

The Great Connection – The Budapest-Belgrade Railway Project and Its Significance for Hungary’s Foreign Policy Identity

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Abstract

This paper investigates the significance of the Budapest-Belgrade railway project in the context of Hungary’s foreign policy identity under the Orbán-regime. It claims that existing explanations have so far failed to appreciate the project’s symbolical importance for enacting and reproducing the Orbán-government’s self-conception in foreign affairs. This self-conception, which has been deployed since the Eastern Opening agenda, is notable for locating Hungary at the crossroads, geographically as well as normatively, between East and West, and for appraising the country as a great conduit between and across these spaces. The Budapest-Belgrade railway project is an occasion in foreign policy discourse to cement this particular positionality of Hungary’s new identity. By viewing the railway upgrade as an element of identity politics, the paper is able to move beyond the literature’s crude notion that this is a political project simply because it seems not to make sense economically. To demonstrate the purchase of this approach, the paper conducts a discourse analysis to trace the meaning of the project in a set of chosen texts from key actors in Hungarian politics. Besides appreciating the infrastructure project as a *marker* of identity, it also shows that the Orbán-government’s emphasis on connecting distant worlds reveals a normatively Chinese approach to international politics in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords: China, Hungary, foreign policy, identity, discourse, Budapest-Belgrade railway, Belt and Road

1. Introduction

In December 2017, while speaking of the Budapest-Belgrade railway upgrade, Orbán said that it does not matter how “it [the project] will be profitable; what matters from the country’s perspective is that the railway runs through Hungary” (Orbán szerint... 2017). To many listeners, this was a confusing statement. Orbán undermined the project’s contribution for a broader economic goal, as if it were abnormal for anyone to expect returns on it. What he stressed instead is simply the *fact* of the railway going across the country. In general, people looking to understand why Hungary participates in the project can find little comfort in these vague expressions. Though policy-makers have tried to alleviate some of the ambiguity, the Budapest-Belgrade railway project is still a headscratcher for most scholars.

This paper sets out to shed light on the project from a radically new perspective. It argues that existing explanations fail to settle why Hungary participates in the project, and because of this, there is a need for a novel approach. This approach examines the significance of the project for Hungary’s new identity discourse, which the Orbán-government has been articulating in its foreign policy for years. The paper argues that the project is meaningful as a marker of Orbán’s claim to be both *European and at the crossroads of East and West*. More specifically, in Orbán’s conception building and connecting distant spaces is the substance of genuine Europeanness in the 21st century, and these tasks are most proper for Hungary in particular. Thus, there is a new geography of Hungarian identity politics, and this geography helps appreciate the broader significance of the railway project.

The paper begins by reviewing the existing literature on China-CEE relations in general, and on the Budapest-Belgrade railway in particular. Afterwards, it develops the identity-infrastructure nexus as the primary analytical and conceptual tools of the study. In the fourth part, the discussion focuses on Orbán’s new identity discourse and its articulation of genuine Europeanness. Then, the analysis turns to the Budapest-Belgrade railway project and the ways in which prominent Hungarian speakers, Orbán key among them, interpret the meaning of the project. The paper ends by summarizing its arguments and noting the limitations of the approach.

2. China-CEE relations in the literature

China-CEE relations have been changing rapidly in the past couple of years, and these changes garnered much attention in the literature (Vangeli & Pavličević 2019). Garlick utilizes an offensive mercantilist approach to assess China's strategy in the CEE region, and also to undermine the impression that China's engagement is bad for Europe (Garlick 2019). In a similar vein, Matura empirically challenges the correlation between good political ties with China and the depth and intensity of cooperation in trade and economy with CEE countries (Matura 2019). This finding is borne out by other studies showing that China did not reward years of concerted political effort with lavish funds for the CEE countries, and this is true even for the most striving nation in this regard: Hungary (Szunomár 2015). Yet others employed the China-threat theory to examine popular perceptions of China in the region, finding that the Beijing government is viewed either positively or negatively, without much balance between the two extremes (Pavličević 2018; Matura 2018). This literature is thus helpful to debunk the myth of China pocketing the entire region, and that the cooperation has been driven uniquely by economic considerations.

