

The Pandora's Box of Fudan Hungary

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A Chinese university opening a campus in the so-called “West” for the first time would have been a major advancement in the globalizing strategy of Chinese higher education. Yet the case of Fudan University opening its first European campus in Hungary seems to have contained several pitfalls from the start. This essay highlights some of them, such as the effects of a Cold War context on national higher-education strategies and the uncertain future of internationalization in higher education. The way the discourse around the university developed proved to be a Pandora’s box unleashing woes: it showed that efforts to globalize higher education have become subordinate to geopolitical considerations and are regarded as questions of national loyalty, particularly in states involved in a growing resurgence of Cold War– type coalitions.

In February 2010, during his election campaign to become prime minister of Hungary, lawyer and politician Viktor Orbán said, “Although [Hungary] sails under a Western flag as an EU member state, the wind of the world economy blows from the East.” (Orbán previously served from 1998 to 2002), the Hungarian government

launched its strategy “Opening to the East.” While focused on export and investment opportunities within the Central and Eastern regions of Asia, the strategy privileged China and major Chinese initiatives that Central European countries

peripheral position of Hungary has long been a cause for concern among the country's political elite, and in many cases, there was a choice, perceived or otherwise, between Eastern or Western alliances.⁴ Moving further along the line set by the prime minister to welcome collaboration with the East, a major actor in Hungarian financial policy, Norbert Csizmadia, hailed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a historic free-trade agreement signed by fifteen Asia-Pacific nations in 2020. In an opinion piece for a Hungarian business newspaper, he framed the agreement in the following manner:

[The RCEP] further strengthens the unfolding of the Eurasian global era. The process started in 2013, when China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which marked the end of a five hundred year Atlantic era. The Belt and Road is about repositioning the esopoli, cult(asil posit)20 ical te036 c nect]T(ur)lloasianopetBRASia-

ed States. This assertion antagonized liberal circles in Hungary who saw CEU as an intellectual recovery after decades of occupation by the Soviet Union. But despite vehement protest from the Hungarian higher education community against governmental pressure on the university, the leaders of CEU

Another difference between CEU and Fudan University that may have stoked government pressure was CEU's connection to the elite of the Democratic Party in the United States. This connection came not only through George Soros, a noted mega-donor to the Democratic Party, but through major donors to both CEU and the Democrats like Donald Blinken: U.S. ambassador to Hungary from 1994 to 1997, father of the current U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, and benefactor of the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, which is a unit at CEU that mainly contains materials on and does research on the Cold War era.⁸

The Budapest campus of Fudan University received strong political support in China. In February 2021, the Chinese government officially published that the consummate leader of China, Xi Jinping, "supports the opening of a Hungarian campus of Fudan University."

tional Bank. On the initiative of the bank's governor, György Matolcsy, the tri-lateral partnership agreement launched the first double-degree MBA program between China and Central Europe in 2018.¹⁵

Despite these perceived benefits, there were several aspects of the project that came to be seen as risky for the future of both Hungarian higher education and Hungary in general. First and foremost was the budget for campus construction that totaled US\$1.77 billion, of which Chinese state loans would cover roughly US\$1.48 billion. Although there were several business models for opening an affiliated university as a foreign enterprise— including campuses that partnering schools have opened in China, such as the Ningbo campus of the University of Nottingham, and the Suzhou campus operated jointly by Xi'an Jiaotong University and the University of Liverpool— Fudan Hungary was designed as a government investment using money sourced from Hungarian taxpayers.

This arrangement was complicated by other challenging aspects, starting with high tuition fees that made attending Fudan Hungary prohibitively expensive for the average Hungarian student. The entrance of an academic giant also risked disturbing the traditional balance of higher education in Hungary, which is mostly based on free public universities. Another risk was the potential for Fudan Hungary to become a domestic brain drain, in light of its salaries for professors that would have been eight to ten times higher than the national average. Finally, in what many viewed as evidence of government corruption, a Chinese construction company was contracted to build the future campus, and the property was set to occupy most of the area once designated for affordable student housing.

Although these pitfalls worked their way into public discourse on Fudan Hungary, the main arguments employed by the opposition (that is, liberal and left-wing political parties) soon became those typical of the Cold War era. Like their predecessors, oppositional politicians and media outlets framed the pending decision on Fudan Hungary as a war between two worlds. In this conflict, there was a choice between freedom of thought or communist oppression, Western or Eastern values, and national sovereignty or Hungary becoming “a Chinese colony.”¹⁶ The harsh war rhetoric, which included calling Orbán a “traitor of the West,” was intended to strike a chord with a Hungarian population that still harbored bitter memories of communism and Soviet occupation.¹⁷

The question of the country's Western or Eastern identity, which has been central to national political battles for centuries, returned with renewed force. After the political director of the prime minister argued for a balance between the two identities and the creation of a third, saying there was no choice because “we have lived here for a thousand years on the route between the West and the East,”¹⁸ a prompt response came from the opposition: “We do have to choose between West and East!”¹⁹ Government plans for establishing Fudan Hungary moved fur-

ther into the spotlight during the run-up to the parliamentary elections in 2022. Throughout this time, public discourse around Fudan Hungary shifted from academic, social, financial, and legal considerations to an emotional fight between domestic political opponents. Because Hungary's Western affiliation still enjoys popular support, liberal opposition in the form of the Hungarian Socialist Party, for example, was eager to embrace a platform that confirmed the country's Western identity. Toward this aim, liberal candidates for prime minister drafted a collective letter to Xi Jinping, in which they pledged to halt the university's construction if they won the elections.²⁰ Thus, in order to close ranks and secure a win, opposition leaders instrumentalized Fudan Hungary to frame its development as a threat to national sovereignty.

