

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.”¹ Shortly after securing his second term as prime minister (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 like Hungary readily joined: namely, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.² In 2014, a high-speed railway project linking Belgrade and Budapest – the capital cities of Serbia and Hungary – was also launched with a HUF 750 billion (US\$2.3 billion) budget, 85 percent of it financed through Chinese state loans. The project was initiated to establish a rail route for transporting Chinese products from the port city of Piraeus in Greece to Central Europe.

There seems to have been a perceived shift in global power, however, that also influenced the vision behind the “Opening to the East” strategy. As an analyst put it eight years after its 2010 launch, “The key question is: to what extent can the strategy of opening to the East enable Hungary to move from her traditional role of conflict zone between ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ powers in Europe to become a bridge that helps unite the new Eurasian supercontinent?”³ Indeed, the semi-

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 (RECP), 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 RECP] 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 axis of development from sea to land and reclaiming Eurasia's former economic, social, cultural and political importance by connecting Europe and Asia.⁵

“Opening to the East” and the China-friendly policy of Orbán's government achieved a rare consensus within Hungary's tumultuous political arena. Although the Belgrade-Budapest railway project received heavy criticism from the opposition, the target was government corruption and not the presence of China. In a report published by a network of European think tanks, it was noted that “unlike in some other countries, [China's] increased political and economic presence has not triggered any alarm in Hungarian political circles or among the wider public.”⁶ Indeed, Hungary's geopolitical horizon didn't include China. On the one hand, because Hungarian political and economic elites saw China as an opportunity. On the other hand, because China was not perceived as impacting the lives of Hungarians, while “Western” relations were seen as vitally important issues.

The ousting of Central European University (CEU) from Hungary in 2018 unleashed widespread protests. It happened almost thirty years after the private research university was founded by George Soros, a Hungarian American philanthropist and financier. Soros established CEU in 1991, with the vision of creating a student hub for the Central-Eastern European region, after Hungary transitioned from socialist rule to a democratic system in 1989. Things came to a head in 2015, however, when a sharp conflict broke out between Orbán and Soros over the 2015 migrant crisis in Europe. Orbán saw pro-settlement Soros as the head of an “international network organized into an empire,” acting against Hungarian national sovereignty, while Orbán cast himself as the nation's defender, forced to fight against the so-called globalist forces led by Soros.⁷

As a result of the ongoing fight for control between Orbán and Soros, CEU came to be viewed as a representative of Soros's “anti-national” values. A legal battle ensued, in which the conservative government claimed that CEU had no right to issue a Hungarian-U.S. degree, as it did not operate a campus in the Unit-

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 decided to relocate to Vienna following the legal proceedings.

It was in the wake of this contentious atmosphere, in early 2021, that plans were announced for Fudan University (in Shanghai) to open a campus in Budapest. The future campus became widely perceived as a political replacement for CEU, but it was only after details became public about its being built with funds from a Chinese state loan that Fudan Hungary was thrust into the center of political debate in Hungary.

In response to domestic concerns, the government promoted Fudan Hungary by emphasizing the high international ranking of its parent university in the prestigious QS World University Rankings system of colleges and universities. In 2022, Fudan Shanghai was number thirty-one out of 1,300 institutions. By contrast, the highest scoring Hungarian higher-education institution was the University of Szeged, ranking between 551 and 560. Opening a Fudan campus in Budapest promised to launch Hungarian higher education into the international top league, or so the public was told. The campus planned to open its gates in 2028 and to offer Chinese-Hungarian dual-degree programs (BA and BSc, MA and MSc, and PhD) in its four faculties: humanities and social sciences, public policy and business, medicine, and science and engineering.

With a teaching faculty of three hundred thirty professors, and one hundred fifty administrative staff, the university would serve approximately five thousand students, not only from Hungary but from the whole Central-Eastern European region. (In comparison, the University of Szeged had twenty-two thousand students in the 2020–2021 academic year, while Fudan University had thirty-two thousand in 2021–2022.) With his vision of an elite hub for higher education in the Central-Eastern European region, Orbán conceived an idea very similar to that of Soros.