China's BRI and infrastructure programs funded under its label have also been in the focus of attention for a while. Many studies tended to favor political economy perspectives to make sense of the particular rationalities explaining recipient countries' support for these projects (Fang 2015; Zhao 2016; Herrero & Xu 2017; Góralczyk 2017). The railway project, too, was analyzed from various angles (Rencz 2019). Rogers found that Chinese foreign direct investment into Hungary after 2010 has become politically-induced rather than market-driven (Rogers 2019). This is a key finding empirically as well as theoretically. It demonstrates that the changing configuration of state-market ties in Hungary is consequential for incoming FDI, as well as for updating our understanding of the country as a dependent market economy.

In particular, the Budapest-Belgrade railway project has also drawn scholarly interest since its inception. Much of the available literature (Rogers 2019; Rencz (2019); Brattberg et al. 2021; Newton 2022) describes the project as the most important deal between Hungary and China either because of the high costs involved, the anticipation for Hungary to become a transportation hub for China, or because of the prospect of even closer ties between Chinese and Hungarian political elites. While Chinese motivations for infrastructure projects implemented in Europe are easy to

understand (Gruebler 2021; Jones 2021),¹ Hungarian motivations are more difficult to comprehend. Many observers have tried in vain to identify the rationality of Hungary's support for the Budapest-Belgrade railway project.² Above all, the *economic* rationale behind the project seems particularly elusive.

While the Hungarian government often emphasized the economic benefits of the railway upgrade, the project is in fact immensely costly, and its benefits are questionable. It is the single most expensive rail investment in Hungary's history so far, and it is mostly financed through a loan provided by the China Eximbank (Inotai 2020). The details of expected traffic levels have never been released, nor have any hard figures been provided to make the case for these rebuilds at such high expenditure. In addition, the loan agreement and the contract have been classified for 10 years by the government. As a result, the public has no information regarding the potential benefits and/or drawbacks of the project.³ Based on logistics calculations by Hungarian experts, it would take 2400 years for the investment to return (Rencz 2019, Káncz 2020).

Since the project's economic rationality is difficult to pin down, both Gyuris (2022) and Szunomár (2022) emphasize that political considerations seem more relevant for understanding the Chinese-Hungarian relationship, particularly after Orbán's illiberal turn. That is, Hungary's commitment to boost its relations with China may explain the prioritization of the Budapest-Belgrade railway better than anything. Hungary's engagement in the railway project may thus hit two birds with one stone. Not only does it signal Hungary's goodwill towards China, but it also provides the Orbán-government with leverage against the criticism from the EU regarding Hungary's democratic backsliding.⁴

Besides Hungary's foreign policy goals, the railway project fits well to the logic of illiberalism in Hungarian domestic politics. Media announcements detailing the 'Chinese' railway and the

¹ From the point of view of the Chinese authorities, the construction of the railway could help to export overcapacities in engineering and construction, while also bringing logistical benefits by diversifying trade routes. In addition, if the refurbishment is ultimately successful, that could open the doors to the European construction market for Chinese companies, as the project would demonstrate their ability to work according to EU standards.

² See Vörös 2018, Káncz 2020, Gyuris, 2022, Szunomár 2022.

³ When announcing the agreement, Hungarian Finance Minister Mihaly Varga said that that the loan "carried a fixed interest rate and an early repayment option," adding that it was "advantageous and secure" for Hungary, and that the terms were "favorable relative to the currently available debt financing conditions" without, however, specifying what these terms were exactly (Than-Kőműves 2020).

⁴ See Enyedi (2018), Bernhard (2021), Holesch and Kyriazi (2021).

concomitant flourishing of Chinese-Hungarian relations can provide positive legitimation for Orbán's politics (Szunomár 2022). Rogers (2019, 86) claims that the railway refurbishment may further enrich Fidesz-loyal actors involved in the project, contributing to the “longevity of the incumbent Hungarian political elites.” Bratberg et al. (2021, 33) also highlights how Hungary's turn towards China helped Orbán play to Euroskeptic sentiments in the country and expresses concerns about the project's transparency and the potential for corruption “in a country where construction projects frequently go to friends and allies of the prime minister.”

