

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

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Abstract: *This article 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 symbolic importance for enacting and reproducing the Orbán government's self-conception in foreign affairs. This self-conception 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. By viewing the railway upgrade as an element of identity politics, the article moves beyond the literature's crude notion that this is a political project simply because it seems not to make sense economically. We conduct 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, the article 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.*

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVES THE FUNCTIONING OF AN ECONOMY AND HAS A significant impact on productivity and growth (Fernald 1999). In the European Union (EU), it has also become one of the economic indicators to measure the readiness of a candidate country to join the EU (Endrodi-Kovacs and Tankovsky 2022). Infrastructure, however, is also used for more abstract purposes, such as embodying objective historical forces, representing modernity, and creating connections that can be

relied on for social and political purposes (Larkin 2013). Moreover, infrastructure often plays out through hegemonic contestation and fracturing (de Goede and Westermeier 2022). A large-scale Chinese-financed infrastructure project implemented in Hungary seems to be a good example of such abstract purposes since it is a long-term, (highly) politicized project that provided many opportunities for top government officials to praise connectivity and use it in their identity politics.

In December 2017, while speaking of the Budapest-Belgrade railway upgrade, Orbán said 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” (HírTV 2017). Strangely, Orbán rejected the project’s potential to serve a broader economic objective, and instead, what he stressed is simply the *fact* of the railway going across the country. This is by no means exceptional. László Palkovics (Kormany 2022) made a similar point more recently. He claimed that whatever the direction of the Silk Road may be, of utmost importance is for the “railway section of it” to go through Hungary. Other policymakers have tried to alleviate the ambiguity by framing the project in terms of a strategic priority supporting Hungary’s “competitive edge” (Origo 2021).

In this article we set out to shed light on the project from a new perspective. We argue that existing explanations fail to settle, reassuringly, 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 article 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 appropriate 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.

Before proceeding, a specification is in order. Our reconstruction of Orbán’s sense-making process is not an endorsement of his discourse. Relying on our familiarity with the Hungarian cultural and political context, we think it important to draw out and explain the connections he establishes between the railway project and Hungary’s national identity. This is doubtless politically self-serving rhetoric, but better appreciating it allows us to understand his continuing popularity in Hungary as well as the broader role relations with China play in Orbán’s politics domestically and internationally. Our analysis is meant primarily to contribute to this goal.

The article begins by briefly introducing the most important details and the timeline of the Budapest-Belgrade railway. The following section reviews the existing literature on China-Central and Eastern European (CEE) relations in general and on the 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 again 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 article ends by summarizing its arguments.

The Budapest-Belgrade Railway Project

The Budapest-Belgrade railway upgrade, billed as a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Europe, is a refurbishment of an existent (though outdated) railway line between the Hungarian and the Serbian capitals, with the aim of reducing journey times from 8 to 4 hours. The construction of the Hungarian section is largely to be financed by a Chinese state loan. The railway will form the final segment of the track from the majority Chinese-owned Greek port at Piraeus, indicating that the main aim is to link the port with Western Europe for the transport of goods, using North Macedonia, Serbia, and Hungary as transit countries. The full section will be 350 km long, of which 166 km is on the Hungarian side.

The railway line was first mentioned in 2013 at the Bucharest Summit of the 16+1 Platform, a diplomatic forum between 16 CEE countries and China. The construction agreement was signed in 2014 by the prime ministers of Hungary, Serbia, Macedonia, and China at the Belgrade Summit of the 16+1. Originally, construction work was supposed to begin in 2015, and the railway should have been operational by 2017. However, by then, only the section between Belgrade and Stara Pazova was under construction. The main reason for the project's delay on the Hungarian side is that in May 2016, the European Commission (EC) initiated preliminary infringement proceedings against Hungary. The EC suspected corruption in the deal, citing irregularities in the tender procedure and uncertainties as to what role Hungarian National Railways would play. In 2017, the EC was still looking into the details of the project but stopped short of a full investigation.

The first tender for the project was published in December 2017, but later, it was invalidated as the estimated cost of the project had increased by about 10 percent. In 2018, the Hungarian government launched a new public procurement procedure for which two consortia, both including Chinese construction companies, made a bid. Finally, in 2019, the tender was won by the CRE Consortium, 50 percent of which is owned by China Railway Group Limited (CREC) through its subsidiaries, China Tiejiju Engineering & Construction Ltd and China Railway Electrification Engineering Group. The remaining 50 percent of the consortium is held by RM International, a unit of Hungary's Opus Global.

