France, and Russia, eventually the US, among others). Hungarian support for the war was initially strong, but Hungarian nationalists resented their country's involvement in a conflict started by Austria and Germany. In all, WWI was devastating. Of some 3.8 million Hungarians who mobilized, some 661,000 died.



**Independence:** With the Habsburgs' defeat imminent, the

Hungarian Diet proclaimed Hungary's independence on October 17, 1918. Yet, stability was elusive. Serb, Czech, and Romanian troops advanced over two-thirds of the country, aiming to incorporate certain territories into their own new states. In spring 1919, communists founded the Hungarian Soviet Republic, but their government fell within 5 months. In early 1920, a newly-elected Diet reinstated the monarchy, yet it named no king. Instead, it elected a regent, Navy Adm Miklós Horthy, a WWI hero who had led the opposition to the short-lived communist regime. Horthy would remain head-of-state until 1944.

**The Treaty of Trianon:** The 1920 Treaty of Trianon officially ending WWI transferred some 71% of Hungary's territory to other states, namely Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia, Poland, and Italy, with Transylvania going to Romania. These transfers effectively reduced Hungary's population by some 64% and largely ended its historical ethnic and linguistic diversity. Today, resentment of the Treaty remains a central pillar of many right-wing political movements.

## The Regency under Miklós Horthy

During the early 1920s, a dysfunctional economy and severe social tensions persisted. A series of Prime Ministers (PMs) appointed by Horthy sought reforms while implementing discriminatory laws against non-Hungarians and suppressing

and imprisoning political opponents. The worldwide Great Depression hit Hungary hard in the 1930s, with soaring unemployment and widespread poverty promoting the rise of right-wing movements. In 1932, Horthy appointed as PM a right-wing radical sympathetic to the fascist leaders of Italy (Benito Mussolini) and later Germany (Adolf Hitler). Elections in 1936 broadened control by the right-wing faction. Meanwhile, Nazi Germany used promises of returning lost territories and threats of military intervention to compel Hungary to support its policies. Following Germany's 1938 annexation of Austria and occupation of Czechoslovakia, it kept its promise, returning to Hungary some pre-WWI territories.

### World War II (WWII)

Nevertheless, Hungary remained neutral when WWII officially began with Germany's 1939 invasion of Poland. However, when Germany's advances resulted in the transfer of northern



Transylvania to Hungary in 1940, it reversed course and signed the Tripartite Pact, signaling its official support for Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan against the Allies (Britain, France, the US, and the USSR or Soviet Union, among others).

Germany compelled Hungary to mobilize in support of its mid-1941 attack on the USSR. Over the next 18 months, Hungary suffered enormous losses. Never a committed supporter of Nazi Germany, Horthy began to negotiate peace with the Allies. In response, Hitler ordered the occupation of Hungary in March 1944. Hungary's puppet government under the pro-Nazi Arrow Cross Party moved quickly to repress any opposition and enforce Nazi policies, notably including the deportation of Jews to extermination camps (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Nevertheless, Horthy still sought a way to surrender to the Allies, leading to his abduction by the Nazis. Meanwhile, the Soviets had been pushing steadily westward, and by summer 1944, had breached Hungary's borders. After 2 months of heavy fighting, the Soviets captured Budapest in early 1945.

In their subsequent occupation, the Soviets convicted some 500,000 Hungarians of various political crimes, deporting many to labor camps across the USSR. In January 1945, a Soviet-sponsored provisional government surrendered to the Allies. The 1947 Paris Peace Treaties following the end of WWII stripped Hungary of the territories acquired during the war and restored its Trianon borders.

### Transition to Communist Rule

Although communist candidates received just 17% of the vote in the 1945 election, the Soviet occupiers appointed communists to several key posts. In the 1947 election, the communists manipulated the process to further cement their gains. By the 1949 election, voters were presented with a single list of communist-associated candidates. Later that year, Hungary enacted a new constitution modeled on that of the USSR.

### The People's Republic of Hungary

As head of the Hungarian Workers' Party, Mátyás Rákosi became leader of the new People's Republic of Hungary. To convert Hungary into a totalitarian communist state modeled after Stalin's regime in the USSR, Rákosi imposed authoritarian rule, purging the judiciary, civil service, and army, while using

the secret police to execute or imprison his perceived enemies. He also appropriated property from religious groups and purged their leadership (see p. 4-5 of *Religion and Spirituality*).



WWII had left Hungary's economy in ruins with much of its infrastructure destroyed. Following the USSR's model, Hungary's communist government nationalized commercial enterprises, pursued agricultural collectivization, and

promoted heavy industry. Over the next decade, industrial production increased significantly, though the standard of living stagnated.

Changes in Soviet policy following Stalin's 1953 death also impacted Hungary. Hardliner Rákosi was removed as PM and replaced by Imre Nagy, a communist reformer who favored the release of political prisoners, relaxation of censorship, and



economic changes. However, Nagy's plans for free elections and withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact (a mutual defense organization of the USSR and its satellites) proved too much for the hardliners. In 1955, they removed Nagy from office and expelled him from the communist party.

### **The 1956 Revolution:**

Rising popular discontent suddenly boiled over on October 23, 1956, when a student rally in Budapest swelled to a demonstration of 200,000 Hungarians demanding free elections and the withdrawal of Soviet troops.



Through skillful maneuvering, Nagy managed to regain leadership of the communist party, and on November 1, announced Hungary's intention to leave the Soviet sphere of influence, hold free, multi-party elections, and become a neutral state. A few days later, Soviet forces invaded, followed by subsequent weeks of violence, widespread damage to infrastructure, and the deaths of some 2,500 Hungarians. Meanwhile, another 200,000 fled the country.

**The Kádár Regime:** As Nagy also fled, János Kádár proclaimed the formation of a new, Soviet-sponsored "revolutionary workers' and peasants' government," ordering mass arrests and executions to suppress any remaining opposition, while promising reforms. As General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSzMP), Kádár ruled Hungary for the next 32 years. Hungarian authorities abducted Nagy from his refuge in Romania then executed him in 1958.

Kádár focused on agricultural collectivization, forcing most farmers to relinquish their private property and enter cooperatives. Conditions in the 1960s improved somewhat: amnesty decrees released many political prisoners, economic reforms (see p. 2 of *Economics and Resources*) increased productivity and improved living standards, and surveillance by the secret police was relaxed. The government introduced additional reforms in the late 1970s-80s, opening Hungary to investment and trade relations with the West. However, a

deteriorating economy in the late 1980s caused soaring inflation amidst declining living standards. Kádár's emphasis on improving living standards has been described as "Goulash Communism." Despite his softening of domestic policies, Kádár demonstrated continued loyalty to the USSR, and Hungarian troops participated in the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush its liberalization movement.



**An Opening:** Meanwhile, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev had introduced a series of reforms that would eventually result in the dissolution of the USSR. Although the attempted reforms were largely unsuccessful, they signaled that the era of Soviet intervention in its satellite countries like Hungary was over, sparking democratic movements

across Eastern Europe. In early 1988, Hungarians began demonstrating for political freedom and environmental protections. As a result of this pressure, Kádár was removed from his leadership position in mid-year. As the MSzMP became increasingly factionalized, a group of communist reformers agreed in early 1989 to end one-party rule. In May 1989, Hungary opened its border with Austria, initiating a chain reaction leading to reform in other Eastern Bloc countries.

### **Post-Communist Hungary**

In October 1989, a new constitution proclaimed the Republic of Hungary. New laws guaranteed individual and civil rights, while economic reforms brought private ownership of businesses and property. Elections in spring 1990 saw the victory of a center-right coalition. Over the next years, Hungary achieved a successful transition to parliamentary democracy and a free-market economy, while pursuing closer ties with Western Europe. In 1991, the last Soviet troops left Hungary.

In the 1994 elections, the communist-successor Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP – see p. 6 of *Political and Social Relations*) won 54% of parliamentary seats. Political, economic, and social reforms aimed to gain accession to the EU. A center-

right coalition led by Viktor Orbán of the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz – see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*) won the 1998 elections. As PM from 1998-2002, Orbán strengthened the position of PM and saw Hungary join NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization – see p. 7 of *Political and Social Relations*). Nevertheless, Orbán's nationalistic rhetoric cost him support, and in 2002, the MSZP returned to power. In 2004, Hungary joined the EU. In 2006 elections, the MSZP retained its hold on power. In an attempt to address severe economic problems, PM Ferenc Gyurcsány introduced austerity measures. However, in a 2009 scandal, Gyurcsány admitted his government had lied about the economy's health, prompting public outrage and his resignation.

### Contemporary Hungary

During parliamentary elections in spring 2010, Fidesz in coalition with the Christian Democratic People's Party overwhelmingly defeated MSZP, capturing some two-thirds of parliamentary seats and making Orbán PM for a second time. Orbán then used his parliamentary majority to enact sweeping new legislation, notably a controversial new constitution in 2012 (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations* and p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*). Orbán's coalition won again in 2014. A year later, Orbán's refusal to abide by EU settlement policies (see p. 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations*) in response to a migrant crisis provoked notable controversy.



Nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric dominated Fidesz's 2018 parliamentary campaign. A disorganized and inconsistent opposition plus a thriving economy worked in Orbán's favor, returning him to the PM office for a fourth time. Since then, Orbán has pursued an increasingly autocratic rule, and the EU has attempted to punish Hungary for its violations of the EU's core values of law, judicial independence, and freedom of the press. In spring 2020, Parliament passed a law giving Orbán sweeping emergency powers and the right to rule by decree indefinitely. While Orbán justified the law as a necessary step in combatting

the coronavirus pandemic, international observers criticized the move as Orbán's power grab that will further erode the country's democratic institutions.

### Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world and provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. For example, the chronicle *Gesta Hungarorum* ("Deeds of the Hungarians") was compiled in the late 13th century and relates the legendary origins of the Hungarian people. A 1282 version of the chronicle includes a creation myth that describes a common ancestry for Huns and Hungarians, though scholars today reject this claim.

### The Saga and Legend of the Stag:

Before the earth was formed, the ancient Sky God sat alongside the Great Mother on golden thrones in the heavens. Their robes contained the planets and star, and they were accompanied by their son, Magyar, the Sun God. One day, Sky God suggested that Magyar should create humans. The Sky God instructed Magyar to retrieve special seeds from the bottom of the Sea of Eternity. Magyar transformed himself into a golden duck and flew down from the heights of heaven to the sea, attempting to dive into the watery depths. After returning to the surface several times to gather strength, he finally reached the bottom of the sea. Gathering some sand in his beak, he returned to the surface. When he opened his beak, small seeds emerged which then awakened to become the animals and the people.



Later, two brothers named Hunor and Magor spied a miraculously white stag while out hunting. They pursued the animal but were unable to catch it, continuing their search ever westward into new territory. There, the brothers married princesses and became the founders of the Huns (Hunor) and the Hungarians (Magor).

## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Hungary

**Magyarország** (Hungarian)

### Political Borders

Slovakia: 390 mi

Ukraine: 80 mi

Romania: 263 mi

Serbia: 102 mi

Croatia: 216 mi

Slovenia: 58 mi

Austria: 199 mi



### Capital

Budapest

### Demographics

Hungary's population of about 9.86 million is currently declining at an annual rate of -0.28%. Generally, the population is expected to shrink and age rapidly in the coming decades, primarily due to low birth rates (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*), Hungarians emigrating abroad in search of education and employment, and high life expectancies. The population distributes relatively evenly across the country, with about 73%

of residents living in urban areas. Home to about 18% of the population, the capital of Budapest is by far Hungary's largest city.



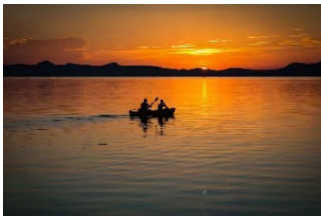
### Flag

Hungary's flag consists of three equal horizontal red, white, and green bands.

Red denotes blood spilled in defense of Hungarian land, while white stands for freedom, and green represents the lush pastures that comprise much of Hungary. In an alternative interpretation, red represents strength, while white stands for faithfulness and green for hope.