Overall, none of the existing claims to the project's rationality – political or economic, domestic or foreign – settle the puzzle of why Hungary opted to participate in such a grandiose project, which is likely to strain the country's financial capacities for decades to come. These studies are all similar in seeking to *explain why* the project makes sense, even though this is not the only approach. Thus, instead of looking for an overarching cause, this analysis intends to *understand how* the project is meaningful in the broader context of Hungary's foreign policy identity. In so doing, it argues that the significance of the project is as a marker of Orbán's new foreign policy identity discourse that situates Hungary at the crossroads of East and West.

One branch of the literature helps prepare this approach. Vangeli and Kavalski, respectively, wrote of the symbolic and normative influence China wields in Central Europe. Vangeli's Bourdieusian contribution stresses the symbolic power of China's presence in the region, which induces others to “start thinking and behaving more like China” (Vangeli 2018, 686). This kind of influence is more difficult to assess empirically, but not impossible. It is to be searched not in statistics of trade and FDI, but in the particular practices of behavior bearing the blueprint of Chinese origination. In a similar vein, Kavalski claims that the BRI, in particular, is a novel platform for the CEE countries to (re)articulate “their domestic and international roles” (Kavalski 2019, 412). This confirms, again, that there is more than the instrumental economic reasoning behind CEE countries' engagement with China. Though Kavalski emphasizes roles rather than identities (Kavalski 2020, 15), he accepts that this new “identity geopolitics” is alive and well, and that CEE countries “are using the BRI to advance distinct strategic narratives about their own international identities” (Kavalski 2020, 15). The approach in this study provides an empirical case, that of Hungary, of how this can be analyzed.

3. Foreign policy identity and infrastructure projects of national significance

This paper is conceptually situated at the crossroads of foreign policy identity and infrastructure. It argues that infrastructure projects are not simply material phenomena whose meaning for an audience is obvious or straightforward. Rather, these projects are invested with meaning only in the context of particular discursive practices. The social significance building programs come to acquire is thus dependent on political actors actively doing this kind of investment. But infrastructure projects also *enable* particular narratives of self-conception to arise, implying that the identity-infrastructure nexus is not a one-way street. In what follows, this nexus is broken down to its two constituent parts: identity and infrastructure, and the ways in which these can be meaningfully brought together for the purpose of this analysis.

The literature on identity, national and otherwise, is large and there is no way to do justice to the diversity of existing approaches and definitions in such a small space. Instead, and keeping in mind the analytical needs of this study, the meaning of identity is briefly defined as (1) contingent and changing (it does not reside deterministically in the national character and its meaning cannot be fixed forever) (Anderson 1991); (2) discursive (it is articulated and reproduced in practices of national story-telling); (3) relational (it draws boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ but can also differentiate in more nuanced ways);⁵ and (4) politically productive (agency and interests *make sense* and are rational against the backdrop of national identity). In short, identities are not simply changing narratives of belonging specific to a given community, but they make intelligible the pursuit of particular goals and objectives in world politics. Equally importantly, their discursive character means that there is a larger, bounded system of meanings limiting the ways in which any identity can be articulated (Waever 2003, 29).

Besides these aspects of what identities are and how they are construed, this study is interested in a particular aspect of identity, that of *national self-conception*. Self-conceptions are autobiographical. They are self-narratives produced by political communities conveying both to themselves and to the larger social environment *who they are and what they claim to be*. These visions are most often a mixture of invented histories and national myths. They recycle symbols

⁵ As Waever reminds (2003, 24), the self-other dichotomy as an analytical tool is not particularly versatile compared with “differentiated systems of difference.” In these systems, the self-other binary can be more productively assessed by listening to the messy overlaps between the ‘us’ and the ‘them.’

of past grandeur and push contemporary claims to prestige and status on their basis. These stories are not, therefore, accurate in any sense of the word, yet their analysis can offer a ‘view from within’ the actor’s self-perspective. The objective is thus not to decide what an actor is “according to a set of external, objective criteria” (Waever 2003, 36), but to understand its own explanation of how and why it behaves the way it does.

There is a considerable literature dealing with the myriad connections between identities and territories (Capello 2018; Banini & Ilovan 2021); that is, how the *realness* of territories is experienced only in and through the social meanings they come to have, and how identities themselves are reflected onto and mirror certain understandings of territory. A *territorial identity* is one in which a particular place acquires an identity – a sense of what it is, what it means – in the eyes of the community. This takes place in and through symbolic appropriation, or the practice of people producing “meanings, values, symbols,” and identifying them as the *sense*, or social significance, of the territory in question (Banini & Ilovan 2021, 6).

