Returning to Eurasia from the heart of Europe? Geographical metanarratives in Hungary and beyond

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Introduction

Hungary is in political, legal, social, and moral (Bozóki 2011, Palonen 2012, Sólyom 2013) crisis. The economic situation is not very good either and worse than in comparable countries (Richter 2011). Emigration is high (HVG 2012) and the number of would be-emigrants has never been higher during the last twenty years (Sík 2012). At the same time as the far right is strong, the country more and more finds itself at unease with the EU (Index 2013) and is more and more turning towards non-democracies in Asia for assistance and to break out of diplomatic isolation – sometimes with difficult outcomes and at the cost of others (DW 2012). These developments make it important to improve understanding on what kind of ideas and ideologies this nation is guided by nowadays.

One way of studying such ideologies and orientations is through national metanarratives, which can be defined as "visions of national solidarity and identification" (Bassin 2012: 553). While globalisation has been impacting national identities across the world, the transformations of the late 1980s and early 1990s—Eastern Europe and the former USSR—are affected by it with a particular intensity. Across these regions, old structures of political and economic organization were largely destroyed, and some of the most important ideological foundations of social cohesion were rejected. In all of the regions affected, this served to initiate a difficult and painful quest for what might be called new "metanarratives" of nationhood that are meaningful and effective in the conditions of the 21stcentury. (Bassin 2012: 553)

Thus changing national self-perceptions are sometimes coupled with altering spatial relations and understandings. In parts of northern Europe, a Scandinavian identity has been constructed during the mid-19th century to emphasise the links

between Sweden, Denmark, and Norway (Larguèche 2010). In Central and Eastern Europe, after 1989 new spatial concepts became necessary to overcome the East-West divide (Götz et al. 2006: 11-12). While the latter image lingers on (ibid: 10), supposedly static spatial perceptions have become much more dynamic (ibid: 12). But the significance of these imaginations lies not just in how they are performatively and discursively constructed, but also what they are achieving (ibid: 16). I focus here on geographical metanarratives in Hungary, not least due to the topicality of suchideas there. The paperis guided by the following questions:

- What kind of geographical metanarratives are circulating in Hungary today?
- Which metanarratives are gaining influence, which ones are in decline, and why?
- How do they affect the country's (geo) political, cultural, and economic orientations?
- Do these metanarratives find a receptive audience in other countries; do they overlap with metanarratives elsewhere?
- Can they affect the country's political culture, and perhaps even democratic norms?

The limited scope of the paper combined with my geographic location during its compilation did not allow for fieldwork, interviews, or public opinion surveys (cf. O'Loughlin et al. 2006) to collect primary data on the extent to which these narratives are impacting society at large – hence my restriction to secondary sources. In order to learn about the extent to which the metanarratives are instrumentalised in Hungarian politics and economics, developments in Hungary and its relations to other countries were followed through different news agencies, expert reports, scholarly work as well as own earlier observations. This introductory section is followed by a short general overview of metanarratives. Section 3 briefly summarises the geographic metanarratives that have been the most important in Hungary over the past years. Section 4 provides empirical evidence to and an analysis of how and why some of these metanarratives are reshaping contemporary Hungary. The last section shortly sums up the conclusions.

Metanarratives and geographical metanarratives

'Geographical narratives' (252 Google Scholar hits[86]) as such are thus far understudied. Even if we add the hits for 'spatial narratives' (1,580), these numbers pale into insignificance compared to 'national narratives' (10,700), let alone to 'historical narratives' (45,300). The number of hits is even lower if we add the prefix 'meta'in front of 'narratives'. Yet I chose to use 'geographical metanarratives' for several reasons. One, unlike 'national', 'geographical' includes supra- and sub-national levels such as regionalisms or pan-nationalisms. Secondly, it indicates that focus is on metanarratives where space is of primary importance. Finally, the prefix 'meta' signals that we are dealing with grand narratives that a large number of people (are expected to) subscribe to, rather than individual stories or accounts.