The consortium secured the construction contract in 2019, and Hungary and China signed the loan agreement in April 2020 under the "active coordination" of the Chinese government. In May 2020, the Hungarian parliament passed a law codifying the commitment to the railway project and also classified the information about it. Therefore, the specifics of the loan agreement are currently unknown, other than the fact that the loan is worth US\$1.855 billion, with a 20-year repayment period and a 2.5 percent interest rate, making this project the single most expensive rail investment in Hungary's history so far. When announcing the signing of the agreement, Hungarian finance minister Varga said that the loan "carried a fixed interest rate and an early repayment option" and added that it was "advantageous and secure" for Hungary, and terms were "favorable relative to the currently available debt financing conditions" but he did not say what the exact terms were.

China-CEE Relations in the Literature

In parallel with its global engagements, such as the "going global" policy and the BRI, China has become more active in the CEE region, hallmarked by developing trade relations, growing inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) and recently also infrastructure projects. It was not only China's structural transformation and global aims that justified this opening up to the CEE region, but CEE itself also began to explore the world outside Europe, especially emerging markets, at the same time (Szunomár 2015). China has increased not only its economic but also political footprint by creating the 16+1 (later 17+1, now 14+1) platform in 2012 to increase cooperation with and its influence in the CEE region. Hence, in addition to economic expansion, China has started to gain a foothold in political terms, too, which garnered much attention in the literature ever since (Vangeli & Pavličević 2019).

Assessing this “new wave” of Chinese presence in CEE takes many forms. Garlick (2019), for instance, 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. In a similar vein, Matura (2019) empirically challenges the correlation between good political ties with China and the depth and intensity of cooperation in trade and economy with CEE countries. 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 and Xu 2017; Góralczyk 2017). The railway project, too, was analyzed from various angles (Rencz 2019; Rogers 2019). Rogers (2019) found that Chinese foreign direct investment into Hungary after 2010 has become politically induced rather than market-driven. 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 and for updating our understanding of the country as a dependent market economy. Furthermore, 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 (Vörös 2018, Káncz 2020) have tried in vain to identify the rationality of Hungary’s support for the Budapest-Belgrade railway project. Above all, the *economic* rationale seems particularly elusive.

While the Hungarian government emphasizes the economic benefits of the railway upgrade, the project is immensely costly, and its

benefits questionable as hard figures have never been provided to make the case for these rebuilds at such high expenditure.² As a result, the public has no information regarding the project's potential benefits and/or drawbacks. Since economic rationality is difficult to pin down, both Gyuris (2022) and Szunomár (2024) 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 toward China, but it also provides the Orbán government with leverage against the criticism from the EU regarding Hungary's democratic backsliding (Enyedi 2018; Bernhard 2021; Holesch and Kyriazi 2022).

Besides Hungary's foreign policy goals, the railway project fits well with the logic of illiberalism in Hungarian domestic politics. Media announcements detailing the "Chinese" railway and the flourishing of Chinese-Hungarian relations can legitimize Orbán's politics (Szunomár 2024). 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." Brattberg et al. (2021, 33) also highlight how Hungary's turn toward China helped Orbán play to Euroskeptical sentiments in the country and express 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." These worries seem legitimate as the Hungarian company featured in the consortium belongs to Lőrinc Mészáros, a well-known oligarch and a close friend of Orbán (Hvg.hu 2022).

Overall, we find that none of the existing claims to the project's rationality—political or economic, domestic or foreign—settle why Hungary opted to participate in such a grandiose project, which is likely to strain the country's financial capacities for decades to come. 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 project's significance is 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, stressed the symbolic and normative influence China wields in CEE. Vangeli's Bourdieusian contribution emphasizes 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 foreign direct investment (FDI), but in the particular practices of behavior, including discourse, 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 that more than the instrumental economic reasoning behind CEE countries’ engagement with China exists. Though Kavalski writes of roles rather than identities, 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.

Foreign Policy Identity and Infrastructure Projects of National Significance

This article 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 dependent on political actors 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 into its two constituent parts, identity and infrastructure, and how these can be brought together for the purpose of this analysis.

Infrastructure serves economic as well as political purposes. In foreign policy, infrastructure has an important role to play in projecting power. As Larkin (2013) puts it, citing American, Prussian, and Russian examples, empire-building has been dependent on infrastructure construction. Besides such material power dimensions in foreign policy, infrastructure has a rather non-material dimension as well. Ho (2020, 1468) refers to the Great Wall of China as an example, which helped construct the identities of the civilized Chinese nation and the nomadic barbarians to be kept outside China’s walls. Today, the existence of the

Great Wall is also discussed by reference to China's strategic culture and the idea of a Chinese "cult of defense" (Scobell 2003), demonstrating that infrastructure and its meaning is socially and culturally produced.

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); 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 2002, 29).