Berlin’s municipal railway structure as both a construction and *constructor* of collective identity in Germany is one such example (Merrill 2015). The structure not only allowed a new kind of identity narrative to materialize, its very existence was a symbol of the new identity. Likewise, the French Canal du Midi constructed in the 17th century, which came to embody France’s “native genius” and lent credence to the French self-conception of ‘New Rome’ (Mukerji 2009), is another instance in which national identity is intimately connected to projects of national building. Urban spaces also bear the blueprint of configurations of individual and collective identity (Drzewiecka & Nakayama 2009). These spatial arrangements thus serve as vehicles helping communities articulate, enact and reproduce a sense of who and what they are.

Infrastructure projects, in particular the large-scale building of railways, motorways, are no exception in this regard. These, too, both represent, and come to be imbued with, meanings of the collective. In her book, Schueler details the Gotthard railways project and its significance for Swiss national identity. She claims that the first building block of the project’s history is “the parallel construction of the Swiss nation state and the Gotthard Railway” (Schueler 2008, 15). Later on, the railway came to embody “both technological prowess and Swiss identity” (Schueler 2008, 27), showing how a project of such magnitude turns into a subject of collective pride.

Inspired by this literature, the paper investigates the identity-infrastructure nexus in the context of the Budapest-Belgrade railway project. In what follows, the objective is, first, to reconstruct Orbán's vision of Hungary and to break down his constellation of national identity into three key themes, or tropes. Second, it is to demonstrate that despite the common portrayal of Orbán as a normatively anti-, or non-, European leader, his self-conception of Hungary relies on, rather than rejects, the idea of Europe. Crucially, this idea(l) of Europe becomes the primary battleground in discourse between countries of Eastern Europe and those of the West.

4. Hungary's new foreign policy identity – 'Being properly European requires turning to the East'

This section argues that the Orbán-regime has been articulating and enacting a new kind of identity since coming to power in 2010. This new identity took shape most vividly in the inauguration of the country's 'Eastern Opening' in foreign policy. This turn is mostly read as a realpolitik-inspired shift in foreign orientation for the purpose of deepening economic and trade relations with countries like Russia and China. Yet, this policy change was also highly consequential for Hungary's nascent self-conception because it located its place in Europe *at the crossroads* symbolically and geographically. From the perspective of its disseminators, this location was not only sound economically and politically, but also in terms of what the notion of Europeanness requires in the 21st century. As Orbán argued on multiple occasions, being at the crossroads and channeling the creative synergies of distant places is what makes Hungary, in his construction, more European today than other nations. The point of doing so, he claims, is neither to forsake the idea of Europe, nor to embrace Eastern political and economic practices unconditionally. Instead, it is to position Hungary at the fertile crossroads, and reaping the potential benefits of acting as a conduit between these two symbolic spaces.

This new normative context is significant for understanding Hungary's involvement in China's Belt and Road Initiative. In particular, the paper claims that the Budapest-Belgrade railway project is fundamentally about interconnectivity, which explains why it functions so well as a marker of this new identity. With such an approach, which locates the significance of the project in its symbolism, one can discard the absence of economic rationality on the Hungarian side and other apparent puzzles as, in fact, less puzzling. It is also possible to demonstrate that China's influence

is alive and well, as regional partners draw on and redeploy a vision of international politics compatible with Chinese practices. This vision is detectable in the Hungarian government's emphasis on interconnectivity, a norm China argues to be key for the practice of international politics in the 21st century.

In what follows, the paper reconstructs three recurring tropes in Orbán's portrayal of Hungary *as European despite its turn to the East*. This return to the East, rather than to Europe, is visible in three key tropes. These tropes have to do with the necessity for historicity and remembering the past (1), Hungary's moral and civilizational superiority (2), and the rejection of hegemonic liberalism dominating Western European politics today.

Trope #1 – (Western) Europe as ahistorical

Orbán has re-conceptualized and reshuffled the meanings associated with the idea of Hungary and its role in Europe today. First, the notion that the Hungarian nation is a descendent of Central Eastern tribes – the so-called Turanian ancestry or legend (Kiss 2015) – has been resuscitated as a marker of difference. The consequence this had was not, however, the relinquishment of the idea of Europe. Rather, the argument on the Eastern origin is used by the government to claim that its national identity is more European than the ahistorical European Union currently is. The idea that Europe should be a *properly historical* entity that needs to remember its past is one key claim of this new identity discourse.