## Geography

A landlocked nation located in Central Europe, Hungary shares a border with Slovakia to the north, Ukraine to the northeast, Romania to the east, Serbia and Croatia to the south, and Slovenia and Austria to the west. Hungary's total land area is about 34,598 sq mi, making it slightly smaller than Virginia and about the size of Portugal. Situated in the center of Europe's Carpathian Basin (also known as the Pannonian Basin), Hungary's terrain is characterized by mostly flat, rolling plains that eventually rise to hills and low mountains in the North, along Hungary's border with Slovakia. Here, Hungary's highest peak, Kékes Mountain, rises to 3,327 ft.



The Danube, Europe's second longest river after the Volga, flows through Hungary from north to south and divides Hungary somewhat in half. Hungary is home to Central Europe's largest freshwater lake, Lake Balaton, which covers about 231 sq mi in the east. Forests comprise about 23% of Hungarian territory, while rich, fertile agricultural land and pastures make up another 55%.

## Climate

Hungary experiences a temperate continental climate with four distinct seasons. Summers are short, warm, and dry, with temperatures generally averaging 70-75°F but reaching as high as 90°F in July. By contrast, winters are long, cold, cloudy, and humid. December, January, and February are the coldest months, with temperatures averaging about 30°F. Generally, temperatures tend to vary with elevation, while upland and mountainous areas frequently experience freezing conditions. Snowfall typically occurs November-March and is heaviest at higher elevations in the North.

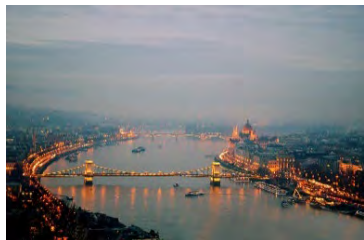
## Natural Hazards

Hungary is prone to relatively few natural hazards. The most notable concern is seasonal flooding, which occurs after heavy rains and is most prevalent in regions affected by deforestation.

Hungary's most devastating flood occurred in 1970, killing some 300, displacing thousands, and causing about \$500 million in damage to infrastructure and agricultural land. Other destructive floods struck in 1999 and 2010, together resulting in eight fatalities and millions in economic loss. Hungary is also vulnerable to earthquakes, the severest occurring in 1911 and causing 10 fatalities.

### Environmental Issues

Rapid industrialization beginning in the 19th century and intensifying during the 20th century's communist era (see p. 11-13 of *History and Myth*) heavily degraded Hungary's natural environment. Ineffective waste management systems and harmful industrial and agricultural practices, notably the unsafe disposal of toxic discharge and agricultural byproducts, led to extensive water, air, and soil pollution across the country. The government has attempted to counteract environmental degradation by investing in green, renewable energy sources,



improving industrial efficiency, and conserving some 22% of Hungarian land and waters in protected areas.

Still, increased industrial activity and energy consumption forces Hungary to rely

heavily on fossil fuels, while weak state agencies and fragmented policy enforcement reduces environmental progress. As a result, significant soil, air, and water pollution continues to afflict more industrialized areas of the country, particularly in major cities, where automobile emissions add to air pollution. Hungary is home to 1 of Europe's highest levels of air pollution from particulate matter, and some 4 in 10 Hungarians lack access to drinking water of adequate quality.

### Government

Hungary is a constitutional republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 19 counties (*megye*), 23 cities that enjoy county status, and a capital city district of

Budapest, each administered by governors and elected local councils. Adopted in 2012 with several controversial provisions (see “Political Climate” below), Hungary’s constitution separates power among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches while outlining the fundamental rights of Hungarian citizens.

### Executive Branch

The President, who is head-of-state and commander-in-chief of Hungary’s Armed Forces, is elected by the National Assembly (NA—see “Legislative Branch” below) in a two-thirds majority vote or a simple majority vote in a second round and is allowed to serve up to two consecutive 5-year terms. Although his powers are largely ceremonial, the President represents Hungary abroad and makes certain governmental appointments. The current President, Tamas Sulyok, took office in 2024.

Executive power is vested in the Prime Minister (PM), who is head-of-government. With the support of a Cabinet of Ministers, the PM oversees the country’s daily affairs. Nominated by the President and elected by the NA to serve 4-year terms, the PM is traditionally a member of the political party that holds the most seats in the NA. Hungary’s current PM, Viktor Orbán, began his fourth consecutive term in 2022.

### Legislative Branch

Hungary’s legislature is a single-chamber **Országgyűlés** (NA)

composed of 199 members serving 4-year terms. Some 106 members are directly elected in single-seat constituencies by a simple majority vote, while the remaining 93 are directly elected through a proportional representation vote in which ballots are cast for party lists rather than individual candidates. The NA controls most legislative powers, such as amending the constitution, passing the national budget, appointing government officials, and approving declarations of war.





## Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Judicial Court (SJC), Constitutional Court, 5 regional courts of appeal, 19 county courts, 20 administrative courts, and a system of lower district courts. As the highest court, the SJC divides into civil, criminal, and administrative departments and is the final court of appeal for civil, criminal, and military cases.

The NA elects the SJC's President on the recommendation of Hungary's President. Meanwhile, the National Judicial Council, a 15-member advisory body, appoints the SJC's remaining 91 justices, who typically serve until retirement at age 62. The NA also elects the Constitutional Court's 15 justices and its President to serve 12-year terms.

## Political Climate

Hungary's political landscape comprises a multi-party system in which political parties or coalitions of parties compete for power. Generally, those parties and coalitions which hold the majority of seats in the NA also hold the bulk of government leadership positions. Hungary's current government is led by the conservative and center-right Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) headed by PM Orbán.

Dominating the political arena since 2010, Orbán has exhibited increasingly authoritarian tendencies, notably introducing a new constitution in 2012 that reshapes the government and tightens control over the judiciary, media, healthcare industry, and other sectors of Hungarian society.



These measures prompted mass protests and drew complaints from international observers, who contend that the constitution and subsequent amendments threaten Hungary's democratic standards and rule of law. Nevertheless, Orbán and Fidesz remain popular with many Hungarians.

In the 2022 parliamentary elections, given Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Orbán's campaign highlighted his "peace and stability" stance. Voters gave him and Fidesz a decisive victory, making Orbán PM for the fifth time (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*). Observers deemed the 2022 elections free yet not entirely fair, criticizing Fidesz and Orbán's use of rigged election rules and domination of the broadcast and print media landscape.

An influential and experienced political figure with populist and far-right views, Orbán is a polarizing force in Hungarian society, sparking frequent and heated debate between his supporters and more moderate political and civil society groups. In promoting his socially conservative, isolationist, and nationalist ideology, Orbán has questioned Hungary's role and involvement in the EU.



He also has made controversial and inflammatory statements about migrants, suggesting that the region's immigration crisis (see "Security Issues" below) poses a security risk to Hungary and endangers Europe's traditional Christian culture and identity. In response, Orbán's critics accuse him of undermining Hungary's rule of law, judicial independence, and media freedoms, while steering the country towards authoritarianism.

Hungary's other notable active political parties include Fidesz's coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP); Fidesz's main opposition, the center-left and communist-successor Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), which led Hungary from 2002-10 (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*) but has since weakened in influence; and the ultranationalist Jobbik party. While initially advocating an incendiary, neo-Nazi political platform having extremist views regarding certain ethnic/religious groups (such as anti-Semitism), Jobbik has embraced a more moderate political tone in the hopes of broadenings its appeal. Significantly, some of Jobbik's more

radical members have recently left to form other, ultranationalist parties with more hardline stances.

## Defense

The Hungarian Armed Forces (HAF) are a unified military force consisting of ground and air branches with a joint strength of 32,150 active duty and 20,000 reserve troops charged with defending against foreign and domestic threats. Most recently, internal border control activities (see “Security Issues” below) have dominated HAF operations. The HAF’s small size compels Hungary to rely on its allies to respond to larger, state-level threats. The HAF receives most of its support from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO – a political and military alliance among 32 nations, the US included) that promotes its members’ security through collective defense.



### Land Component:

Consists of 10,450 active-duty troops who divide into one special

forces brigade, two mechanized maneuver brigades, four combat support regiments and battalions, and one combat service support regiment.

**Air Component:** Consists of 5,750 active-duty personnel with a fighter/ground attack squadron, a transport squadron, a training squadron, one attack helicopter squadron, one transport helicopter squadron, and two air defense regiments. They are equipped with 14 combat capable aircraft, 35 helicopters and numerous air defense and radar equipment, air-launched missiles, and laser-guided bombs.

**Joint Forces:** Hungary’s remaining 15,950 active duty troops are organized into a joint force comprised of both army and air units.

**Paramilitary:** Hungary’s Paramilitary consists of 12,000 Border Guards who divide into 11 regiments and 7 rapid reaction companies stationed in Budapest.

# Hungarian Ground Forces Rank Insignia



General



Lieutenant  
General



Major  
General



Brigadier  
General



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



First  
Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Chief  
Master  
Sergeant



Senior  
Master  
Sergeant



Master  
Sergeant



Sergeant  
First  
Class



Staff  
Sergeant



Sergeant



Junior  
Sergeant



Corporal



Lance  
Corporal



Private

## Foreign Relations

After communism's 1989 collapse, Hungary pursued political, economic, and military integration with its Western European neighbors, joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. However, the current government's recent support of nationalistic, isolationist, and Eurosceptic political ideologies has distanced Hungary from its Western European allies. Moreover, the US, EU, and other allies have accused Hungary of enacting what they view as increasingly autocratic policies that erode Hungarian democracy and constitutional freedoms. Though it has sought to balance relations with the West, Hungary views such accusations as meddling and intrusive in its internal affairs. Amid this environment, Hungary has expressed interest in forging closer political and economic ties to Russia, China, India, and Turkey.

### Relations with the EU:

The EU is a political and economic partnership among 27 nations located in Europe. In addition to enjoying lucrative trade ties within the EU, Hungary relies on the partnership as a political and military buffer against external security threats. Hungary's isolationist reaction to Europe's migrant crisis (see "Security Issues" below) and PM Orbán's anti-EU rhetoric caused a deep diplomatic rift with the EU in recent years. Angered by Hungary's refusal to participate in the EU's mandatory refugee settlement plan, EU leaders have threatened Hungary, along with Poland and the Czech Republic, with sanctions, fines, and other penalties, considerably heightening hostilities since the migrant crisis' 2015 onset.

Tensions increased in March 2019, when the EU accused the Hungarian government of subverting democratic values traditionally embodied by EU members and suspended Hungarian representatives from participating in the European Parliament. As of early 2024, the government has continued to tighten its control over society and undermine EU democratic values.



**International Cooperation:** Hungary generally cooperates with its Central European neighbors. For example, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland collectively form the Visegrád Group, a regional political and cultural alliance established in 1991 to advance military, economic, social, and energy cooperation among its members. There are tensions among Hungary and neighboring Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Ukraine regarding Hungary's advocacy for greater autonomy of Hungarian minority communities in those countries.



Nevertheless, close economic and political ties generally keep regional tensions low.

As a NATO member, Hungary notably hosts the NATO Center of Excellence for Military Medicine and regularly participates in NATO training exercises to

improve interoperability and effectiveness in large-scale NATO operations. Hungary also engages in various NATO-led international military and peacekeeping operations in the Middle East and North Africa. In addition to its NATO activities, Hungary is an active member of the United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and World Trade Organization, among others.

**Relations with Russia:** Although Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and their support of separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine initially caused some bilateral friction, Hungary sought to build closer economic and political ties with Russia. Under PM Orbán's leadership, Hungary appears to be one of the most pro-Russia members of NATO and the EU. Orbán was one of the last foreign leaders Putin met before Russia's invasion of Ukraine began in 2022. Hungary did follow other EU and NATO members in denouncing Putin's actions. But other than signing off on a package of sanctions, it has refused to go further. Hungary has slowed further EU sanctions by, for example, seeking an opt-out from the oil ban. Hungary has maintained

what it calls pragmatic relations with Moscow, creating tensions with some EU allies keep to take a tougher line. Hungary firmly opposes the idea of any EU sanctions on Russian gas imports.

