

# Helsinki bulletin



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NO.167 // MAY 2023



Viktor Oran and Aleksandar Vučić

Foto: FoNet

## HUNGARY AND SERBIA: REGIME SIMILARITY

Of all neighbouring countries Serbia has maintained the best relations with Hungary over the past ten or so years. Its turning to the Visegrad Group, primarily to Hungary, already began during the time of President Boris Tadić, with the hope that Serbia will receive support for obtaining candidate status and opening negotiations on EU membership. After coming to power (2012), the Progressists (Serbian Progressive Party) only intensified those relations, so that today Hungary is Serbia's "most reliable"

political partner. President Aleksandar Vučić often points to Viktor Orbán's statement that "the European Union needs Serbia much more than Serbia needs to join the EU".<sup>1</sup> The current Serbian government often emphasizes that Hungary is one of those countries that "support Serbia's accession to the EU the most and that

1 <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/moguca-je-pogodba-o-razmeni-teritorija-kosova-i-srpske-profesor-sa-kembridza-timoti/cwg6gpgq>

Serbia deserves speedy membership in the European Union”.<sup>2</sup>

Belgrade’s shifting to Budapest and neglect of the relations with the post-Yugoslav area, especially Croatia, are also the result of the unsolved problems (and the aspirations) created by the breakup of Yugoslavia as well as the neighbours’ lack of trust in Belgrade.

The relations between the two countries have been on the rise since 2013 when the Serbian Parliament adopted the Declaration on the Condemnation of the Crimes Against Hungarians in 1944 and 1945 (21 June 2013). On the same day, Hungarian President János Áder apologized for all war crimes committed against the Serbs.<sup>3</sup> These gestures of the two parties have not been perceived as sincere by the general public and it is believed that Serbia has primarily opted for such a gesture due to Hungary’s support for the opening of Serbia’s accession negotiations with the EU.<sup>4</sup>

What especially makes the two countries close are the values promoted by their governments when it comes to democratic procedures, media, rule of law, civil society, ethnocentricity and migrants. Every year, both countries are given increasingly lower democracy ratings due to the steady decline of democracy, so that they are now classified (by Freedom House) as hybrid democracies or authoritarian.

2 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/334123/Dacic-Madjarska-as-jedna-od-zemalja-koje-najvise-podrzavaju-pristupanje-Srbije-EU.html>

3 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/madjarska>

4 The Declaration was drafted and adopted by the Parliament within 24 hours, and was proposed by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM), with the support of the Socialists, as a SNS coalition partner, and the opposing Democrats. This initiative shows that the political actors use historical injustices as a means to achieve the current strategic goals.

The personal rapprochement between the two leaders has improved bilateral relations between Serbia and Hungary, which has also been followed by numerous high-level meetings.

The similarity of the two authoritarian regimes with strong leaders – Viktor Orbán and Aleksandar Vučić – is their special common characteristic, including in particular their personal relationship. After coming to power, both leaders gradually violated all democratic procedures. Both are close to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Both Orbán and Vučić pursue greater state policies and the same policies towards their minorities in the neighbouring countries.

In all neighbouring countries – Slovakia, Croatia, Romania and Vojvodina – Orbán makes significant investments in various areas (sports, education, agriculture, culture) and, in particular, in the work of national councils. He has also facilitated getting Hungarian citizenship, which is especially attractive to Hungarians in Vojvodina, because Hungary is an EU member. Vučić acts similarly in Bosnia, Montenegro and Kosovo where he uses different strategies (official government documents), which, all together, represents the “Serbian World” project.

The relations between the two leaders also reflect on the European Commission’s reporting on Serbia. Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement (otherwise close to Orbán), “faked” the Progress Report on Serbia in 2021, which was criticized by the Commission and, more broadly, the EU, because such a biased stance threatens the rule of law standards and EC integrity.

Although Viktor Orbán used to be one of George Soros’s favourites, he formalized his advocacy of “illiberal democracy” in the meantime due to which Hungary is often called on the carpet by the European Commission, which denies it financial resources.