Besides the Turanian ancestry, the country's medieval role as the alleged gatekeeper and defender of Christian Europe has also returned to Hungarian political rhetoric. It was often deployed in the past couple of years to embed the migration crisis in a specifically historical framework. For instance, in September 2016 (NT n.d.), Orbán compared the tasks and responsibilities of his cabinet to those of John Hunyadi, popularly known as the *turkish beater*. He was an early 15th century hero in Hungarian medieval history praised for his efforts to protect the kingdom against Ottoman invasions.

In these cases, the Hungarian government critiques mainstream European politics and pushes its claim to Europeanness by rooting it firmly in the past. In Orbán's vision, Hungary *dares to remember*, unlike the rest of Europe today, and thus a sense of historical consciousness and continuity is invoked, and it moves the country upward on the so-called "sliding scale of merit" in

East-West relations (Melegh 2006, 9). These historical tropes are thus used to construe an idea of Hungary as *properly European* notwithstanding criticism from the country's Western European partners and deterioration of its democratic credentials.

Trope #2 – (Western) Europe in moral and civilizational decay

Second, the historicization of Hungary's European identity is coupled with Orbán's double portrayal of (Western) Europe as suffering from moral and civilizational decay, and of Hungary's normative potential for fixing this state of affairs. Orbán's speech in 2016 is telling in this respect. He praised the brave heroes of 1956 and reflected their moral responsibility onto the contemporary tasks of the nation:

“As the heirs of 1956, we cannot accept that Europe wants to sever the roots which once made us great and which also helped us survive communist oppression” (Orbán 2016).

Importantly, he specified that “the task of Europe's freedom-loving peoples is to save Brussels from sovietisation” (Orbán 2016). The objective of *saving Europe* speaks volumes of Orbán's conception of the central role Hungary is supposed to fulfill. Having proudly called Hungarians “half-Asians” in 2012 (Orbán: veszekedés... 2012), Orbán has steadily invested in a general Asianization discourse (Moreh 2016, 346) that makes Hungary outstanding. Yet again, however, this self-claimed exceptionalism is argued not to come at the expense of Hungarian Europeanness. Instead, for Orbán, this is precisely what guarantees the country's *genuine* Europeanness. This is clear in the following example:

„Even if the majority of Europe does restructure the foundations of its own civilisation and blend its own ideals and population, we must remain capable of protecting this piece of Europe the size of Hungary” (Orbán 2016).

Opposed to the allegedly self-destructive tendencies of Western Europe, Orbán claims Hungary is actively concerned with the reproduction of true Europeanness.

Trope #3 – (Western) Europe suffering from hegemonic liberalism

In addition to the ahistoricity of Europe and its self-destructive practices, the third trope dominating Orbán's discourse is the charge of hegemonic liberalism reigning supreme in Western

European politics today. In this framing, Hungary's illiberal turn is positioned as an allegedly *democratic* alternative. Importantly, this turn is necessitated because of the country's search for "an authentically Hungarian form of modernity" (Schöpflin 2016). For Orbán, this search is incapacitated if Hungary is expected to adhere to the liberal consensus.

Orbán has spoken on numerous occasions about the purpose illiberalism is supposed to serve. In 2014, he claimed that „we found our own community-organizing form, detached from the dogmas and ideologies of Western Europe” (Orbán 2014). In the same vein, George Schöpflin, a Fidesz MEP and Hungarian academic, has argued that liberalism has become a kind of “postmodern inquisition,” which attained a hegemonic position that leaves no room for contending thought systems to gain the upper hand in European political thinking (Schöpflin 2017, 8). Zoltán Kovács, the government's international spokesperson, also charged that since some of today's liberal democracies enforce their liberal agenda without respect for any other alternative, they do not function as democracies anymore, but rather “liberal non-democracies” (Erdélyi 2016).