**Relations with the US:** After enduring strained relations during Hungary's communist era, the US and Hungary began to build political, economic, and social ties following Hungary's transition to democracy in 1989. Throughout the 1990s, the US helped Hungary strengthen its democratic institutions, rule of law, and free market economy. Over the past several decades, Hungary has emerged as an important regional ally for the US, cooperating with the US on regional and transatlantic objectives such as human rights, nonproliferation, energy security, missile defense, and counter-terrorism.

The US delivers substantial defense assistance to Hungary, providing military training and equipment to bolster the HAF's interoperability with US and NATO forces, its capacity to promote



regional stability, and engage domestic threats. Hungary also shares close trade ties with the US as a member of the EU and is a top destination for US foreign investment, attracting US businesses by its strategic geographic location in the heart of Europe, skilled and educated workforce, and developed infrastructure.

### **Security Issues**

Hungary views illegal migration as its main security challenge. Political unrest in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan has forced hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants to flee to Europe. Seeking to alleviate pressure on Greece and Italy, two nations disproportionately affected by the migrant crisis, the EU adopted a mandatory relocation plan in 2015 requiring EU member states, Hungary included, to absorb a portion of the asylum-seekers.

Citing security concerns, Hungary rejected the relocation scheme, refusing to accept any asylum-seekers despite being assigned some 1,294 by the EU. Instead, Hungary stationed troops and erected fences along its borders with Serbia and parts of Croatia. It also detained asylum seekers who passed the country through in temporary, poorly-equipped border camps.

Some Western European nations have accused Hungary of indulging in divisive fear-mongering and failing to meet its social and economic commitments as an EU member. By contrast, Hungary criticizes the EU immigration policies as invasive, arguing instead that member states should retain full sovereignty in their immigration decisions. Due to the ongoing Russian war

in Ukraine, as of April 2024, there are 66,135 Ukrainian refugees living in Hungary.



## Ethnic Groups

Hungary was ethnically diverse before the 1920 Treaty of Trianon following World War I reduced Hungary's

territory and population by some two-thirds (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*). Today, Hungary is somewhat ethnically homogenous, with some 84% of the population identifying as Magyar (Hungarian) in the 2022 census.

Under the 2012 constitution, Hungary recognizes 13 ethnic minorities or “nationalities:” Armenian, Bulgarian, Croatian, German, Greek, Polish, Roma, Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovakian, Slovenian, and Ukrainian. This official designation grants members certain language rights (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*), support for cultural preservation, and some administrative autonomy at the local level.

According to the 2022 census, Roma (“Gypsies”) form the largest minority group (9%), followed by Germans (1%), Slovaks and Romanians (each 0.3%), and Croats (0.2%). Many census respondents claimed more than one ethnic identity or refused to



declare an identity. Consequently, the count is somewhat inaccurate. For example, observers believe that Hungary's Roma population is actually higher and comprises up to 10% of the population.

## Social Relations

Generally, societal divisions occur along rural-urban, male-female, and generational lines. Generally, urban dwellers, males, and the wealthy enjoy greater access to educational and economic opportunities and hold the most social prestige.

While most other minorities are well-integrated and largely accepted in Hungarian society, anti-Roma prejudices are widespread. Some 61%



of respondents in a 2019 survey reported an unfavorable view of Roma in their country. This hostility in turn supports systemic harassment, discrimination, and marginalization that affects the Roma's access to education (see p. 3-4 of *Learning and Knowledge*), housing, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

Both PM Orbán's ruling Fidesz party and the ultra-nationalist Jobbik party and its offshoots have spread anti-Roma rhetoric in recent years. Further, the European High Court of Human Rights has found the Hungarian government has neglected to prevent, investigate, or prosecute instances of racist violence against Roma.

Some Roma live in communities segregated from mainstream Hungarian society. Roma also tend to lack political representation and support due to the perceived stigma of association with the Roma community. Under EU pressure, the government has set goals to improve Roma health and welfare and promote Roma language and culture. Nonetheless, uneven implementation means that poverty and unemployment remain serious problems.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

In the 2022 census, 40% of the population did not respond. Of the 60% who reported religious affiliation, 29% identified as Catholic, 10% members of the Hungarian Reformed Church (Calvinist), 2% Lutheran, and less than 1% Jewish. Greek, Russian, and other Orthodox Christian groups; Pentecostals and other Christian denominations; Buddhists; and Muslims together comprise less than 5% of the population. The remaining 16% reported no religion.



Hungary's 2012 constitution (see p. 14 of *History and Myth* and p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations*) protects freedom of religion and separates church and state. The law prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion, protects the autonomy of religious communities, and allows individuals to freely worship in both private and public spheres according to their personal beliefs.

However, it also limits the activities of religious groups that infringe on the dignity or rights of others, disrupt public order or morality, or present security challenges. While it names no state religion, the constitution refers to Christianity as a fundamental component of Hungarian nationhood. As a result, Christian denominations, particularly the Catholic and Reformed churches, hold a privileged role in Hungarian society and close ties to the Hungarian government.

#### The Arrival and Spread of Christianity

In 973, Prince Géza invited missionaries from the Holy Roman Empire to introduce Christianity to the region. In the year 1000, his son, King Stephen, confirmed the Kingdom of Hungary's

allegiance to Christianity by accepting coronation under a crown sent by the Pope, leader of the Catholic Church in Rome (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). Initially, the new religion was slow to spread, with several pagan revolts in the 11th century. However, by the 14th century, Christianity had taken root as a variety of

Catholic religious orders established theological schools and founded monasteries, while cities built inspiring churches and cathedrals.



Religious tensions flared beginning in the early 16th century, when Martin Luther began what would become the

Protestant Reformation in Germany. Lutheranism and later Calvinism gained significant converts in Hungary, yet became the source of conflict with many of Hungary's Catholic foreign kings (see p. 3-4 of *History and Myth*).

Under Catholic Habsburg rule beginning in the mid-16th century (see p. 6-7 of *History and Myth*), religious conflicts continued. Although the Habsburgs guaranteed Protestants certain rights in 1606, they also supported the Catholic Church's "Counter-Reformation" or efforts to reconvert Protestants to Catholicism.

While these Catholic missionary efforts were successful in many areas, repression of Protestants continued to incite further revolts in the late 17th-early 18th centuries (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*). In response, the Habsburg rulers introduced harsher measures to impose Catholicism, banning conversion to Protestantism, while requiring all civil servants to be Catholics.

Inspired by European Enlightenment philosophy, the Habsburg rulers introduced a series of reforms in the mid-18th century. Most notably was a 1781 Edict of Toleration that legalized two Protestant denominations (Lutheran and Reformed), though Catholicism retained its superior status. Only in 1848 were all religions (except Judaism – see textbox below) proclaimed equal.

## Jewish Life in Hungary

First arriving in the region during Roman times (see p. 1 of *History and Myth*), Hungary's Jewish community remained small for centuries, totaling only a few thousand at the end of the 17th century. Beginning in the 18th century, the arrival of Jewish immigrants from neighboring lands but also as far as Poland, France, Germany, and the Balkans helped grow the population significantly, reaching 250,000 by 1827.

Under the Habsburgs (see p. 6-7 of *History and Myth*), Jews faced severe residence restrictions and were barred from owning land and certain occupations. Beginning in 1781, the Habsburgs issued a series of edicts that lifted some of these restrictions and opened institutions of higher learning to Jews. An 1840 law allowed Jews to settle in all cities except mining towns, and many Jews embraced the Hungarian nationalism that was sweeping the country at the time (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). An 1868 law finally gave Jews equality before the law and legalized their full participation in economic life. By the beginning of World War I, Hungary was home to Europe's second largest Jewish population, some 1 million people.

## Religion during the 20th Century

Hungary at the beginning of the 20th century was religiously diverse. Alongside the Roman Catholic majority were Lutherans, Calvinists, Unitarians, Greek Catholics, and Greek Orthodox. Further, the Jewish population comprised some 5% of the country's total. Economic dysfunction and social tensions following World War I (WWI – see p. 9-10 of *History and Myth*) contributed to the resurgence of anti-Semitic rhetoric and violence, especially following the end of the short-lived communist republic in 1919 (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*).

Under an increasingly right-wing government in the 1930s (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), anti-Semitism gained momentum. So-called “Jewish Laws” passed in 1938-39 limited the number of Jews in certain professions and defined “Jewish” racially according to Nazi German policies.

**Religion during World War II (WWII):** Hungary’s Jewish population in 1941 was around 725,000, including territories awarded Hungary by Nazi Germany (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*). As an ally of Nazi Germany in the early years of the war, Hungary excluded Jews from regular military service, instead requiring Jewish males to submit to forced labor, often on the Russian front. By early 1943, some 40,000 forced Jewish laborers had died or been taken captive. Meanwhile, other laws ordered the confiscation of Jewish property and further restricted Jews from certain occupations.

Following Nazi Germany’s spring 1944 occupation of Hungary (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*), the Nazis confined Jews to ghettos, murdered them outright, or shipped them to labor or extermination camps located elsewhere. At war’s end, just 144,000 Hungarian Jews remained alive, mostly in Budapest.

**Religion during the Communist Period:** Shortly after the conclusion of WWII, Hungary came under the control of a Soviet-backed communist government (see p. 11 of *History and Myth*).



The communists’ atheistic worldview, or the disbelief in deities and the rejection of religion, brought significant changes to the region’s religious landscape.

For example, the communist government sought to dismantle the Catholic Church and other religious institutions by drastically restricting their activities. The state nationalized all church property and converted many churches for alternative uses. Moreover, the state dissolved seminaries, monasteries, and convents; banned religious literature; excluded religion from educational policy and curriculum; and controlled the activities

of clergy, who were forced to conduct religious rituals in private, though the authorities were somewhat more tolerant of Protestants than Catholics. Further, the authorities arrested and imprisoned many religious leaders, most notably Catholic Cardinal József Mindszenty.

### Religion Today

Today, religion is not a substantial component of daily life for most Hungarians. In a 2020 survey, 30% of respondents reported that religion is of significance, placing Hungary 16<sup>th</sup> out of 2 European countries in terms of religiosity. While Hungary generally has a tolerant society free of religious violence, the recent rise to prominence of nationalist, right-wing political groups (see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*) promoting anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim views has caused tension. Further, Hungarian officials have promoted deeper involvement of Christian institutions in Hungary's political and social spheres, claiming that Christianity is central to Hungarian national identity. Furthermore, 2018 amendments to the constitution stipulate that all state agencies must protect Hungary's traditionally Christian culture.

Meanwhile, both Muslim and Jewish leaders express concern that inflammatory anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic rhetoric incites violence and discrimination against members of their respective communities. In 2022, both groups reported incidents of assault,



discrimination, and vandalism of Jewish and Muslim-owned properties.

**Roman Catholicism:** As the nation's largest religious institution, the Catholic Church receives by far the most state funding, operates some 50% of private schools in the country, and offers numerous social services. The government's recent emphasis on traditional Christian values.

**Judaism:** According to the 2022 Hungarian census, only 7,635 Jews reside in Hungary today, primarily in Budapest, where

some 20 synagogues and numerous Jewish cultural institutions serve the community. Other cities with sizeable Jewish populations include Debrecen, Miskolc, and Szeged. While recent public messaging inciting anti-Semitism has

prompted concerns about community members' safety, many Hungarian Jews openly express their heritage and religious life. Still, according to a recent survey, some 74% of Jews find anti-Semitism problematic in Hungary's political sphere.

**Islam:** According to the 2022 census, Hungary is home to about 8,000 Muslims, some of whom are immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. Europe's migrant crisis (see p. 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations*) and the conservative Hungarian leadership's staunch anti-immigration political stance and hostile anti-Muslim rhetoric have fueled tensions with Hungary's Islamic community. PM Orbán and other top leaders have likened the arrival of Muslim immigrants as an attack on Hungary's (and Europe's) shared Christian culture and values. Moreover, some political groups, such as Orbán's Fidesz party, successfully campaign on anti-foreigner, anti-immigration platforms (see p. 5-6 and 12 of *Political and Social Relations*). This growing anti-Islamic sentiment has discouraged some Muslims from openly practicing their religion in Hungary.