In critical theory and in postmodernist approaches a metanarrative refers to a comprehensive explanation, a narrative *about* narratives of historical meaning, experience or knowledge, which offers a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of an often yet unrealised master idea (cf. Appignanesi& Garratt 1995: 102-103; Childers & Hentzi 1995: 186). For literary scholars Stephens and McCallum (1998: 6), a metanarrative "is a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience"; a story about a story, encompassing and explaining other "little stories" within conceptual models that make the stories into a whole. In communication and strategic communication, a master narrative or metanarrative is a "trans-historical narrative that is deeply embedded in a particular culture" (Halverson et al. 2011: 14). A master narrative is therefore a particular type of narrative, defined as a "coherent *system* of interrelated and sequentially organized *stories* that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form" (ibid; Stephen & McCallum 1995: 8).

On the general level, there are at least two problems with metanarratives. On the one hand, such grand theories tend to unduly dismiss the naturally existing chaos and disorder of the universe, and the power of the individual event (Nouvet et al. 2007: xii-iv). On the other hand, metanarratives are created and reinforced by power structures and are therefore untrustworthy. Rather than creating grand, all-encompassing theories, postmodernism therefore attempts to replace metanarratives by focusing on specific local contexts as well as the diversity of human experience (Peters 2001: 7). Thus postmodern narratives will often deliberately disturb the formulaic expectations such cultural codes provide

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[86] The searches referred to in this paragraph were undertaken on February 25, 2014.

(D'Haen 1997: 186), pointing thereby to a possible revision of the social code (Ermarth 1992: 156).

Geographical metanarratives can then be seen as imaginations containing "distinctive and competing geopolitical orientations toward certain states and regions of the world" (O'Loughlin et al. 2006: 130).In her study on Russia, Laruelle (2012: 558) defines geographical metanarratives as grand narratives consisting of sets of more specific, narrowly focused narratives. They advance a supposedly comprehensive and teleological explanation of Russia through a master idea—territorial size and location in space are the drivers of Russia's mission in the world, and of the nature of Russia's state and culture. Going beyond data or maps, they have as their main function to develop a theoretical assumption and transform it into a legitimate ideological tool. These metanarratives are flags that are waved mostly by nationalist-minded intellectual circles, but they also have a much wider audience—although it is difficult to measure and analyze—in parts of the elite, the educated middle classes whose professions have suffered from loss of prestige, some student circles, and members of the general public. Whether in radical or moderate, extreme or subtle, forms, these metanarratives constitute a *doxa*—a non-homogenous set of opinions, popular prejudices, and general presuppositions that shape contemporary Russian culture and politics.

Thus a metanarrative "gives sense, purpose, and coherence to discourses of history and geography" (Suslov 2012: 577). My definition of geographical metanarratives here is that of *ideas and visions of communalsolidarity and identification that have a geopolitical agenda*. Community here refers mainly to national, but also sub-, supra- or pan-national levels.

Geographical metanarratives in Hungary and beyond

Hungary is a particularly complex case, with a culture based on an unquestionably unique language but one that has been shaped by many different peoples including Tatars, Turks, Austrians, Germans, Soviets and others (Cartledge 2011). Moreover, while all political entities legitimise their existence on a narrative of some sort, a number of such – sometimes conflicting – ideologies are circulating in Hungary today that are intensively debated across wide segments of the society, including the political elite. Given this plethora of geographic metanarrativesit is impossible to present a full account, but the following imaginations appear to have been the most influential over the past few years. Of these, due to its gaining importance neo-Turanism will be dealt with at particular length.