These quotes signal the Orbán-regime's efforts to discard liberalism as an allegedly harmful ideology all the while saving the notion of *proper freedom*. In this conception, freedom and liberalism are not mutually inclusive; the former is not readily contained in the latter. Instead, a proper kind of freedom is to be found, for Orbán, in the *liberal* diversification of instruments of social and economic statecraft. To this dilemma, liberal democracy is, then, just one of many potential answers. As hegemonic liberalism is portrayed as making it impossible for Eastern European countries to catch up and find models of development appropriate for themselves, the turn to the East and deepening ties with China, in particular, is meant to remedy this state of affairs.

To conclude this section, it is important to keep in mind that the analysis above made no attempt to evaluate Orbán's discourse in terms of objectivity and accuracy. There is no doubt that much of the criticism he mounts against Europe is instrumental for his authoritarian agenda in Hungary. Therefore, his new identity politics is very much self-serving. It is an ideological coating that became more accentuated just as the muzzling of democratic checks and balances became more obvious. But the purpose of this reconstruction was merely to appreciate *his* understanding of Hungary's foreign policy identity, not to decide whether his portrayal is correct or seriously distorting. Like any discourse, this is a particular construction of social reality built on a set of meanings and claims about *what should be taken as real and true* by the target audience – both

Hungarian and European in this case. Thus, the significance of this analysis is to make sense of the larger discursive context in which the turn to the East became a rational and meaningful undertaking. In the following section, the task is to connect, if possible, this discursive context with the Budapest-Belgrade railway project as an identity marker of interconnectivity.

5. The Budapest-Belgrade railway project as an identity marker of interconnectivity

This section of the paper argues that Orbán's conception of Hungarian foreign policy identity at the crossroads of east and west is exceptionally well-served by the Budapest-Belgrade railway project. As has been shown, the significance of the project can be exhausted neither by political considerations of friendship between Hungary and China, on the one hand, nor by economic considerations stressing the national interests of participating countries, on the other. Instead, the project is a key material artefact that illustrates and confirms the alleged centrality of Hungary's place in Europe, which is expressed in terms of the identity's amalgamation of East and West. Just as the railway tracks connect distant places in a tangible way – the South with the North –, the role of Hungary is to connect, as it were, the East with the West on a symbolic, normative plain. Furthermore, the normative influence of China's discourse becomes evident in the Hungarian emphasis on interconnectivity. Interconnectivity is a key concept associated with the BRI, and, as such, references to it in Hungarian rhetoric may signal the successful normative diffusion engendered by this vocabulary.

In March 2022, during the ceremony launching the renewed Belgrade-*Novi Sad* railway line, Orbán's speech focused on the notion of connection. This is hardly surprising in the context of the ceremony, yet connection was used in multiple ways (emphases mine):

“For the past seventy years we have been *connecting* countries from East to West, all the while forgetting how important it is to *connect* regions from North to South. This created the disgraceful situation of the journey from your superb capital Belgrade to Budapest taking many hours to complete. In the 21st century, we need to recognise that this is not normal” (Orbán 2022).

The speech establishes two kinds of connections: one concrete, or infrastructural, the other symbolical, or metaphorical. First, Orbán construes both Serbia and Hungary as countries

historically connecting the East and the West. This is a metaphorical understanding of who and what these countries have always been. Second, this makes the Budapest-Belgrade railway upgrade not simply a timely endeavor – overdue, in fact, in Orbán’s argument –, but a reasonable, meaningful endeavor. This is evident in the words ‘disgraceful’ and ‘not normal’ used to describe the current state of affairs. That is, the railway line cannot be *disconnected*, or in disrepair materially speaking, if the self-conception of these countries is to connect faraway regions. Finally, this ambition is construed as an inherently peaceful undertaking. In the speech, Orbán claims that “peace builds, war destroys” (Orbán 2022). The meaning of this claim is not simply that *peaceful* actors are the ones building anything, but that building itself is a morally responsible practice because it contributes to peace.

The idea that the project is a case of responsible building connecting places and communities is detectable already in a previous speech, though in a different form. In October 2021, at the ceremony for the Szeged-Subotica railway line, Orbán spoke of foreign powers bringing nothing but trouble to the region (emphasis mine):

“Speaking for Hungary, I can tell you that foreign powers have never brought anything here but war and unrest. What has come from outside has *divided us*, brought us failure, decline and conflict. The time has come for us to take control of our own destiny” (Orbán 2021).