## Hungary's Religion Law

A controversial 2011 law granted only 32 of Hungary's 358 previously registered religious organizations formal recognition. As a result, hundreds of organizations lost the official status that allowed them access to government funding and other rights and benefits, particularly the right to erect places of worship, teach religion in public or private schools, and officiate at marriages. While the law outlined a process of reregistration, the new, more demanding framework made compliance impossible. Observers, notably Hungary's own Constitutional Court and the European Court on Human Rights, criticized the law as discriminatory and a departure from the European Union and international human rights standards.

After public outcry, Hungary amended the law in 2018, introducing four types of religious organizations: "incorporated church," "registered church," "listed church," and "religious association," each with varying levels of rights and privileges. To achieve recognition in any category, an organization must submit a formal application to the government and fulfill certain other requirements. At the highest level of recognitions is the "incorporated church," which grants notable privileges such as the right to provide religious instruction in public schools (see p. 4 of *Learning and Knowledge*), open private schools, and provide pastoral services in hospitals, among others. However, this recognition also requires two-thirds approval by Hungary's National Assembly (see p. 4 of *Political and Social Relations*), and observers claim the new system remains discriminatory. The "incorporated" religious organizations recognized by the Hungarian government as of late 2023 include the Roman Catholic Church, several Protestant, Orthodox, and other Christian denominations, Jewish, Buddhist, and Muslim organizations, and one Hindu organization, among others.



## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Hungarians generally have a high regard for family and community. Parents tend to maintain close relationships with their children through adulthood, and extended families are typically tight-knit.

### Residence

During the communist era (see p. 11-13 of *History and Myth*), the government redistributed and heavily subsidized housing. Because industrial construction took precedence over residential, a severe housing shortage developed. After the 1989 end of communism (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), the government reprivatized property, resulting in a home-ownership rate of 90% today, higher than the European Union (EU) average (69%).



**Urban:** Some 73% of Hungarians live in urban areas, with one-third of those in and around Budapest. Urban areas demonstrate a range of architectural styles, though many historical

structures were destroyed during World War II. City outskirts often feature single- or multi-family detached homes. By contrast, city centers are dominated by apartment blocks from a variety of historical periods, notably Soviet-style buildings from the communist era known as **panel házak** (“panel houses,” referring to the prefabricated panels used to construct the buildings). Affordable housing remains problematic in many urban areas, especially in Budapest where home prices rose 51% between 2008-17.

**Rural:** Rural homes tend to be free-standing, single-family structures. Often in a traditional farmhouse style, they typically have two or three rooms and a kitchen, brick walls, tiled roof, and a garden.



### Family Structure

Even if both parents work outside the home (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*), the father is

traditionally the head of the household and primary breadwinner, while the mother holds responsibility for most household chores and childcare. Most Hungarians live as nuclear families (two parents and their children), though some households, especially in rural areas, include grandparents, who help with childcare. Generally, Hungarians feel a strong sense of loyalty to their elders, often providing physical and financial care for their aging parents. In recent decades, this traditional family structure has changed, with an increasing number of Hungarians preferring cohabitation over marriage, with or without children.

### Children

Today, most Hungarian families have just one-two children (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*), though rural families tend to be larger. Children typically perform household chores and are taught to be obedient, respectful, and studious. Most children live at home until they finish their education, establish financial security, or acquire a partner, often well into their 20s or 30s.



**Names:** Parents often choose their baby's name before the birth, traditionally relying on the Hungarian calendar, which lists

names for each day of the year. Hungarians often celebrate their **névnap** or “name day” in addition to their birthday.

**Childhood Milestones:** Catholic Hungarians typically baptize their babies when only a few months old, identifying godparents who provide the children emotional, spiritual, and financial support throughout their lives. The baptism is typically followed by a celebration at a restaurant or in the home. Another commonly celebrated Catholic religious sacrament is **bérmálás** (confirmation), held around age 17.

### Dating and Marriage

Boys and girls typically interact from a young age and tend to begin casual dating in their early teens. Young couples typically meet at cafes, dance, and go to the movies or parties. Increasingly, Hungarians rely on the Internet to meet potential partners.

Hungary’s legal marriage age is 18, though 16-year-olds may marry with permission from authorities. The average marriage age has increased in recent decades, rising from 22 and 25 for women and men respectively in 1980 to 33 and 34 in 2022. In an effort to promote marriage and childbirth (see p. 3 of *Sex and Gender*), in 2019, the government began providing subsidized loans



to couples that marry before the bride’s 41st birthday, causing marriage rates to surge that year.

**Weddings:** By law, Hungarians must marry in a civil ceremony at a local government registry. Some Hungarians opt for a religious ceremony following the civil proceedings. For the ceremony, the bride historically wore a colorful, embroidered dress and a woven headpiece made of wheat to represent fertility and prosperity. Today, most brides opt for a white gown.

After the ceremony, friends and extended family typically gather to celebrate with elaborate meals, music, and dance. Traditionally, friends “kidnap” the bride, requiring the groom to pay a “ransom,” usually drinks, for her return. During the candlelight waltz (**gyertyafénykeringő**), guests holding candles gather in a circle around the newlyweds. As the couple dances, they blow out the candles. Around midnight, the bride changes from her wedding attire into her **menyecske ruha** (“new wife dress”). Red or red and white, this new attire symbolizes her new life as a married woman.

**Divorce:** At 1.8 per 1,000 people in 2022, Hungary’s divorce rate is lower than the EU average (1.3) but higher than neighboring Croatia (1.2) and neighboring Romania (1.2).

## Death

Following a member’s death, mourners typically gather at a church or cemetery chapel for a funeral service and burial. The funeral service may feature traditional Hungarian songs and prayers, such as the Funeral Sermon and Prayer (**Halotti beszéd**), which dates to the 13th century. After the service, a procession accompanies the casket to the gravesite, where attendees typically throw soil or handkerchiefs in the grave as a symbol of mourning. Afterwards, Hungarians commemorate the life of their loved one with a feast of traditional food, often setting a place for the deceased at the table. Hungarians increasingly

opt for cremation rather than casket burial due to limited cemetery space.

Catholic Hungarians celebrate and honor the dead with two holidays. On **Mindenszentek** (All Saints’ Day – see p.

2 of *Time and Space*), Hungarians attend church services to celebrate the saints. On the next day, **Halottak napja** (All Souls’ Day), families gather to clean and decorate their deceaseds’ gravesites and pray for their family members.



## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

Hungarian society is traditionally patriarchal, meaning men hold



most power and authority. Today, women and men have equal rights before the law, yet traditional attitudes continue to hinder women's full participation in social, economic, and political spheres. In a

2023 study, Hungary ranked 26<sup>th</sup> among 27 European Union (EU) states in gender equality.

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Work:** During the communist era (see p. 11-13 of *History and Myth*), gender equality was a pillar of state social policies, and most women worked full-time but under the expectation that they also fulfill their domestic duties. Today, most women working outside the home still have to balance this double duty. In 2022, some 87% of women engaged in childcare, cooking, and housework daily, compared to just 42% of men.

**Labor Force:** As of 2023, some 54% of Hungarian women worked outside the home, lower than rates in the US (57%) and neighboring Slovakia (56%) but higher than in neighboring Romania (42%). Some gender segregation in the labor market occurs, with 25% of women working in jobs traditionally considered “female,” such as education, healthcare, and social work, compared to 5% of men. Further, just 8% of women hold positions in science, technology, engineering, and math fields, compared to 38% of men. Women held 11% of corporate board seats in 2023, lower than the EU average of 34%. Nevertheless, over 69% of court judges are women. While women earned an average of 17.5% less than men with similar qualifications in 2022, this gap was higher than the EU average (12.7%).

Women experience harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Further, a lack of childcare resources forces many mothers to seek part-time work or drop out of the labor force entirely, slowing their progress towards promotion and reducing their earning potential. However, Hungary offers few part-time opportunities for working mothers—just 29% of women work part-time compared to the EU average of 47%.



### Gender and the Law

Hungary's constitution (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations*) stipulates equal treatment of men and women and prohibits discrimination based on sex. Other laws mandate 24 weeks of paid maternity leave, higher than the EU average of 22 weeks, and provide for additional leave for both parents. Despite this legal framework, gender disparities and unequal treatment exist.

### Gender and Politics

As of 2024, women occupy almost 15% of parliamentary seats, one of the lowest rates in the EU and significantly lower than the US rate (29% in 2024). Upon winning his fifth term in 2022 (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*), Prime Minister Viktor Orbán appointed one female cabinet minister to his new cabinet. In 2022, the Hungarian parliament elected Katalin Novak, a close ally of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, as the EU member's first-ever female president.

### Gender Based Violence (GBV)

Some 21% of Hungarian women report experiencing physical or sexual violence at least once since the age of 15, lower than the EU average of 33%. However, experts believe many victims fail to report incidents because authorities do not take charges seriously. Even if crimes are reported, perpetrators often receive little or no punishment. While Hungary has not ratified international conventions to combat violence against women, the government has established regional crisis centers to support victims of physical and sexual violence. Nevertheless,

experts note that Hungary lacks sufficient shelter space for women fleeing abusive situations.

**Trafficking:** Hungary is a source and transit point for trafficked persons, with Roma (see p. 12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*) particularly vulnerable. While women and girls are primarily trafficked for sexual exploitation, both men and women are subject to forced labor.

### Sex and Procreation

At 1.6 children per woman in 2024, Hungary's fertility rate is below both the rate required to maintain the population (2.1) and the EU average of 1.50.



The government offers various financial incentives to encourage childbearing. For example, a 2019 marriage promotion scheme that provides subsidized loans to newlyweds (see p. 3 of *Family and Kinship*) also forgives one-third of the loan should they have two children and wipes the debt altogether should they have three. In 2020, the government announced it will provide free in-vitro fertilization at state-run clinics. While abortion has been legal since 1956, the government has supported an anti-abortion campaign since 2011 and introduced some restrictions.

### LGBTQ Issues

Hungary's 2012 constitution (see p. 5 of *Political and Social Relations*) explicitly defines marriage as a union between a man and a woman. Consequently, the law does not recognize same-sex marriage. Since 2009, same-sex couples may register their partnership, though they do not receive the same legal rights as married heterosexual couples. In a 2023 survey, approximately 31% of Hungarians were in favor of authorizing same-sex marriages in the country. Despite a slow increase in societal acceptance, LGBTQ individuals continue to experience some harassment, discrimination, and even violence. Residents of larger cities tend to be more accepting of LGBTQ individuals, and Budapest has hosted an annual Pride Parade since 1997.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

The official language is Hungarian, which 99% of the population speak it as a first language.

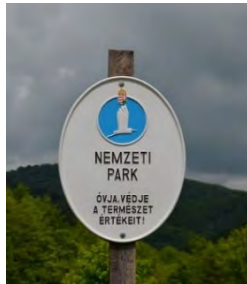
### Hungarian

Hungarian is traditionally considered a member of the Ugric branch of the Finno-Ugric group of the Uralic language family, though some linguists dispute this categorization. It is most closely related to the Mansi and Khanty languages of northwestern Siberia. Other Finno-Ugric languages include Estonian, Finnish, and the Sami languages of northern Scandinavia.

Following the establishment of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1000 (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), Latin became the official language of government administration. Nevertheless, subsequent decades saw the production of some literary works in Hungarian, the oldest dating to the 1190s.

Hungarian remained primarily a spoken language with no official status until the mid-19th century. During the Hungary's "National Awakening" (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), reformers like Count István Széchenyi promoted the Hungarian language as a crucial part of Hungarian national identity. They successfully advocated the replacement of Latin and German by Hungarian as the official language of parliament, administration, and education in 1843.

Modern Hungarian utilizes a modified 44-character Latin alphabet, comprising 26 standard Latin letters, 9 grouped consonants, and 9 vowels with diacritics, which are symbols placed above the letter to indicate length or a pronunciation change. Hungarian has several mutually intelligible dialects, spoken primarily by older generations in rural areas.