Both leaders have radicalized their societies using populism, for which it can be said to be extremist, where various right-wing and extremist parties and groups flourish. In essence, these organizations are controlled by the state, because it not only tolerates them, but often creates them too.

## POLITICAL RELATIONS

Hungary is a small country on the external border of the EU and NATO, which gives Orbán special power. By using the power of veto, Orbán puts pressure on EU and NATO member states at every opportunity, whether it is about blocking some EU decisions (for example, blocking the imposition of EU sanctions on Milorad Dodik, obstructing Sweden's admission to NATO, not introducing sanctions on Russia), or the release of some cohesion funds (COVID). Tucked into the NATO and EU security and economic framework, Orbán has turned from a freedom fighter into a fierce opponent of liberal democracy, shifting towards building a corrupt "illiberal state".

Although the government generally respects the West's major decisions – such as EU sanctions, NATO decisions and joint arms procurement – or does not interfere with them, Orbán mostly rhetorically expresses his peculiarity when it comes to some less important decisions, such as the International Criminal Court's decision to issue the arrest warrant against Putin. Consequently, the Hungarian government has a limited influence on the course of events.

However, Orbán is aware that Hungary will lose its stability and security without NATO and the EU. He will certainly continue to pursue a populist policy in the hope that he can stay in power until 2030. Therefore, he will continue to subordinate the relations with his close allies precisely because of the desire to remain in power as long

as possible, which does not exclude his further shift to the East.

Viktor Orbán's government having a mandate since 2010 and two-third majority in the Parliament has undermined the democratic system, judicial institutions and the basic values of a tolerance-based, pluralistic and open democratic political culture. All this is a negative precedent for one EU member state.

Such a position of Viktor Orbán is more than just a support to Aleksandar Vučić to persevere with his manipulative policies vis-à-vis the EU. On the one hand, Serbia enjoys various benefits from the EU (from financial to economic ones) but, on the other hand, it has not made progress when it comes to fulfilling its obligations within the EU accession negotiation process.

Aleksandar Vučić has also succeeded in cancelling all democratic values: pluralism, tolerance and political dialogue in society. He now derives his legitimacy mostly from the Kosovo question which is otherwise an inexhaustible source of emotions and frustrations.

Bearing in mind their political orientation and manipulative ability, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and President Aleksandar Vučić have developed close ties that show a rising trend. They meet on a regular basis, which receives extensive coverage in government-controlled media. They use every opportunity to emphasize the (Christian) values that they jointly defend from migrants. During his visit to Belgrade, Orbán said that the mission of both Serbia and Hungary is to "defend the southern gate of Europe". As he emphasized, due to migrations "our joint mission is to channel these processes"<sup>5</sup>.

The Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has made the decision to start the

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5 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-orban-orden/32036491.html>

procedure for considering Kosovo's request for admission to this organization, which has angered Aleksandar Vučić. Hungary, which had recognized Kosovo, has voted against this proposal. Vučić has thanked the Hungarians and said: "We have expected the Hungarians to be restrained, but they have proved to be Serbia's greatest friends."<sup>6</sup>

In 2022, due to his exceptional support to Serbia, President Vučić presented Viktor Orbán with the Order of the Republic of Serbia on a large necklace for exceptional merits in developing and strengthening peaceful cooperation.<sup>7</sup> During his official visit to Hungary and the Diocese of Buda in 2022, Serbian Patriarch Porfirije presented Viktor Orbán with the highest decoration of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Order of Saint Sava of the First Degree, "as a token of gratitude for the promotion of traditional Christian values, generous support to the Diocese of Buda in Hungary and exceptional personal contribution to the strengthening of friendship between the two neighbouring nations"(2022).<sup>8</sup>