The 'return to Europe' and the return of 'Central Europe'
While the notion of 'Mitteleuropa' has long traditions in the German-speaking and former Habsburg lands, it was largely buried with the East-West division of

Europe during the Cold War. The idea received a new boost through Milan Kundera's famous essay *The tragedy of Central Europe* (1984). Kundera famously argued thatthe historic lands of Bohemia, Poland, Hungary etc naturally belong to Europe, from where they were artificially divided but to where they shall one day return. Building on the region's distinctiveness from Eastern Europe in general and from Russia in particular, the concept was useful in legitimising several countries' NATO and EU accessions:"[b]y framing Central Europe as an Eastern outpost of Europe, it provides a platform from which to make appeals to Western assistance" (Kuus 2004: 480, cf. Pridham 2005: 84). Thus its success after 1989 also depended on a positive reception not just in the countries concerned but also among powerful western decision-makers. In Hungary, while the focus on the country's Europeanness has declined somewhat in the last years, the notion of 'Central Europe' is still important (hirado.hu 2013) but has received different associations. One, it may serve to distance the country from the (even more) crisis-struck southern Europe. Secondly, it signifies a region devoted to nation-building as opposed to the "empire-building "Eurocrats and cosmopolitan elites that are perceived by the right to dominate Western Europe.

The 'Carpathian Basin'

A dominant geographic metanarrative in Hungary today is that Hungarians across the Carpathian Basin belong together (Kárpátalja 2012). This narrative was a taboo during the socialist period. Even if the country has not made formal territorial claims since World War II, public institutions including the government are today openly supportingthe Székely Land's aspirations to territorial autonomy within Romania (MNO 2013a). While offering citizenship to co-ethnics beyond the mother-state's borders is also practised elsewhere, in Hungary it is coupled with a rhetoric of "reuniting the nation" ninety years after the Treaty of Trianon (Fidesz 2011), by offering not just citizenship but also for instance the right to vote in the country's national elections (MNO 2012). Pan-Hungarian institutions are being set up throughout the region for various groups such as entrepreneurs (Kormányportál 2012), artists (MNO 2013b), and so on. Rather than just governmental organisations, such initiatives are also taken by NGOs (TKMM 2012, KMJA 2013). Importantly, these actions are also popular among Hungarians and their political representatives in the neighbouring countries (Fidesz-EU 2013, MNO 2013c). Last but not least, the Carpathian Basinas a "unitary geographic space" (Dövényi 2012) also enjoys revived attention by a number of Hungarian scholars across the region (Gyuris 2014), not leastbased on its ethnic composition (Kocsiset al. 2006, Kocsis&Tátrai 2013).

Neo-Turanism and other Eurasian metanarratives

Another type of metanarratives with significant geographic relevance is winning terrain in Hungary. In practice this includes a number of more or less well-

established ideas that share an emphasis on the ancient Hungarians' historical, cultural and even some linguistic links with various peoples in Asia. Neo-Turanism appears as the most influential among these narratives. The ideology of pan-Turanism has been a political movement for the union of the Uralo-Altaic peoples and languages (Murinson 2006: 945). It has historically been most influential in Turkey (overlapping with pan-Turkism) and Hungary, though during somewhat different periods. In Turkey, it was mostly popular in the years preceding World War I (ibid) and then in the 1950s and '60s. While gradually gaining influence from the late nineteenth century on, in Hungary the heydays of Turanism were rather in the interwar period (Hanebrink 2009, Vardy 1983: 37-39). Still, during that time pan-Turanism did serve as some common ground for collaboration between the two countries to stem the Russian threat (Murinson 2006: 945). But while it was more and more replaced by Kemalism in Turkey, in Hungary Turanism was gradually merging with Fascism[87] (Hanebrink 2009: 118). Partly as a consequence, the ideology was fully discredited in the socialist era. During that time, the official version of history adopted the Finno-Ugric link – to the extent that questions of ethno-genesis enjoyed any attention at all. With the change of system a plethora of new-old ideas saw light, supported by more or less scientific literature. While several ideas still promote a Finno-Ugric kinship of some sort, others explicitly reject such a link. Many new-old theories in fact trace the Hungarians' roots in the Turan (a historical region north of Iran), Sumer, or elsewhere in Central Asia. The area south of the Urals has long been a strong suspect of the location of ancient Magyars, with a recent shift towards what is today western Kazakhstan (Bíró et al. 2009).