## Other Languages

Hungarian law recognizes 13 minority languages that align with the 13 officially-recognized national minorities (see p. 12 of *Political and Social Relations*): Armenian, Bulgarian, Croatian, German, Greek, Polish, Romani (the language of the Roma – see p. 12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*), Romanian, Ruthenian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, and Ukrainian. Consequently, speakers of these languages are granted certain rights, particularly receiving some instruction in their language in public schools (see p. 3 of *Learning and Knowledge*).

Unlike Hungarian, all 13 minority languages belong to the Indo-European language family. According to the 2022 census, German is spoken as a first language by about 1,207,058 Hungarians, followed by Romanian (137,884), Ukrainian (57,293), Romani (39,767), Slovak (37,803), Serbian (30,764), Croatian (29,687), Polish (13,145), Greek (6,137), Ruthenian (5,120), Bulgarian (5,112), Slovenian (3,537), and Armenian (926).



**English:** Since the end of the communist era in 1989 (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), English has become increasingly popular,

and students are taught English beginning in the fourth grade. Today, English is the second mostly widely spoken language after Hungarian, with nearly 2.43 million speakers. An informal hybrid of Hungarian and English characterized by adding Hungarian suffixes to English words is called “Hunglish”.

## Communication Overview

Communicating effectively in Hungary requires not only knowledge of Hungarian, but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralanguage (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of

communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

## Communication Style

Hungarian communication patterns reflect the value Hungarians place on hierarchy, honesty, and personal relationships. Accordingly, Hungarians typically exhibit formality, respect, and deference to authority figures during communications. Valuing candor, they usually communicate in a straightforward manner and are not reluctant to express differing opinions. Raised voices during such discussions rarely imply anger but rather demonstrate a Hungarian's deep and sincere concern for the subject.

## Greetings

Hungarians typically extend greetings with great care and respect and regard a failure to introduce oneself or return a greeting as impolite. While close friends may exchange



cheek kisses, strangers and acquaintances generally shake hands, with the younger or more junior person initiating the greeting. Common oral greetings include **szervusz** ("hi"), **jó reggelt kívánok** ("good morning"), and **jó napot kívánok** ("good day"). Hungarians also extend such greetings in everyday social situations, such as entering a place of business or elevator.

## Names

Hungarian names typically comprise one or two family names (last names/surnames) followed by one or two personal names (first names/given names). For example, while Hungary's Prime Minister is known as Viktor Orbán in the US, he is called Orbán Viktor in Hungary. Traditionally, Hungarian women acquire a new name upon marriage by adding the suffix "**né**" to their husband's full name. For example, Viktor Orbán's wife is traditionally known as Orbán Viktorné. Today, a married woman has additional options, namely keeping her maiden name or appending the *né* to either her husband's family name or his personal name and then adding her own maiden name.

## Forms of Address

Hungarians use Mr. (**úr**), Mrs. (**asszony**), and Miss (**kisasszony**) on formal occasions and with strangers, with the titles following the family name. For example, Mr. Viktor Orbán in the US is Orbán Viktor úr in Hungary. Other titles reflect a professional position or a relationship between speakers and are often combined with Mr. or Mrs. Examples include **Igazgató**



**asszony** (Mrs. Manager) and **Szomszéd úr** (Mr. Neighbor).

Hungarian has distinct “you” pronouns that reflect different levels of formality and respect. Hungarians typically use the formal

“you,” (**ön** or **maga**) when meeting for the first time, with elders, and with authority figures. They tend to reserve the informal **te** for friends, relatives, and close colleagues. Foreign nationals should use formal forms of address unless directed otherwise.

## Conversational Topics

While Hungarians enjoy conversation on a wide range of topics, foreign nationals should avoid potentially sensitive topics such as politics, religion, and Hungary’s history, particularly its loss of territory following World War I (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*). Hungarians interpret the US greeting “How are you?” not as an invitation for small talk but as a sincere inquiry that necessitates a detailed account of their health and mood.

## Gestures

Hungarians typically use few gestures, though they consider both the “thumbs down” gesture and a fist with the thumb tucked between the index finger and middle finger as vulgar.

## Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Hungarian
Hello / Good day	Jó napot kívánok
Good morning	Jó reggelt kívánok
Good evening	Jó estét kívánok
Good night	Jó éjszakát
Goodbye	Viszontlátásra
My name is _____	A nevem _____
What is your name?	Mi a neve?
How are you?	Hogy van?
I'm fine. And you?	Jól. És Ön?
Please	Kérem
Excuse me	Elnézést kérek
Sorry	Sajnálom
Thank you	Köszönöm
You're welcome	Szívesen
Yes / No	Igen/Nem
I am American	Amerikai vagyok
Do you speak English?	Beszél angolul?
Where are the toilets?	Hol a véce?
Is this taxi available?	Szabad ez a taxi?
Where's the train station?	Hol van a vonatállomás?
Where's a super-market?	Hol van egy élelmiszeráruház?
How much is this?	Mennyibe kerül ez?
I want to buy...	Szeretnék venni...
I don't understand	Nem értem
I don't know	Nem tudom
I'm lost	Eltévedtem
Help!	Segítség!
Call the police!	Hívja a rendőrséget!
Call a doctor!	Hívjon orvost!

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population over age 15 who can read and write: 99%
- Male: 99%
- Female: 99% (2021 estimate)

### Early History of Education

Before the introduction of formal education that accompanied the introduction and spread of Christianity (see p. 1-2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), regional inhabitants informally transmitted values, skills, and historical knowledge to younger generations. Following his crowning and the creation of the Kingdom of Hungary in 1000 AD (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), King Stephen ordered the establishment of a church for every 10 towns. Subsequently, monastic orders founded associated schools focused on basic literacy and Christian teachings that became the foundation of Hungary's elementary education system. Monks also taught artisanship and agricultural practices to local villagers, and by the 14th century, Catholic universities opened in Pécs and Óbuda.

During the 16th century Reformation and Counter-Reformation (see p. 2 of *Religion and Spirituality*), Catholics and Protestants competed for influence. Accordingly, they founded several educational institutions, most notably the Protestant University

of Debrecen. Dating to 1538, it is the oldest continuously operating institution of higher learning in Hungary.



Under Austrian rule in the 18th century (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*), education was extended to the general population. A secular

school system was introduced in 1777, and all education above the elementary level was delivered in German. With the interest in Hungarian as a literary language during the 19th-century

National Awakening (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), Hungarian scholarship grew. By 1843, Hungarian was the primary language of instruction.

### Education in the Late 19th-Early 20th Centuries

After the 1867 establishment of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*), a series of reforms modernized the education system. In 1868, schooling became compulsory for children aged 6-15, and curricula were restructured to reflect the contemporary German system, notably 8 years of university preparatory studies at a ***gimnázium*** for the very best students. As a result of these reforms, literacy increased 33% between 1870-1910. Higher education also expanded with the founding of several law, agricultural, and theological colleges. Hungary maintained investment in education after World War I, with 3,500 new classrooms built across the country between 1920-30.



### Education under Communism

The 1949 establishment of the People's Republic of Hungary (see p. 11 *History and Myth*) brought significant changes to Hungarian education. New laws nationalized and secularized all schools, marking a stark shift from Hungary's historic reliance on religious organizations and clergy in education.

Highly centralized, the communist educational system was designed to produce graduates with the requisite skills to meet the needs of Hungary's economy (see p. 1-2 of *Economics and Resources*). Consequently, vocational training was prioritized, with some 50% of 14-18-year-olds attending vocational schools by the 1950s. The authorities also used education to implement their communist agenda, mandating that schools train "loyal sons of working people and builders of Socialism." Accordingly, curricula emphasized patriotism and communist tenets like atheism (see p. 4-5 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and Marxist philosophy.

Pre-primary offerings increased to allow mothers to work outside the home (see p. 1 of *Sex and Gender*), and post-secondary institutions prioritized applicants from farmer and worker families. However, the communists also used access to higher education to reward regime supporters or punish dissenters.

### Modern Education

Following the 1989 end of communism (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), the new government pursued education reforms, notably allowing the creation of private schools and returning religious schools to church control. Today, the ministries of Human Capacities and National Economy oversee education. Schooling



between ages 3-16 is free and compulsory, and Hungarian is the primary language of instruction.

In a 2022 academic assessment of 85 countries, Hungarian students performed close to the average in reading, science,

and mathematics. Hungarian students outperformed US students in mathematics. In 2022, the government spent some 5.1% of GDP on education, higher than regional neighbors Slovakia (4.5%) and Romania (3.2%) but slightly lower than the US (5.4%).

The educational system faces several challenges. Students in rural areas exhibit significantly lower educational achievement and have higher dropout rates than their urban counterparts. While the law mandates that speakers of recognized minority languages (see p. 2 of *Language and Communication*) receive instruction in that language from pre-primary through secondary grades, both instruction and appropriate textbooks are occasionally lacking.

Hungary's Roma population (see p. 12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*) exhibits lower educational achievement than Hungarians of other ethnicities. While 98% of Roma children participate in compulsory-level education, some 50% end their

education at the lower secondary level, compared to 12% of the general population. Further, just 39% of Roma complete upper secondary education, compared to 97% of the general population. Roma students continue to experience discrimination, segregation, and unequal access to educational opportunities despite various court rulings intending to end the practices.

The law mandates an hour of religious and/or ethics instruction per week in public schools through the 8th grade. Only the officially-recognized “incorporated” churches (see p. 7 of *Religion and Spirituality*) are allowed to develop their own textbooks and provide religious instruction, though public school teachers may give the ethics lessons.

Further, the government provides significant subsidies to “incorporated” churches that open private schools. It also grants “incorporated” churches and a limited number of other religious organizations the right to assume operation of a public school with the support of at least 50% of parents. As of 2020, “incorporated” churches operate about 17% of primary and secondary schools, about half of which are run by the Catholic Church (see p. 5 of *Religion and Spirituality*).

Under Prime Minister (PM) Viktor Orbán (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth* and p. 4-6 of *Political and Social Relations*), the national government has increasingly assumed oversight responsibilities traditionally delegated to local governments, provoking some criticism. It has also expanded its role in the creation of educational materials, resulting in textbooks focused on PM Orbán’s nationalist rhetoric of praising Hungary’s homogenous ethnic identity and warning of the dangers of immigration (see p. 5-6 and 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations*).



**Pre-Primary:** Public and private pre-primary schools provide compulsory education for children aged 3-6. In 2021, some 83% of 5-year-olds were enrolled.



**Primary:** Comprising 8 years starting at age 6, primary education consists of lower (grades 1-4) and upper levels (grades 5-8). The curriculum includes Hungarian language and literature, math, natural and social sciences, information technology, art, physical education, and “practical life skills.” Students typically begin foreign language study in the 4th grade.

Primary education aims to provide students with socio-cultural and civic awareness, literacy, numeracy, and basic technological skills. Given Hungary’s obesity epidemic (see p. 6 of *Sustenance and Health*), authorities have recently encouraged schools to devote increased time to physical education. While most students complete all 8 years of compulsory education in primary schools, students may apply to



transfer to a *gimnázium* focused on university preparation as early as the 5th grade.

**Secondary:** At the secondary level, students choose between general and vocational courses of study. The academically-oriented *gimnázium*

typically lasts 8 years (grades 5-12) and includes Hungarian language and literature, social and natural sciences, math, information technology, art, physical education, and “practical skills.” Students must also study two foreign languages. To graduate and qualify for university, students must pass comprehensive final exams.

Students pursuing secondary vocational/technical education have two options lasting typically 4 years. The ***szakközépiskola*** is a technical secondary school that combines academic and vocational education. Graduates may continue their education at a technical college or enter the workforce directly. By contrast, the ***szakiskola*** focuses solely on vocational/technical subjects to prepare its graduates to practice a trade. In 2022, less than 25% of secondary graduates earned a vocational qualification, a significantly lower rate than most other European countries.

**Post-Secondary:** Following the 1989 end of communism (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*), private and religious universities re-emerged. For example, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and Pázmány Péter Catholic University have earned international reputations.

Over the last 2 decades, Hungary has consolidated its public higher education system, combining older, established institutions with smaller, specialized schools to form new “integrated universities” with expanded academic offerings. For example, St. Stephen (Szent István) University, an institution focused on technology, resulted from the merger of several smaller institutions. Other prominent, internationally-renowned public institutions include Eötvös Lorand University in Budapest, the University of Debrecen, the University of Szeged, the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, and the University of Pécs.