The Republic of Serbia and Hungary have signed 153 agreements, including the Memorandum of Understanding on the Promotion of Serbia's Integration into the European Union (2010); the Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of State Public Documents on the Acquired Level of Education, Issued in the Republic of Serbia and Hungary (2019); the Memorandum of Understanding on Upgrading the Railway Line Between Subotica and Szeged (2019); the Agreement on the Construction, Management, Maintenance, Reconstruction and Remediation of the

Pipeline for Cross-Border Transport of Natural Gas (2019); the Memorandum of Understanding on the Joint Use of the Premises of the Diplomatic and Consular Missions of the Two Countries (2020); the Agreement on Friendly Relations and Strategic Partnership Cooperation (2021).<sup>9</sup>

Serbia has been a member of the European People's Party (EPP) since 2013, while Orbán's Fidesz left this bloc in 2021. Both parties are extremely conservative: they promote traditional social values and oppose the European concept of human rights, especially LGBT ones.

## ECONOMIC RELATIONS

The most important aspect of cooperation between Serbia and Hungary focuses on infrastructure. The reconstruction of the Budapest–Belgrade railway, financed by Chinese credits, is underway. Both Hungary and Serbia are important countries on the Chinese "Silk Road", which also explains other numerous infrastructure projects, especially in Serbia. There is also a possibility of extending the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, thus connecting the two countries with Russian gas fields.

Economic transactions between the two countries are stable, while Serbian exports to Hungary were intensified during the period 2015–2020. Budapest is one of the most popular destinations for Serbian citizens, while the number of Hungarian tourists visiting Novi Sad and other parts of Vojvodina, as well as Belgrade, has also been increasing over the last few years.

Mutual trade is continuously increasing. According to the data of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the period from January to July 2022, an upward trend in mutual trade continued

6 <https://pogled.me/vucic-hvala-madjarima-ocekivacismo-da-ce-bit-uzdrzani-a-oni-su-se-pokazali-kao-najveci-prijatelj-srbije/>

7 <https://www.021.rs/story/Info/Srbija/317124/Vucic-urucio-orden-Orbanu-Madjarska-moze-da-se-osloni-na-Srbiju.html>

8 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/patrijarh-spc-odlikovao-orbana-/32019125.html>

9 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/madjarska>

and reached 2.2 billion euros (it increased by 935.1 million euros compared to the same period of the previous year). Hungary is currently Serbia's third largest trading partner (after Germany and China) and the eighth largest foreign investor (950 million euros during the period 2012-2021).<sup>10</sup>

In 2021, mutual trade amounted to 2.292 billion euros of which Serbia's exports to Hungary amounted to 1.089 billion euros and imports from Hungary to 1.203 billion euros. In 2020, imports to Hungary amounted to 922 billion dollars, while imports amounted to 1.3 billion dollars. In 2019, Serbia's exports and imports amounted to 830 million and 1.14 billion dollars respectively.<sup>11</sup>

Like Serbia, Hungary is dependent on Russia for energy and both countries need time to diversify their energy sources. Hungary is also interested in giga projects, which are realized together with Russian state companies, such as the Paks Nuclear Power Plant.

The Hungarian Government invested a lot of funds in Vojvodina: about 139 million euros were spent on the programme of Vojvodina's economic development, which attracted twice as much investment.

Cross-border trade has also increased. The increasingly better relations between Hungary and Serbia are used by the cities and municipalities of the two countries to deepen cooperation on both sides of the border. Thus, the local governments of Irig and the city of Siklós in Hungary have made their friendship official.<sup>12</sup>

10 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/madjarska>

11 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/madjarska>

12 [https://www.irig.rs/page\\_lat.php?pro\\_id=140](https://www.irig.rs/page_lat.php?pro_id=140)

Parallel to the rise of political ties between Belgrade and Budapest, the business operations of the companies close to the ruling parties are also being strengthened. Several media have pointed to the clear evidence of suspicious business relations between the members of the Serbian authorities and Orbán's family.