Despite the overlap, there are marked differences between CEU and Fudan University. The former is a relatively small university that dedicates most of its academics to postgraduate programs. As of the fall of 2022, CEU had 1,479 enrolled students and had amassed 18,667 alumni. It also maintained a clear focus on the social sciences, as natural science and technology fields are almost completely missing from its offerings, apart from doctoral programs in data science and environmental science. To further illustrate this point, in the 2022 QS World University Rankings by subject, CEU was twenty-fourth in politics, thirty-third in philosophy, and sixty-fifth in sociology. CEU did not appear at all, however, in the aggregate ranking of 1,300 higher-education institutions.

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."⁹ Fudan Hungary was viewed as one of the flagship projects of internationalization of higher education under the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰ Referring to Xi Jinping's support, Zhang Jun (dean of the school of economics at Fudan University) added: "With such a stronghold, our students and faculty can travel regularly for study and exchange, and develop long-term research collaborations with local academic and financial institutions."¹¹ Hungary, a founding member of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs' then 16+1 initiative (now known as 14+1), was apparently seen as a location uniting institutional prestige, integration into the European academic landscape, and investment opportunities in the Central-Eastern European region.

In contrast with CEU's sociological contributions to the higher-education landscape in Hungary, Fudan Hungary would have focused on business, medicine, engineering, and newer fields in technology, such as artificial intelligence and autonomous driving. The Hungarian Ministry for Innovation and Technology saw Fudan Hungary as a means "to speed up the internationalization process of Hungarian higher education . . . to create high-quality educational infrastructure and raise educational standards."¹² They also added that the presence of the university in the country could attract investments and "encourage Chinese companies to set up R&D centers in Hungary."¹³ On a website favoring the Orbán-led conservative government, economist Csaba Lentner argued for establishing Fudan Hungary due to an urgent need for greater innovative capacity in the nation:

Patenting activity in Hungary is one third of that in the Visegrád partner countries and one fifth of the EU average. . . . There is no point in wasting any more time on cherishing certain mediocre universities, we need to move on and, if there is a chance, we need to move towards one of the best universities in the world.¹⁴

It is clear that business interests would have equaled educational aims, reinforced by the fact that the megaproject of Fudan Hungary was preceded by an agreement between Fudan Shanghai, the Corvinus University of Budapest (whose primary focus is business administration and economics), and the Hungarian Na-

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 started focusing on portraying China as an enemy. Connect this strategic shift to the Orbán government's framing of George Soros (and to a certain extent the United States) as the enemy of Hungary, and one thing becomes clear: the Hungarian political binary translated into the current Cold War context. That is to say, like the myth of Pandora's Box, the case of Fudan Hungary released the antagonism of today's Western and Eastern blocs (the United States and China) in a tiny Central-European country.

The left-wing opposition would go on to lose the parliamentary elections by a huge margin the following year. Although they had a sizeable base of supporters in Budapest, residents in the countryside remained faithful to Viktor Orbán and his conservative Fidesz political party. Therefore, an urban-rural divide seemed to be at play in Hungary: the urban, liberal, and internationally mobile populace was at odds with its rural, conservative, and more stationary counterpart. Once the dust settled from the debates about Fudan Hungary, however, preparations for the campus construction were halted and the media fell silent. That was until late 2022, when Prime Minister Orbán made a surprising announcement at a press conference:

[Fudan] remains on the agenda. I am convinced that as Asia rises, there are two kinds of economic knowledge in the world today: Western knowledge and Eastern knowledge. And if we do not know the Eastern concept and knowledge of the economy, we

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

Just as science and technology "became integrated into the apparatus of the national-security state" during the Cold War, higher education seems to be following a similar path.²⁴ And the national discourse around Fudan Hungary developed in a way that demonstrates how decisions to internationalize higher education have become subordinate to geopolitical considerations. Such decisions have also come to be regarded as questions of national loyalty, particularly in non-core states within the rapidly forming blocs.

Various scholars of higher education have researched the tensions between geopolitics and the internationalization of higher education. In the first chapter

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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