The government heavily subsidizes public post-secondary education, making it low cost for Hungarians. Nevertheless, Hungary has a low post-secondary graduation rate, and less than half of students graduate on time. As of 2022, about 32% of Hungarians aged 25-34 had attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, lower than the European Union (EU) average of 42%.



Several foreign-based universities have also opened branches in Hungary. In 2017, legal changes aiming to regulate and restrict their activities provoked significant opposition. The most notable charge was that the legislation violates EU rules on the freedom of education. As a result of the legislation, the English-language Central European University was forced to relocate its campus to Vienna, Austria in 2019. Other efforts by PM Orbán’s Fidesz-controlled government (see p. 14 of *History and Myth* and p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*) to restrict, regulate, and control higher education have caused controversy, particularly its 2019 decree to eliminate gender studies programs at Hungarian universities on ideological grounds.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Hungarians value honesty and punctuality in the workplace and consider significant tardiness to be rude. They view personal relationships built on mutual trust and respect as foundational to successful business dealings.

### Time and Work

Hungary's work week runs Monday-Friday from 9am-6pm. While hours vary by store size and location, most shops are open weekdays from 10am-6pm and Saturdays from 10am-1pm. Grocery stores generally open Monday-Friday from 7am-7pm and Saturday from 7am-3pm, though some supermarkets close as early as noon on Saturdays. A 2016 law allows some retailers to open on Sundays, though many small shops remain closed. Most banks open



Monday-Thursday from 8am-5pm and Friday from 8am-4pm. Post offices typically open weekdays from 7am-7pm.

**Working Conditions:** Hungarian labor laws establish an 8-hour workday, a maximum 48-hour workweek, and at least 2 rest days per week. Labor laws also guarantee 10 national holidays and 20 days of paid vacation. After age 25, Hungarians receive an increase in vacation days every few years, with a maximum of 10 additional days by age 45. Parents receive 2 extra vacation days per child per year, up to a maximum of 7 days.

Responding to acute labor shortages (see p. 3 of *Economics and Resources*), lawmakers passed controversial legislation in 2018 that allows employers to require up to 400 overtime hours annually, while delaying compensation for up to 3 years. The new law, nicknamed the "Slave Law," has provoked significant opposition. While supporters maintain the extra work is optional, critics note the potential for employer coercion and misuse.

**Time Zone:** Hungary adheres to Central European Time (CET), which is 1 hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 6 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Hungary observes Central European Summer Time (CEST) during daylight savings from the end of March-October, when Hungary is 2 hours ahead of GMT.

**Date Notation:** Like the US, Hungary uses the Western (Gregorian) calendar. Unlike Americans, Hungarians typically write the year first, followed by the month and day.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- March 15: 1848 Revolution Day (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*)
- March/April: Good Friday
- March/April: Easter Monday
- May 1: May Day/Labor Day
- May/June: Whit Monday
- August 20: National Day
- October 23: Republic Day (commemorating the 1956 Hungarian Revolution – see p. 12 of *History and Myth*)
- November 1: All Saints Day
- December 25: Christmas Day:
- December 26: Second Day of Christmas

Any holiday that falls on a weekend is usually observed on the following Monday.

### Time and Business

Hungarian workplaces are typically hierarchical, with upper management running meetings and making most decisions. Business typically moves at quick pace, with value placed on punctuality and meeting deadlines. Hungarians tend to be hardworking, often putting in long hours and overtime to meet deadlines. They usually prefer to foster friendly relations with coworkers and business partners and may ask personal

questions regarding home and family life to build trust. Generally, Hungarians appreciate candor and strive to resolve workplace disputes quickly and efficiently with direct, honest communication.

### Personal Space

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the nature of the relationship. Generally, Hungarians maintain at least an arm's length of distance when conversing with strangers, comparable to US standards. With family and friends, the distance is typically smaller.

**Touch:** Aside from an initial handshake, Hungarians engage in little conversational touching. Close friends and family members typically hug or exchange cheek kisses to convey affection.

### Eye Contact

Direct eye contact is important and conveys honesty and respect. Hungarians generally consider lack of eye contact a sign of poor manners or dishonest intentions.

### Photographs

Banks, churches, and secured areas tend to prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should always acquire a Hungarian's permission before taking his photo.

### Driving

Most major roads and highways are paved and well-maintained. Some Hungarian drivers have aggressive habits, such as



running red lights or tailgating other vehicles. In 2021, Hungary recorded 6 traffic-related deaths per 100,000 people, higher than regional neighbors Austria (4) and Slovakia (5) but lower than the US rate (13). Police strictly

enforce speed limits and laws against texting while driving, with violators facing severe penalties. Like Americans, Hungarians drive on the right side of the road.

## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Hungarian traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the country's rural customs; history of foreign occupation and ethnic/religious diversity; and modern global trends. Government spending on arts and culture is among Europe's highest.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Historically, traditional styles differed by region but typically featured intricate, brightly colored embroidery and reflected the wearer's social class, age, and marriage status. Today, traditional costumes are often featured in performances, folk festivals, and holiday celebrations.

Women's wear typically includes a wide skirt topped with an apron that falls just below the knee paired with a short-sleeved blouse adorned with ribbons worn under a tight bodice. While married women traditionally cover their hair with a kerchief, young unmarried girls weave ribbons into braids. Necklaces of silver coins (*lázsiás*) are common accessories, and footwear comprises stockings with leather boots. Men's traditional attire usually consists of a shirt and vest worn over linen pants. Variations in feather arrangements tucked into a man's hat



correspond to his marriage or dating status. In winter, a *szűr* (embroidered overcoat) adds warmth.

Many of Hungary's ethnic minorities (see p. 12-13 of

*Political and Social Relations*) have their own distinct styles of traditional clothing, also worn today only for performances and folk festivals. Among the Roma, (see p. 12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*), women traditionally wear a blouse and vest over a long skirt, while men accessorize with a *diklo* (neckerchief), jewelry, and decorative belt buckles.

**Modern:** For everyday dress, most Hungarians wear clothing that reflects the latest European fashion trends. While they value a neat, fashionable appearance, daily dress is typically casual. By contrast, office attire is more formal, consisting of dresses or blouses with trousers/skirts for women and suits for men, though few men wear ties outside the office. In rural areas, many older women avoid pants, and men often wear boots daily.

### Recreation and Leisure

Hungarians tend to spend their leisure time with close friends and family. Common activities include sharing meals (see p. 1 of *Sustenance and Health*) and attending theater and dance performances. Hungarians also enjoy sailing, canoeing, and waterskiing, on their country's many lakes and rivers, particularly Lakes Balaton and Tisza. During the summer, many Hungarians frequent rural vacation homes (*vikendház* or *nyaraló*). Often owned collectively by members of extended families, these cottages offer space for urban dwellers to garden, fish, ride horses, and generally enjoy a break from busy city life.

Hungary is also home to some 1,300 natural thermal springs, popular for their perceived medicinal benefits (see



p. 4 of *Sustenance and Health*). Hungary's Lake Hévíz (also known as "The Healing Lake") is the world's second largest thermal lake.

**Holidays:** Some of Hungary's most popular holidays combine Christian and pre-Christian traditions. In early December, children put out boots for St. Mikulás to fill with treats, hoping to avoid the punishment for ill-behaved children administered by *Krampusz*, a goat-demon. On *Szenteste*, (Christmas Eve), most Hungarians exchange gifts, decorate Christmas trees, and attend religious services, reserving Christmas day for socializing with friends and relatives. Similar to Mardi Gras or Carnival, *Farsang* is a Hungarian celebration characterized by music,

dancing, and costumes before the period of Christian Lent begins in late winter. On the Monday following Easter Sunday, men traditionally doused women with buckets of water, echoing ancient cleansing and fertility rituals. In some rural areas today, men sprinkle a woman's hair with perfume in exchange for a treat or kiss.

Other holidays commemorate milestones in Hungarian history. On March 15, Hungarians honor the 1848 Revolution (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*) with a reading of Sándor Petöfi's "**Nemzeti dal**" (National Song – see "Literature" below) at the Budapest National Museum. The Feast of St. Stephen (see p. 2-3 of *History and Myth*), celebrated as "Constitution Day" during the communist era (see p. 11-13 of *History and Myth*), includes religious processions and fireworks. On October 23, Hungarians remember the violence of the 1956 Revolution (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*) with events honoring the deceased.

## Sports and Games

**Futball** (soccer) is Hungary's most popular spectator sport, though Hungary claims few international titles and last qualified for the World Cup in 1986. However, Hungary has had some triumphs: after winning Olympic gold in 1952, the Hungarian "Magnificent Magyars" became the first soccer team outside of the British Isles to defeat the English at their home stadium in 1953. Hungary went on to the World Cup final in 1954 before



losing to West Germany. Stars from this era such as Ferenc Puskás, Nándor Hidegkuti, and Sándor Kocsis remain national icons.

Hungarians also enjoy a variety of other sports, notably tennis, sailing, and cycling. Horseback riding has a rich history dating to the Magyar people's ancient nomadic ways (see p. 2 of *History and Myth*). Hungarians have been successful at the Olympics, routinely winning medals in fencing, swimming, water polo, canoeing, shooting, and the pentathlon.



**Games:** Hungarians enjoy a variety of games with family and friends. Hungarian chess player Judit Polgár was the youngest player ever to earn the title of International grandmaster and remains one of the best female players in the history of the game. The Rubik's cube, an internationally popular puzzle game, was invented by Hungarian architect Erno Rubik in 1974.

## Music

**Traditional:** While styles vary by region, folk songs generally follow a five-tone diatonic scale common in Central Asia and incorporate instruments like the bugle, lute, bagpipe, **kobzos** (a stringed instrument), organ, and the **tárogató** (a woodwind instrument with two reeds and six finger holes). The **tárogató** became a popular symbol of early 18th century resistance to Habsburg rule (see p. 7 of *History and Myth*), when Hungarians used its piercing sound to startle enemy troops.

During Habsburg rule, army recruiters encouraged enlistment by employing Roma musicians to play **verbunkos** (recruitment music). Using traditional Roma instruments like fiddles, basses, and the **cimbalom** (a stringed instrument played with mallets), the lively **verbunkos** with their Roma, Slavic, and Islamic influences became wildly popular. Prominent 19th-century Hungarian composer and pianist Ferenc (Franz) Liszt notably incorporated elements of **verbunkos** and other folk music into his compositions, such as his well-known "Hungarian Rhapsodies."

Besides Liszt, the late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the rise of numerous renowned Hungarian composers, notably Béla Bartók, considered one of the 20th century's most influential composers and, along with Liszt, among Hungary's greatest. Bartók and his contemporary Zoltán Kodály are known for their systematic study of folk music to create distinctly Hungarian soundscapes that appealed to audiences across social classes.



**Modern:** Hungary has produced notable contemporary musicians, such as Holocaust survivor and Grammy-winning cellist János Starker and composer György Ligeti, known for his work on *The Shining*, *2001 Space Odyssey*, and other popular films. International pop, rock, jazz, hip-hop, electronic, and other styles are also popular. Hungary hosts several music festivals that draw international talent and large crowds, such as the Budapest Spring Festival, Szeged Open-Air Festival, Mayfest Opera Festival, and the Sziget Festival, one of Europe's largest pop-rock gatherings with some 500,000 average attendees.

## Dance

Traditional folk dances include the **csárdás**, in which couples perform steps while the music steadily increases in tempo. In the **legényes**, young men take turns improvising in front of



musicians, while in the **karikázó** young women link arms and dance in a large circle. Today, **táncházak** ("dance houses") primarily in Budapest provide venues for Hungarians to learn and perform folk dances accompanied by *verbunkos* and other traditional music.

Budapest's Hungarian State Opera House is the center of Hungary's rich tradition of classical ballet. In the 20th century, the Hungarian National Ballet combined Hungarian folk dance with classical ballet to create innovative new compositions. Ballet remains popular today.