Besides these aspects of what identities are and how they are construed, this study is interested in one aspect of identity: *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 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 2002, 36), but to understand its own explanation of how and why it behaves the way it does.

There is considerable literature dealing with the myriad connections between identities and territories (Capello 2018; Banini and 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 and 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 and 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 connected to projects of national building. Urban spaces also bear the blueprint of configurations of individual and collective identity (Drzewiecka and Nakayama 1998). These spatial arrangements thus serve as vehicles helping communities articulate, enact, and reproduce a sense of who and what they are.

Infrastructure projects are no exception in this regard. These, too, 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, this article 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.

'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 explicitly 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 to deepen economic and trade relations with countries like Russia and China. Yet, this policy change was also consequential for Hungary’s nascent self-conception because it located its place in Europe *at the crossroads*. From the perspective of its disseminators, this location was not only sound economically and politically but also in terms of what the notion of Europeaness 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. In Korkut’s words (2017, 88; emphasis mine), what matters most for Orbán is “his identification of Hungarians with the Eastern *that appears Western*.” The point, therefore, 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, following the logic of a “borderscape” (Balogh 2020, 3–5), 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 article claims that the Budapest-Belgrade railway project is fundamentally about connectivity, which explains why it functions so well as a marker of this new identity. With such an approach, the project’s significance can be located in its symbolism and normative potential, and it becomes 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 connectivity, a norm China argues to be key for the practice of international politics in the 21st century.

In what follows, the article 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 (1) the necessity for historicity and remembering the past, (2) Hungary’s moral and civilizational superiority, and (3) the rejection of hegemonic liberalism dominating Western European politics today.

Trope #1 – (Western) Europe as Ahistorical

Orbán has reconceptualized 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 descendant of Central Eastern tribes—the

so-called Turanian ancestry or legend (Kiss 2015)—has been resuscitated as a marker of difference. However, this consequence was not 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 EU currently is. Orbán repeated this self-identification in 2022, claiming that Hungary was the “last Eastern people to survive in Europe” (Herczeg 2022). The idea that Europe should be a *proper 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 few years to embed the migration crisis in a specific 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. 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 (Neményi 2012), Orbán has steadily invested in a general Asianization discourse (Moreh 2016, 346) that makes Hungary outstanding. Yet again, 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. While Europe is restructuring “the foundations of its own civilization,” claims Orbán (2016), “we [Hungarians] must remain capable of protecting this piece of Europe the size of Hungary.” 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 historicity 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 (2017, 8), 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. 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 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 is meant to remedy this state of affairs.

How does the Chinese concept of connectivity inform these three tropes in Hungarian discourse? Connectivity is a mainstay in Chinese policy documents and features as the means through which the BRI is to succeed. All of the BRI's five dimensions operate under the assumption of connectivity, leading to better coordination and cooperation.³ However, China's emphasis on connectivity is part of broader connectivity politics, reflecting an "understanding that power and connectivity are closely linked" (Kohlenberg and Godehardt 2018, 1). This is a new meta-geography of international politics and an attempt to re-order the spatial, and consequently the political, imaginaries of actors participating in the BRI (Kohlenberg and Godehardt 2021). China is thus molding the region according to a "geoeconomic imaginary centred on connectivity, infrastructure, and (re)industrialization" (Vangeli 2020, 28). Far from a neutral and transparent vocabulary, the BRI's conceptual language is itself an alternative ordering of global regions and, thus, a challenge to the West.

In their own ways, the three tropes examined above register and make explicit that *something about Europe* is in disrepair today, and, therefore, they are about (dis-)connectivity. Europe is historically *disconnected*; it is morally and civilizationally out of touch with itself, and it has *lost* the practice and true meaning of freedom in the 21st century. Orbán's focus on mending this brokenness of Europe acquires, then, its discursive vessel in the rhetoric on the Budapest-Belgrade railway project. It stresses the need to connect distant spaces and actors not exclusively in a crude, material sense but as a normative solution to problems ailing the continent.

The Budapest-Belgrade Railway Project as an Identity Marker of Connectivity

This section of the article 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. The project is

a key material artifact illustrating and confirming 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 connectivity. Connectivity 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 the 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)

Orbán construes both Serbia and Hungary as historically connecting the East and the West. Because of this, the Budapest-Belgrade railway upgrade is not simply a timely endeavor—overdue, in fact, in Orbán's argument—but a reasonable, meaningful endeavor evident in the words ‘disgraceful’ and ‘not normal’. 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 (2022) claims that “peace builds, war destroys.” 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: “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” (Orbán 2021). The image of external powers sowing discord is connected to the idea of *division*. This implies that decline and conflict directly result from 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 an 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 (2020) used the inauguration of the Monostor Bridge to claim that “Europe is being built in Central Europe.” 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 Visegrad Four (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: “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). Here, 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). There is thus a nexus in this construction between *being and doing*, between what one is and what one does. This connection between identity and

agency is typical of Orbán's identity discourse. It also reveals a particularly performative approach to being European today, as it is through building practices that Hungary legitimizes its claim to Europeaness. Hungary's in-betweenness is not only apposite for being European, it is also a pragmatic choice as it caters to the country's "unique national development" needs (Révész 2023).