To be sure, there were many justifiable concerns surrounding the project, especially compared with the factors that led to CEU's ousting. The Fudan Hungary proposal lacked transparency on important questions of profitability, risk versus opportunity, existing dynamics in Hungarian higher education, and possible corruption. The most important question of all, "Why should the campus be funded by Hungarian taxpayers, if the tuition fees would be out of reach for an average Hungarian family?" was also troubling. Though the opposition raised these questions, in a completely new turn they sta0 Tw 11 0 0 11 7BT01t6 11 37 11 0 07TJETEMnoi6.7 Tm[

will not be able to cooperate with the Eastern world economy. And I do not want Hungary to be locked into the knowledge of the Western world economy.²¹

What was striking about this statement was Orbán's stress on *economic knowledge*. The East-West distinction manifested itself here not in the realm of politics, values, or ideology. The two sides were not presented as mutually exclusive either. It seemed, instead, that the prime minister was trying to strike a balance between both sides and avoid conflict, while highlighting economic interdependence and the need to absorb knowledge from both superpowers. Were we to take his reasoning one step further, we could say there should be space for CEU and Fudan Hungary to coexist with transparent financing, respect for domestic priorities, and the inclusion of all stakeholders in their decision-making processes. For Fudan University (the parent university in Shanghai), it would be (or would have been) a huge reputational gain to open the first Chinese campus in the European Union. And it cannot be ruled out that some Fudan professors were hoping to enjoy greater freedom of expression abroad.

The question of opening to the East seems not to have been confined to Hungary. Writing about the internationalization of education under the semiperipheral position and conditions of the Nordic states, public policy scholar Kazimierz Musiał drew a similar conclusion on cooperating with Russia and China: "Perhaps the Nordic countries... do not want to rely solely on the epistemic hegemony of the Western core powers. It may be a strategic choice or just a recalibration of their semiperipheral status vis-à-vis the alternative empires of knowledge."²² But this research, conducted before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, might yield different results today. With national security at the forefront of many international collaboration schemes, seeking Musiał's "alternative empires of knowledge" no longer sounds realistic. The opportunities offered by a semiperipheral position, namely balancing out East and West or even alternating between them, are limited. As Sándor Zoltán Kusai, former Hungarian ambassador to China, has stated, "Hungary, as a small state in Central-Eastern Europe, is moving along a determined path in the early stages of a new Cold War, and a fundamental choice between opposing sides is inevitable."²³

of their 2022 book on the future of higher-education research, Jeroen Huisman and Marijk C. van der Wende ask, “[Is] the era for global higher education and open science (really) over?”²⁵ Seeing the example of Fudan Hungary, the answer is likely yes, at least for a while. At the time of writing this essay, the campus project has been placed on hold due to fiscal constraints. There is a war just across the border as well, resources are depleted, and the Orbán government is likely to avoid forcing the project in a highly fragile political situation within the European Union— so the jury remains out on determining the future of Fudan Hungary University, at least for now.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

The research for this essay was conducted when the author was a Research Associate in the Center for Cultural Studies on Science and Technology in China (CCST) at the Technische Universität Berlin.

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁴ Katja Levy and Ágota Révész, “No Common Ground: A Spatial-Relational Analysis of EU-China Relations,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 27 (3) (2022): 457–491, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-021-09769-w>.
- ⁵ Norbert Csizmadia, “Eurázsia korszaka—a szabadkereskedelem diadala: Tovább erődik az eurázsiai világkorszak kibontakozása. Vélemény” [The Eurasian Era—A Triumph of Free Trade: The Unfolding of the Eurasian Era Continues to Gain Momentum. An Opinion Piece], *Világgazdaság* [World Economy], December 9, 2020, <https://www.vg.hu/velemeney/2020/12/eurazsia-korszaka-a-szabadkereskedelem-diadala-2>.
- ⁶ Tamás Matura, “Absent Political Values in a Pragmatic Hungarian China Policy,” in *Political Values in Europe-China Relations: A Report by the European Think-Tank Network on China* (ETNC), ed. Tim Nicholas Rühlig, Björn Jerdén, Frans-Paul van der Putten, et al. (Stockholm: The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2018), 48, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/publications-ifri/ouvrages-ifri/political-values-europe-china-relations>.
- ⁷ Viktor Orbán, “Orbán Viktor: Ez a mi hazánk, ezért küzdeni fogunk érte a végső kig” [Viktor Orbán: “This Is Our Country, and We Will Fight for It to the End”], *Hazánk*, Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (KDNP) [Christian Democratic People’s Party (