## Theater

Subsidized by the government, theater is a popular Hungarian pastime. Nevertheless, policy changes in late 2019 in the way theaters receive state funding provoked opposition in the arts community. Furthermore, there have been charges that Prime Minister Orbán is attempting to restrict artistic freedoms and use the arts to further his political goals (see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*).

## Literature

For centuries, Hungarian stories of mythical heroes and magical creatures were transmitted orally. **Halotti beszéd**, a eulogy dating to around 1200, is an early example of Hungarian literature, while the 1473 **Chronica Hungarorum**, a history of the Magyar people, was the first book printed in Hungary. Several centuries later, the works of poet and revolutionary Sándor Petöfi galvanized Hungarian nationalism during the 1848 Revolution (see p. 8 of *History and Myth*). Romanticism, a literary and arts movement exploring the individual, subjectivity, and emotions, became prominent among late 19th-century writers like Petöfi who wrote novels, epic poems, and ballads exploring themes like heroism and nature. In the 20th century, authors grappled with issues facing contemporary society, such as the plight of Hungary's Jews in World War II (see p. 4 of *Religion and Spirituality*) and the effects of communism. In 2002, Imre Kertész became the first Hungarian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature for his novels describing his adolescence in a World War II concentration camp.



## Folk Art and Handicrafts

Hungary has a rich folk art tradition, consisting of lace-making, weaving, hand-shaped and painted ceramics, furniture-making, leather- and metalwork, and jewelry. Hungary is known for its colorful, floral embroidery that adorns traditional costumes, linens, and other textiles, as well as its unique block-printing technique called blue-dyeing used to imprint geometric and floral designs on household textiles like aprons and quilts.



## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Hungarians value hospitality and socializing with family and friends, gathering often for leisurely meals at home or in cafes and restaurants. Hungarian cuisine is characterized by seasoned and hearty dishes featuring fresh, local ingredients.

### Dining Customs

Hungarians typically eat three daily meals and snack throughout the day. While lunch is traditionally the largest meal, dinner is typically also substantial, particularly in urban areas. Most visits to the home are arranged in advance, though close friends and relatives may drop by unannounced. When invited to a Hungarian home, guests usually arrive on time, bringing small gifts of sweets, alcohol, or flowers.



Meals typically consist of a series of courses served at a relaxed pace. Hosts serve their guests first and offer additional servings throughout the meal. To begin, diners say **Jó étvágyat!** ("Enjoy your meal!") to each another. While dining, Hungarians keep their hands on the table rather than their laps and avoid placing their elbows on the table. Similarly, they do not place their napkins in their laps but keep them on the table to the left of their plates. Diners indicate they have finished their meal by placing their knife and fork parallel across the plate.

Alcoholic beverages accompany many lunch and evening meals and are especially prominent during formal dinners and on special occasions. Diners typically toast often, generally maintaining eye contact and saying **egészségére** ("cheers"). They clink wine glasses during the toast but not beer glasses.

### Diet

Hungarian cuisine reflects the country's agrarian past, history of foreign influence, unique location, and fertile soil. Often featuring

elements of various European and Turkish culinary traditions, dishes tend to vary by region. The Turks introduced paprika powder made from ground red peppers to the region during their

rule (see p. 5-6 of *History and Myth*). Paprika, in both hot (**csipős**) and sweet (**édes**) varieties, remains Hungary's most popular spice.



Bread is a main staple that accompanies almost every meal. Some of the most popular forms are

**félbarna** (made from whole wheat or wheat and rye), **zsemle** (a soft, round, crumbly roll), and **kifli** (a salty, crescent-shaped roll). Meat also features prominently in Hungarian cuisine. Most recipes highlight pork, beef, or poultry that is fried, baked, dried, smoked, or simmered in a sauce and served with vegetables and dumplings, potatoes, or rice. Prominent varieties of fish include carp, hake (member of the cod family), pike, and perch incorporated into soups and other dishes.

Common vegetables include peppers, onions, pickles, cabbage, carrots, mushrooms, and legumes such as lentils and peas. Hungarians rarely serve vegetables raw, preferring instead to pickle, boil, and sauté them or simmer them into a stew called **főzelék**. Locally grown fruits such as strawberries, raspberries, cherries, apples, and pears are common in the spring and summer months. Many Hungarian dishes also incorporate dairy products such as fresh cheese, milk, and sour cream. Besides paprika, marjoram, garlic, and black pepper accent many dishes.

### Meals and Popular Dishes

Breakfast (**reggeli**) is typically a lighter meal consisting of bread and cold cuts served with coffee or tea. Lunch (**ebéd**) is traditionally the main meal, especially in the countryside, and typically comprises a rich soup followed by a meat dish served with bread or noodles and cooked seasonal vegetables, and a dessert. Dinner (**vacsora**) may also comprise several courses or alternatively consist of a simple, lighter meal of cold cuts, cheese, and pickled vegetables.

Popular traditional dishes include **halászlé** (spiced fish soup); **gulyás** (goulash – a thick stew made of slow-cooked beef, carrots, onions, potatoes, and paprika); **paprikás csirke** (paprika chicken) served with **nokedli** (egg dumplings); **töltött káposzta** (cooked cabbage leaves stuffed with a spiced meat filling); and **libamáj** (goose liver). In the warm summer months, Hungarians traditionally begin a meal with **meggyelevel** (chilled cherry soup) rather than with a warm, hearty soup.



Popular desserts include an array of pastries, cakes, and other sweets, such as **palacsinta** (crepes or thin pancakes) served with walnut cream or other sweet sauces; **dobos torta** (a 7-layer sponge cake made with chocolate buttercream and caramel); and **kürtöskalács** (cylinder-shaped “chimney” cakes).

## Beverages

Hungarians drink coffee and tea throughout the day. Common alcoholic beverages include **pálinka** (a fruit brandy), **Unicum** (a spiced, herbal liqueur), beer, and wine. Hungary’s most popular wine varieties are **aszú**, sweet dessert wine from the Tokaj region, and **Egri Bikavér** (or “Bull’s Blood”), red wine from the Eger region. **Fröccs** (wine spritzer) is a popular summertime beverage.

## Eating Out

Restaurants range from upscale establishments serving regional and international foods to small, casual eateries, **kávéház** (cafés), so-called ruin pubs (abandoned industrial spaces transformed into bars), and **vendéglő** (regional restaurants serving traditional, homestyle cooking). Common in urban areas, street vendors sell a range of food items such as **lángos** (flatbread with sour cream, garlic sauce, or cheese) and **kolbász** (sausages). In restaurants, waiters expect a 10-15% tip for good service, though some establishments automatically add a 12.5% service fee to the bill.

## Health Overview

Hungarians' overall health has improved significantly in recent decades. Between 1990-2024, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased notably from 15 to 4.7 deaths per 1,000 live births, and life expectancy at birth increased from 69 to 76 years, though it remained lower than both European Union (EU) and US averages 81 years. Meanwhile, maternal mortality reduced from 16 to 15 deaths per 100,000 live births between 2000-20.

Although Hungarians have access to free healthcare, health services fail to properly prevent, detect, and treat diseases for all citizens. Hungary is one of Europe's primary medical tourism destinations, with foreign patients primarily seeking affordable dental care or various therapies from Hungary's medicinal waters.

## Traditional Medicine

This method consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills that are derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional Hungarian medicine centers on the use of home remedies, notably herbal and other natural non-surgical methods, to identify and treat illnesses. Many Hungarians supplement modern medicines with traditional therapies to treat a range of ailments, from minor issues like common colds to

more serious chronic conditions such as cancer.

Hydrotherapy, the process of bathing in or drinking mineral-rich water, is a particularly popular treatment in Hungary. The country is home to over 1,300

thermal springs, notably the famed Széchenyi Baths in Budapest (see p. 2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*) and Lake Hévíz. These medicinal waters are believed to cure a variety of ailments such as muscular disorders, nerve problems, digestive issues, headaches, and psychological disorders. Other popular alternative therapies include homeopathy (a form of alternative



medicine developed in 18th-century Germany in which a patient ingests diluted plant, mineral, and animal substances to trigger the body's natural system of healing) and acupuncture (the process of inserting long, thin needles into a patient's skin).

### Modern Healthcare System

The Ministry of Human Capacity oversees and regulates Hungary's healthcare system, which provides free universal healthcare to all Hungarians. The country's healthcare system is primarily funded by the National Health Insurance Fund (HIF), a compulsory national health insurance scheme. While both employers and employees contribute to the HIF, and the unemployed must pay a small lump-sum fee, the central government covers pensioners, minors, and students. The HIF covers most medical services, although out-of-pocket payments for procedures not covered by the HIF are high and account for 28% of all health spending, nearly twice as high as the EU average.



**Healthcare System Challenges:** Hungary's healthcare system remains underfunded, with total health expenditures accounting for 4.4% of GDP in 2022, lower than the EU average of 7.7%. Public hospitals, which concentrate in urban areas, tend to be outdated, understaffed, and overcrowded. While private facilities offer higher quality care, only the wealthy can afford them. Quality of care further diminishes in rural areas, where clinics offer limited medical procedures and are largely unprepared to meet residents' needs. Moreover, corruption permeates Hungary's healthcare industry, with many patients seeking faster or preferential treatment by offering to pay additional fees.

Hungary is also experiencing a significant shortage of medical personnel, particularly general practitioners in rural areas. Low public-sector wages and the ease of intra-Europe employment following Hungary's accession to the EU compel many



Hungarian physicians to seek opportunities in the private sector or elsewhere in Europe. Experts estimate that some 10% of Hungarian doctors have emigrated due to poor working conditions and low salaries.

### Health Challenges

As in most developed countries with aging populations, the prevalence of chronic and non-communicable “lifestyle” diseases has increased and now account for about 88% of all deaths. The top causes of death are cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes. Preventable “external causes” such as accidents, suicides, and drug use account for about 8% of all deaths. Communicable diseases like tuberculosis and hepatitis, cause about 4% of all deaths.

Hungary’s health system is characterized by significant socioeconomic and gender gaps. Hungarian men with the lowest level of education live 9 years less on average than the most educated men. Meanwhile, Hungarian females are expected to live 6 years longer than males. Experts attribute these stark differences to unhealthy lifestyle habits such as unbalanced diets, high rates of alcohol and tobacco use, and unequal access to healthcare.

Despite government measures to promote healthy lifestyles, such as banning smoking in public places and increasing taxes on unhealthy foods, some 32% of Hungarian adults use tobacco, while more than 24% are overweight or obese, Europe’s second highest rate. Other challenges include high rates of cancer



mortality and alcohol use disorders, unequal access to medical treatment for the Roma population (see p. 12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*), and harmful levels of air pollution. Hungary’s

aging population and rising proportion of retirees is likely to add substantial strain to the healthcare system in the future.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, Hungarians primarily subsisted as peasants in an agrarian-based economy, although some worked in the region's mines. Hungary experienced some industrialization at the end of the 19th century, though it remained primarily agricultural, with grain, wheat, and cattle accounting for almost half its exports in the 1880s. After World War I, the Treaty of Trianon (see p. 9 of *History and Myth*) greatly reduced Hungary's territory and resources, including 43% of its arable land, 84% of its timber, and 83% of its iron ore.

Following a period of hyperinflation and large deficits, the economy rebounded, with growth averaging over 5% between 1925-29. However, the 1930s



Great Depression hit the region hard, causing unemployment to soar and standards of living to fall. By 1933, one in five residents of Budapest lived in poverty. Thereafter, Hungary became increasingly reliant on the German economy, especially during World War II (see p. 10 of *History and Myth*). By the war's end, Hungary had lost some 40% of its national wealth and faced the world's worst inflation crisis: in 1946, the daily inflation rate stood at 207%, with prices doubling every 15 hours.

In 1949, communist Hungary (see p. 11-13 of *History and Myth*) adopted economic policies prioritizing heavy industrialization and farm collectivization modeled on the centrally-planned Soviet system. The same year, Hungary became a founding member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), an economic cooperation group of Soviet bloc countries, and the Soviet Union became its most important trade partner. As a result of forced industrialization policies, Hungary's growth rate reached 20% by 1953, and industry accounted for over 50% of national income.