The dyad of *claiming Europe normatively by building it materially* comes across in previous texts. In 2019, Orbán said Hungary is "ready to build a new Central Europe," which is about building the best of Europe itself. The goal, in Orbán's assessment, is for "Central Europe to become one of the world's most successful and most competitive regions where cities are connected together by motorways and express railway lines" (Orbán 2019).

Above all, the aspiration is to develop the region through connectivity in such a way that Central Europe is able to beat Western Europe. Besides expanding the economic fruits of such development to the whole of Europe, Orbán is clear that Central Europe is the true host of Europeaness. People in the region "always knew," claims Orbán (2019), "that freedom would never be gifted to them by the great powers," and that the region would still be under the communist yoke "had we waited for the West." In other words, one must act on its own initiative, and this is the true substance of contemporary Europeaness. Strangely but logically, *defying* the West (and Brussels) does not undermine this claim. Rather, this defiance is the very spirit of the European ideal. This connection also helps us understand Orbán's fascination with economic performance and the desire to base Hungarian society on a new work ethic. For Orbán, he who is most agentic and unhinged in delivering growth to his people is the ultimate flagbearer of Europe.

During an official visit to Beijing in 2017, Orbán was asked about his interpretation of the BRI. The response featured many of the talking points familiar to Chinese foreign policy discourse, framing the BRI as a global agenda of win-win projects and marking a new era of globalization (Orbán 2017). Importantly, Orbán emphasized connectivity as a way to bring communities and cultures together without *forcibly assimilating* them, the latter of which he identified with an outdated form of globalization. "We are not supposed to change each other, to withdraw into alliances," claims Orbán (2017), but "to connect all these countries, these communities and these economies."

Orbán thus accepts that the Western, 'old' type of globalization seeks a conversion of value systems, social norms and the erasure of differences between nations. Crucially, Orbán reappropriates the BRI as

a discursive innovation because it serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, it feeds into his focus on development and economic performance, which his government has stressed as the cornerstones of its legitimacy since 2010. On the other, it allows Orbán to praise *economic* openness without political and normative openness, the latter of which he rejects as typical of old globalization characterized by cultural and political assimilation.

Conclusion

To better grasp the Budapest-Belgrade railway project's significance, this article asked how the project is meaningful for what Hungary claims to be international. It argued that the project came at a time when the Orbán government's self-conception shifted toward the East. Growing dissatisfied with what he interpreted as the cultural and social disfiguration of Europeanness in Western Europe, Orbán deployed new identity tropes and (re-)located genuine Europeanness to 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 proper role for Hungary. Recasting his country in these terms, Orbán was careful not to abandon the idea(l) of Europe, and thus he established a link between *being European* and *building Europe* itself. That is, lest it falls off the civilizational ladder, Europe cannot be idle. It has to be built and rebuilt, and this explains Orbán's relentless emphasis on sovereignty and agency. Today, the expression of this performative, neoliberal Europeanness, argues Orbán, is Hungary itself.

Furthermore, the article shows that the Budapest-Belgrade railway project helps articulate and enact these connections. For Orbán the builder and peacemaker, the project is a way to mend the brokenness of Europe itself and to inaugurate a new Hungarian identity he claims to be too agentic and thus untamable by the system of liberal democracy and its checks and balances. In making this claim, the discourse resembles China's approach to modernization. Looking to secure the conditions for his country's development in the 21st century, Orbán borrows the conceptual toolkit to express these conditions (connectivity), and re-appropriates the Chinese maxim of economics, trumping politics, and pragmatism over political principles. Thus, Orbán's Hungary is a self-pronounced bridgehead of Central Europe, a meeting point of global economic activities, and a safe space for business no matter its

origination. What makes this model *European*, for Orbán, is not adherence to a common value system socially and politically but the ability of its participants to conserve themselves in their respective differences. Hungary's claim to Europeanness is rooted in its exceptional ability at self-reproduction in an era of massive global changes.

Notes

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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. Based on logistics calculations by Hungarian experts, it would take 2,400 years for the investment to return (Rencz 2019; Káncz 2020).

3. Policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds.

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