The image of external powers sowing discord is connected to the idea of *division*. This implies that decline and conflict is the direct result of foreign meddling in the region, as this intrusion generates division – material and otherwise. This image thus serves to specify the meaning of *who* can claim to build peace as well as to uphold it through building. Actors *indigenous* to the region are the ones with such ability. This is indication of Orbán separating, once more, what he sees as *truly existing Europe*, generally associated with ‘Brussels,’ from an ideal-typical Europe enshrined in no other than Hungary itself.

This same triad of ideas is detectable in other speeches. In September 2020, Orbán used the inauguration of the Monostor Bridge to claim that “Europe is being built in Central Europe” (Orbán 2020). These two spaces, and the differentiation Orbán seeks to erase between them, are to be understood normatively, rather than purely geographically. By doing so, much of the teacher-student hierarchy governing the discourse on East-West relations, to which Europe is usually not

an exception, is neutralized. At the same time, by mapping these two labels onto each other, Orbán articulates an *essentialized* notion of what Europe is, and points to the V4 countries as hosts of this idealized substance in the 21st century. Yet, because such an articulation depends on excluding certain others, he adds a key qualification. The V4 region is situated between “Germany and Russia,” and unless the V4 countries are able to organize it on their own, “others will organize it for us.” Thus, in the absence of these joint building projects, the region is vulnerable and exposed to foreign intervention.

References to East-West connectivity also appear in the government’s developmental narrative. In 2011, the New Development Plan relied on colorful language to claim that Hungary acted as a focal point around which economic activities converge (emphasis mine):

“Due to its geographical position, Hungary can act as the *Western gate* of the Asian developmental area, the *Eastern gate* of the Western European innovation-driven area, and a key player of the Amber Road running from the North to the South” (Nemzetgazdasági Minisztérium 2011, 7).

Though the text itself is for introducing the developmental vision of the Orbán-government, its richly metaphorical language reveals a new self-conception Hungary’s policy-makers claim for themselves. In particular, Hungary’s role is much more than a simple *passthrough*, a transparent geographical area in which foreign business activities meet and go through. Rather, the text stresses the significance of the “Vienna-Bratislava-Budapest” axis, for it will be here that Europe’s “future renewal” will be formed and mediated (Nemzetgazdasági Minisztérium 2011, 24-25). This is, then, another example of the nexus between being and doing, or identity and building, so characteristic of the Orbán-government.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigated the significance of the Budapest-Belgrade railway project in the context of Hungary’s new foreign policy identity discourse. By first reviewing the existing literature, the paper pointed to the mind-boggling absence of any obvious rationality underpinning the project. While scholars have no more than breadcrumbs of information at their disposal, most analyses converge in that the project seems to make little sense economically. And while potentially

anything can be argued to make sense *politically*, there is no indication yet that Hungary is going to be significantly rewarded for its participation. In fact, as data about the railway upgrade are hard to come by, this can be a confession that it is not an ordinary kind of infrastructure project. But if so, then usual approaches stressing cost-benefit calculations and economic returns may not be apposite for grasping its significance.

Indeed, the paper opted to ask how the project is meaningful for what Hungary claims to be internationally. It argued that the project came at a time when the Orbán-government's self-conception of Hungary shifted towards the East. Becoming dissatisfied with what he construed as the *distortion of genuine Europeanness* in Western Europe, Orbán started deploying new identity tropes to make the case that true Europeanness is to be found in Eastern Europe. Later on, this estrangement from the West allowed him to position Hungary at the crossroads of East and West, and to argue that bridging differences between them and channeling creative synergies is a properly European role for Hungary. Symbolically powerful and materially tangible, the Budapest-Belgrade railway upgrade helps articulate these grand connections. For Orbán the builder and peacemaker, the project is a way to mend broken relations in Europe and beyond it, and to inaugurate a new Hungarian identity he claims to be too agentic to be constrained by the limitations of liberal democracy.

Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that this analysis is not to be read as siding with those disseminating this new discourse. There is a difference between understanding how political actors explain and legitimize what they do, on the one hand, and embracing those reasons as accurate, real, and objectively true, on the other. In short, whatever Orbán says is not taken on surface value. It is taken, instead, as the indication of *public meanings* with which the project can be reasonably imbued in front of a domestic and international audience. Appreciating these meanings is indispensable for grasping the significance, if there is any, of the project. It is towards this goal that the paper sought to make a modest contribution.

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