Following an unsuccessful 1956 popular uprising (see p. 12 of *History and Myth*), communist leader János Kádár sought to improve standards of living and began to move away from Soviet-style centralized planning, ushering in a period of economic liberalization nicknamed “goulash communism.” In 1968, Kádár implemented the “New Economic Mechanism”

which introduced elements of the free market system, such as allowing some private businesses and limiting price controls.



This plan was initially successful and gave Hungarians some of the highest standards of living

in communist Europe. Nevertheless, various external shocks, notably the world oil crises of the 1970s, heavily impacted Hungary, slowing growth and causing inflation. Further, Hungary’s foreign debt increased from \$1 billion to almost \$8 billion between 1970-78.

The 1989 end of communism (see p. 13 of *History and Myth*) proved harsh. Although the country had been implementing some market reforms, it was unprepared for a full transition to a free market economy. Consequently, unemployment rose by 14% in the early 1990s, while GDP declined by some 18%. A series of severe austerity measures such as reducing social benefits and devaluing the currency, coupled with additional privatization measures, modernization strategies, and an influx of foreign investment, slowly improved the economy’s outlook.

Hungary’s accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 brought both significant financial support and further economic integration with Western Europe. Healthy economic growth continued until 2008, when Hungary was devastated by the global economic crisis. The economy struggled, and Hungary was compelled to accept some \$26 billion in multilateral financial assistance. In 2013, Hungary slowly returned to growth.

Since coming to power in 2010 (see p. 13-14 of *History and Myth*), Prime Minister (PM) Viktor Orbán has sought to increase

growth and reduce external debt through various schemes nicknamed “Orbanomics.” A notable component of Orbanomics was a vast public works program that created hundreds of thousands of jobs. Government leaders credit this program for reducing the national unemployment rate from 11% to 3.4% between 2010-22, while critics note that program participants earned below the minimum wage.



Besides near-record unemployment, the last decade has experienced improved growth rates and reduced budget deficits and debt. The government's introduction of the EU's lowest corporate tax rates has made the country attractive to foreign investors. Today, Hungary's economic outlook is largely positive. Fueled by private consumption, a construction boom, foreign investment, and EU funds, GDP grew by 4.6% in 2022. Experts predict that growth will decline to 1.5% in 2023, before recovering to 3.1% in 2024.

Hungary experiences serious economic challenges. Experts criticize the country's dependence on EU funds, which on average make up 2% of Hungary's annual GDP. Further, corruption plagues the system, with substantial amounts of public monies funneled to companies with government connections. Economic development across the country is uneven, with Budapest accounting for 36% of Hungary's GDP. Moreover, wealth is unequally distributed, with rural residents and the Roma (see p. 12-13 of *Political and Social Relations*) experiencing significantly higher poverty rates.

Hungary also faces acute labor shortages that compelled the government to pass a controversial new labor law in 2018 (see p. 1 of *Time and Space*). Causes of the labor shortage include an aging population, high rates of Hungarians emigrating to other EU countries, and PM Orbán's nationalist rhetoric (see p. 5-6 and 11-12 of *Political and Social Relations*) discouraging immigration and specific policies severely limiting work permits for most foreigners.

## Services

Accounting for about 56% of GDP and 64% of employment in 2022, the services sector is the largest. Key components include tourism, wholesale and retail trade, and banking and financial services.

**Tourism:** As one of the country's fastest growing sub-sectors, tourism accounted for some 5% of GDP and 9% of the workforce in 2022. In 2022, some 46 million foreign tourists arrived in Hungary, predominantly from Germany, Austria, the United Kingdom, and the Czech Republic. Cultural, historical, and natural attractions include Buda Castle and the National Parliament Building in Budapest, Lake Balaton, and Lake Hévíz

(see p. 2 of *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

## Industry

Even though industry has declined in importance since the communist era, it remains the second largest



economic sector, accounting for about 26% of GDP and employing 31% of the labor force in 2022. While mining provided a significant share of GDP in the past, manufacturing and construction are the most significant sub-sectors today.

**Manufacturing:** Manufacturing accounted for 17% of total GDP in 2022 and includes the production of motor vehicles, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, cement, processed food, and textiles. Automobile production accounts for some 30% of Hungary's industrial output and 4% of total employment.

The world's largest engine factory is located in Győr, and large automobile manufacturers like Suzuki, Audi, and Mercedes-Benz have production facilities in Hungary. The electronics sub-sector accounts for 5% of GDP and employs some 176,000 Hungarians, while the chemical manufacturing industry employs over 75,000.

**Construction:** This sub-sector employed over 421,000 people across 122,000 companies in 2022. Fueled by high demand for residential structures and large investments in public infrastructure, construction contributed 6.4% to Hungary's GDP in 2022.

## Agriculture

Historically the main component of the economy, agriculture – including farming, livestock, fishing, and forestry – comprised just 3% of GDP and employed 4% of the labor force in 2022.

### Farming and Livestock:

Almost half of Hungary's land is arable, with one-tenth dedicated to permanent cultivation.

Primary crops include wheat, corn, sunflower, seed-grain, potato, sugar beet, and various fruits. Over 80% of Hungary's farms are less than 5 hectares in size. Pork, cattle, and poultry are common livestock varieties.



**Forestry:** Some 22% of Hungary's territory is covered in woodlands, primarily oak, black locust, pine and fir. In 2017, forestry and logging employed some 20,600.

## Currency

Hungary's currency is the **forint** (Ft), issued in six banknote values (500Ft, 1,000Ft, 2,000Ft, 5,000Ft, 10,000Ft, and 20,000Ft) and six coins (5Ft, 10Ft, 20Ft, 50Ft, 100Ft, 200Ft). The *forint* subdivides into 100 **fillér**, though these no longer circulate. Over the past 5 years, \$1 fluctuated between 232Ft and 395Ft.

## Foreign Trade

Totaling \$161.76 billion in 2022, Hungary's exports primarily consisted of cars, vehicle parts/accessories, electric batteries, packaged medicine, computers to Germany (24%), Italy (6%), Romania (5%), Slovakia (5%), Austria (4%), Poland (4%), France (4%), Czechia (4%), and the Netherlands (4%). In the same year, imports totaled \$169.2 billion comprised of natural gas, vehicle parts/accessories, electricity, cars, plastic products

from Germany (21%), Austria (7%), China (7%), Slovakia (7%), Poland (6%), the Netherlands (5%), Czechia (5%), and Italy (4%).



### The EU

Membership in the EU (see p. 9 of *Political and Social Relations*) provides a large common market for exports, a more secure business environment, and easier access to investment and development funds. In 2022, some 78% of

Hungary's exports were destined for the EU, while 71% of imports originated in the EU. A 2023 survey showed that 59% of Hungarians view EU membership favorably, a decrease from a high of 69% in 2022, likely due to the EU aiding Ukraine.

However, the Hungarian government under PM Orbán is often resistant to EU directives and policies (see p. 14 of *History and Myth*) while exhibiting significant Euroscepticism (see p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*). Further, while Hungary is treaty-bound to adopt the Euro, the EU's common currency, there is no fixed date for that occurrence. Although a 2022 survey showed some 69% of Hungarians support the Euro's introduction, the government regularly questions the Euro's effectiveness in ensuring a strong economy and expresses reluctance to pursue its adoption.

### Foreign Aid

For the period 2014-20, Hungary received some €25 billion (\$28 billion) in financial aid from the EU. About 43% of funds were earmarked for regional development, while much of the remainder went to reducing disparities, promoting employment, and developing rural areas. In 2022, the US contributed \$3.6 million to Hungary, primarily for international development. Hungary provided an equivalent of USD \$427.8 million in official development assistance (ODA) in 2022. A majority of ODA was earmarked for multilateral organizations, mostly EU and UN institutions. Bilateral recipients included India, China, Nigeria, and Brazil among others.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

Hungary has a modern physical infrastructure, with major highways and efficient public transportation systems. While the constitution guarantees freedoms of speech and press, in practice, the government regulates content and controls most media outlets.

### Transportation

Hungarians typically travel by privately-owned vehicle, bus, train, taxi, bicycle, and foot. Budapest has an underground metro, and all major cities have efficient and reliable mass transit systems using buses and trams.



**Roadways:** As of 2022, Hungary had some 134,492 mi of roads, 37% paved. With its central location in Europe, Hungary is at the crossroads of several main transportation corridors, notably between the North and Black seas, the Adriatic Sea and Eastern Europe, and the Baltic states and Turkey. Accordingly, Hungary has Europe's third-highest road density after Belgium and the Netherlands. Some 17 major highways connect all major towns and cities to Budapest.

**Railways:** Hungary has just over 4,913 mi of railways. Trains operated by the state-owned MÁV (Hungarian State Railways) and a joint Hungary-Austria enterprise connect Hungary's cities and towns to major European capitals and other cities. The town of Záhony on Hungary's border with Ukraine is a major junction and reloading center between Europe's standard-gauge system and the wide-gauge rails of Eastern Europe and Russia.

**Ports and Waterways:** Hungary has over 1,000 mi of inland waterways, including about 260 mi of the Danube River and 372 mi of the Tisza. Major Danube ports include Baja, Budapest, Dunaújváros, Győr-Gönyű, and Mohács. Regular ferry services

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operate in Budapest on the Danube and on Lake Balaton.



**Airways:** Hungary has 41 airports, 20 with paved runways. The largest is Budapest Ferenc Liszt International Airport, with expansions planned for its second largest, Debrecen

International Airport. Since Malév Hungarian Airlines ceased operations in 2012, Hungary has been without a flag carrier. No domestic commercial flights operate within Hungary, but several international airlines offer flights from Hungary to destinations in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Asia.

## Energy

Hungary net imports about 37% of its electricity, primarily from Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Croatia, Serbia, and Austria. For its own electricity generation, Hungary relies on coal (about 8%), natural gas (21%), nuclear (44%), and renewable resources such as hydroelectric, geothermal, solar, and biofuels (26%). Hungary imports 80% of its oil and 80-85% of its gas from Russia. In 2020, Hungary adopted a new law making the net-zero emission target by 2050 a binding obligation. In mid-2022, Hungary issued a key permit for the Russian-led expansion of its sole nuclear power plant, bolstering the nation's energy links with Moscow even as EU peers seek to distance themselves over the invasion of Ukraine.

## Media

While the Hungarian constitution protects freedom of speech and press, the country has recently seen a rapid decline in press freedoms. The Fidesz-led government under Prime Minister Orbán (see p. 14 of *History and Myth* and p. 5-6 of *Political and Social Relations*) has enacted legislation regulating and controlling the media, forcing many independent outlets to close and journalists to self-censor. Some 90% of remaining outlets are owned or controlled by supporters of Orbán and Fidesz. As a result, outlets offer only a severely limited, pro-government perspective on news and current events. In 2018, some 476

outlets – including almost all regional daily newspapers, cable TV channels, radio stations, and news websites – founded a pro-Orbán consortium called the Central European Press and Media Foundation. The group was subsequently recognized by the Orbán government as being of “strategic national importance” and thus not subject to European Union (EU) rules. Despite charges that the consortium illegally receives funding from the Hungarian government and breaks EU regulations guaranteeing media pluralism, its outlets continue to publish or broadcast only pro-government viewpoints. In spring 2020, the government imposed additional restrictions on the media in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic.

**Print Media:** National dailies with the largest circulations include *Magyar Hírlap* and *Magyar Idők*, both loyal to the government, and the independent *Népszava*. English-language publications include *The Budapest Times* and *Budapest Business Journal*.



**Radio and TV:** Hungary’s state media conglomerate, Duna Media, broadcasts many of Hungary’s most popular programs on seven national TV channels and seven public radio stations. Most households subscribe to cable, satellite, or Internet services that also provide international content. After losing its license in 2016, Class FM, Hungary’s only private national radio station, transitioned to online broadcasting.

### **Telecommunications**

Hungary has an extensive and advanced telecommunications network. In 2022, Hungary had about 29 landline and 104 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people.

**Internet:** Hungarians pay significantly more for Internet access than most other Europeans, and in 2014, the government canceled a proposed Internet tax after mass protests in Budapest. Some 90% of Hungarians regularly used the Internet in 2022. The government does not restrict Internet access nor censor online content, though it blocks sites that violate the law.



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