Controversial business deals also flourish in the shadow of politics. In its analysis, BIRN points out that since 2016, in the public procurement process, a group of Hungarian, Serbian and Slovenian companies has obtained the contracts worth more than 25 million euros for the renovation of public lighting in several cities in Serbia where the Serbian Progressive Party is in power.<sup>13</sup> The research conducted by BIRN and the Hungarian online portal Direkt36 shows that these companies are linked to the people from the innermost circles of Orbán, Vučić and Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić.<sup>14</sup>

## THE SERBIAN AND HUNGARIAN WORLDS

Both Vučić and Orbán cherish greater state ideas, which is shown by various laws that mainly focus on financing culture, language preservation and the like in the neighbouring countries in order to homogenize the nation and preserve its unity. Under the given circumstances, this is always an introduction to war undertakings as was the case with Slobodan Milošević and now with Putin.

The creation of a unique cultural space that also includes the diaspora is the identical project of Vučić and Orbán. The Charter on the Serbian Cultural Space<sup>15</sup> implies that the Serbs should

13 <https://birn.rs/osvetljavanje-srbije-u-madjarskom-stilu/>

14 Ibid.

15 See: <https://www.kultura.gov.rs/vest/788/-povelja-o-srpskom-kulturnom-prostoru.php>



conduct a “mutually agreed cultural and educational policy” in the entire cultural area and that their cultural policy actors should especially develop historical awareness “about the proportions of the genocide against the Serbian people” in order to stand in the way of the “widespread appearance of disorientation, despondency and the loss of a basic national self-esteem”.<sup>16</sup>

A similar project was launched by Viktor Orbán as the “spiritual unification of the Hungarian nation” as early as 1998. The Law (2001)<sup>17</sup> on the Citizens of Hungarian Origin Living in the Neighbouring Countries as “part of the whole of the Hungarian nation” was also adopted. It was opposed by the neighbours, especially Romania and Slovakia, so that it was changed under pressure from the Council of Europe.

Despite such nationalist projects, both Fidezs and SNS profile themselves as centre-right. Both parties consciously try to relativize their extremism, shifting it to right-wing groups.

Such an orientation has brought about social conservatism and state capitalism. Fidezs has concentrated itself on building “liberal democracy”, while the Serbian Progressive Party has aimed for a one-party system by subordinating all state institutions to party control. In addition, Vučić’s government is drifting further and further away from European integration, including an increasingly elaborate anti-European narrative.

Orban and Vučić have strengthened their positions by restricting the freedom of media, cancelling the internal dialogue and launching a constant campaign against the opposition. By privatizing local media, at the insistence of the European Commission, the Serbian Progressive

Party has brought almost all media under its control with the exception of a few cable operators without a national frequency and some independent weeklies with a very small circulation. The regime also exhausts these media financially, primarily by launching various lawsuits, usually for defamation.

Belgrade’s relations were not even disturbed by Orbán’s provocation, namely a map of “Greater Hungary” which appeared at party rallies (and in social media). It included large parts of present-day Serbia, Romania and Slovakia, as well as the northern part of Croatia – the territories lost under the Treaty of Trianon of 1920.<sup>18</sup>

## MIGRATION POLICY

The two governments reacted differently to the migrant crisis in 2014. Since the beginning, Hungary has been exclusive with respect to receiving refugees, ignoring the EU’s request that refugees be proportionately distributed in all EU member states. At that time, Serbia had a great understanding for refugees and allowed their unhindered passage through the country. It is also a fact that most migrants did not want to stay in the Balkans, including Serbia (and Hungary), and that the majority of them aimed for Germany and the Scandinavian countries.

However, in subsequent years, an anti-migrant atmosphere and narrative were promoted. So, right-wing groups were very active in that regard. People’s patrols are among the most active groups when it comes to anti-migrant protests, where you can hear hate slogans like “We don’t want migrants”, “Serbia to Serbs”. “Fence for migrants, freedom for citizens”.<sup>19</sup>

16 Ibid.

17 <https://kops.uni-konstanz.de/server/api/core/bitstreams/09fa7f5c-7ade-48ad-b426-8e1e2d25e5f4/content>

18 <https://vojvodinainfo.rs/prijatelj-srbije-opet-prekraj-nasu-teritoriju-mapa-velike-madarske-na-skupu-orbanove-stranke/>

19 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-51761864>

Thousands of refugees and migrants living in informal settlements near the northern borders of Serbia are forcibly transferred by the police to state camps throughout the country.

In the meantime, due to permanent migration pressure, the EU adopted the policy of helping the countries bearing the brunt of migrants to manage migration. Since mid-2015, when the increased influx of refugees into the territory of the Republic of Serbia began, the EU has donated more than 130 million euros to be used for humanitarian aid the protection for migrants, especially children, as well as for the fight against human trafficking.

In 2022, the representatives of Serbia, Hungary and Austria agreed to deploy a greater number of policemen to guard the border with North Macedonia, as well as to provide significant equipment, namely cars with thermal imaging cameras in order to “move the defence line to the south”.<sup>20</sup> On that occasion, Vučić said: “Serbia will not be a parking lot for illegal migrants”.<sup>21</sup>

Hungary is under constant pressure from the European Commission due to its inhumane treatment of migrants. The European Court of Justice has ruled that Hungary illegally detains migrants in the border areas. After being criticized by the EU, Hungary closed two controversial transit camps at the border with Serbia, but did not renounce its restrictive asylum policy. During his visit to Hungary, in final Mass in Budapest, Pope Francis called on believers “to be particularly open to migrants, the poor and strangers”.<sup>22</sup>

20 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63652044>

21 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/srbija-63652044>

22 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/papa-madjarska-migranti-orban/32385911.html>

## THE HUNGARIAN MINORITY IN VOJVODINA

Until the 1990s, the Hungarians were the largest minority in Vojvodina (about 300,000). It is now calculated that their number in Vojvodina has actually dropped to 120,000–180,000.<sup>23</sup> The birth rate is very low, while the emigration of people and the related social mobility are enormous. The largest number of Hungarians live in Vojvodina. As an administrative unit, it had the largest number of the minorities and was a model of coexistence and multiculturalism. However, after the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the strengthening of ethno-national priorities, it gradually lost its importance.

The attitude towards the Hungarian minority has changed over the past 30 years. At the beginning of the war in Croatia (1991), the Hungarians were subject to conscription, which led to a huge exodus of young people, thus greatly weakening the demographic and intellectual potential of the Hungarian community. The Hungarian community is the best organized minority in Serbia, with the best minority infrastructure.

Until 2016, there were the tensions that ended with the strengthening of the Vučić-Orbán personal relationship. Between 2014 and 2016, the attempts by Jobbik members to open party offices, first in Subotica and later in Senta (northern Bačka), created another potential source of tension – given the nationalist and irredentist prerogatives advocated by Jobbik. However, the local authorities thwarted its efforts.

A series of public surveys, conducted between 2016 and 2019, points to harmonious relations with the Hungarians in Vojvodina. It is also indicative that in these surveys the majority of (Serbian) respondents considers Hungary as one of Serbia’s friendliest neighbours.

23 <https://slobodnarec.rs/2020/11/22/broj-madjara-koji-zive-u-pokrajini-dramaticno-je-smanjen/>

As a politician, the President of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians (SVM), István Pasztor, played a crucial role in the rapprochement between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. All relevant decisions for the Hungarian minority are made either in Belgrade or in Budapest. As for many issues, Novi Sad has become just a showcase of power and not a place for public dialogue or the protection of public interest.

The Hungarian minority is, through the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, in a tight “coalition” with Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Fidezs, on the one hand, and the SNS, on the other hand. One should bear in mind numerous joint financial projects of Hungary and Serbia, as well as the financial aid that sent by Hungary to Vojvodina Hungarians through the Prosperitati Foundation, established in Vojvodina in 2015 and fully controlled by the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians. Thanks to the Prosperitati Foundation, several companies have been launched, while larger companies have also been strengthened. The President of the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians maintains good relations with both ruling parties from which he derives a significant profit.<sup>24</sup>

Several tens of thousands, if not one hundred thousand people in Serbia (not only Hungarians), have received Hungarian citizenship thanks to the simplified procedure for its acquisition. Since Hungary is a member of the European Union, its citizenship opens the path to the West, where it is much easier to get a job with the Hungarian “papers” than the Serbian ones.<sup>25</sup> Regardless of the fact that the Hungarian minority is in the most favourable situation for the above mentioned reasons, its more significant integration is nonexistent.

24 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/ma%C4%91arska-vojvodina-izbori-glasanje-orban/29158659.html>

25 Ibid.-

## SERBS IN HUNGARY

Serbs in Hungary live in a number of settlements where they usually constitute up to 2-5 percent of the population (up to 300 Serbs). These settlements are often distant from each other and scattered in several counties of central and southern Hungary (Pest, Csongrád, Baranya, Bács-Kiskun), which has an unfavourable effect on the situation of the Serbian community. In the whole of Hungary there are only a few settlements with more than one hundred Serbs (Batanya, Lórév, Szantovo, Deszk, Szigetcsép).<sup>26</sup> The only Serbian majority community in Hungary is the village of Lórév on the Szigetcsép “island”, that is, a Danube island south of Budapest. The largest Serbian community is in Batanya. (about 350 Serbs). Smaller Serbian communities can still be found in the cities like Budapest, Szentendre, Szeged and Baja, as well as in smaller settlements.<sup>27</sup> According to the 2011 population census, there are 3,000 Serbs in Hungary.<sup>28</sup>

Predrag Mandić, editor at the Serbian Broadcasting Service, Hungarian Radio, points out that the position of Serbs in Hungary is good and that all opportunities for cherishing and preserving the Serbian language, culture and religion are provided. He emphasizes that the greatest role is played by the 1994 minority law that guarantees the rights of the minority communities in Hungary.<sup>29</sup>

The Nikola Tesla Serbian Educational Centre in Budapest is the educational and cultural centre of the Serbian people. It is the only Serbian high

26 [https://sh.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srbi\\_u\\_Ma%C14%91arskoj](https://sh.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srbi_u_Ma%C14%91arskoj)  
27 Ibid.

28 <https://www.rts.rs/lat/rts/Dijaspora/srbija-na-vezi/4973047/popis-vazan-za-srpsku-zajednicu-u-madarskoj.html>

29 <https://www.portalnovosti.com/predrag-mandic-u-madarskoj-nam-je-omoguceno-negovanje-srpske-kulture>



school in Hungary, while an elementary school, kindergarten and library are situated next to it. Mandić points out that there is a great interest for this centre in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.<sup>30</sup> According to him, apart from this centre, the Serbs in Hungary are also

devoted to the Serbian Orthodox Church that has “preserved them”.<sup>31</sup> He has also mentioned that the assimilation is noticeable, so that it is questionable whether the Serbian community can still resist it.<sup>32</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Hungary and Serbia are hybrid democracies. They share extremely conservative values and do not respect human rights, media freedom and pluralism. However, the close relationship between Vučić and Orbán has exerted influence not only on the improvement of political and economic relations, but also on a significant rise of the grey economy.

As part of cooperation with President Vučić, Prime Minister Orbán is also building his political influence in South-East Europe. On the other hand, President Vučić cherishes his alliances with illiberal democracies within the EU, especially with Hungary, which gives him its full support on the path to EU membership.

There is a huge scope for the further improvement of cooperation between the two countries, especially as part of cross-border integrative cooperation with the aim of overcoming centralized administration both in Serbia and in Hungary. The Hungarian community in Vojvodina has a special role in this. It is necessary to strengthen the spatial and infrastructural integrity of cross-border regions, as well as cross-border initiatives and market integration. The completion of the reconstruction of the Belgrade-Budapest railway line (the so-called high-speed railway line) will certainly contribute to this.

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30 Ibid.

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31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.