As we will see in the next section, what makes the study of these narratives particularly topical is that they enjoy growing popularity among sizable segments of the Hungarian population at a time when the country's leadership is increasing efforts to strengthen connections with more and more states in Asia. At the same time, some of these imaginations find an audience and even have their equivalents in several Eurasian societies. For instance, neo-Ottomanism is gaining influence in Turkey (Murinson 2006) and neo-Eurasianism is increasingly popular in Russia (Laruelle 2012).

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[87] It only proves the malleability of such metanarratives (*cf.* Bassin 2012: 555) that while Turanism for some served to emphasise Hungary's Eurasian links, for others it served to strengthen what they believed were shared (geopolitical) interests with Germany.

Towards an "Eurasianisation" of Hungary?

The strengthening of Eurasian connections in Hungary can today be traced in genealogic interest, popular culture, political ideology and foreign policy alike.

Genealogy and national self-images

It should be noted that the origin of the Hungarians has often been and continues to be a subject of intensive popular, scientific and pseudoscientific debate (Marinov 2009). Most researchers today agree that the tribes that at some point called them selves Magyars have their origin in central Asia, but there is disagreement over issues as their more precise "original" location or when the migration process began westwards. Similarly, the relation of Hungarian to other Finno-Ugric languages is quite debated. Representations of these relations have also followed political orientations: when Hungary was relatively well-off around the fin-de-siècle, kinship with the then so-called "fish-stinking Finns" was rather neglected; at the dawn of the Cold War it was the Finns who ignored their unfortunately positioned "relatives". All the while few Hungarians reject the reality of their nation today being composed of people of various origins. While a recent genetic study (Bíró et al. 2009) in fact found overlaps between the Kazakhstani Madjar tribes and the dominant Magyar (i.e. Hungarian) population in Hungary, another study from the same year concluded that three fourths of Hungary's current male population has a genetic pool proving at least a 30,000-year-presence in Europe (HVG2009).

It is of course not the goal here to find out the "real" origins of Hungarians and their kin. Instead, focus is on various ideas, imaginations and self-perceptions that have the potential to link this society to others. Of particular importance here is the question which images emphasise Asian, Eurasian, or European connections. While the majority of Hungarians probably still see their nation as a primarily European one, certain ideas and studies on its ethno-genesis can "disturb" such a picture. Discourses around an Asian origin are particularly delicate given the importance of Christianity in Hungary's history, as the country has seen itself as an outpost of western civilization and its defender against "Oriental barbarism" (Vardy 1983: 37) since the first king and founding father of the state Stephen I adopted Christianity around the year 1000. This self-perception was especially accentuated during the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century and during Turkish rule (1541-1686), with both events featuring high in the nation's historical conscience. Illustrative here is a popular novel on the initially successful protection of the Castle of Eger against Ottoman troops in 1552 by the extensively outnumbered Hungarian forces (Gárdonyi 1901/1991), which is part of the national curriculum. Anti-Turkish feelings are also represented in folk songs, poems, and nursery rhymes (Akçalı 2013: 44). This self-image only started to

weaken with the Habsburg rule, at a time when Hungary was increasingly distancing itself from Austria in the nineteenth century.

Popular culture

There is today a growing interest in what was or could have been the ancient culture of the Turanian, Hun, and Magyar tribes. This includes their everyday-practices (including archery, horse-riding, handcraft, building and dwelling in yurts) but also pre-Christian beliefs such as Shamanism and various forms of Paganism (Kolozsi 2012). While festivals and different gatherings and associations devoted to such activities and cultural practices have now been around for some years, these earlier rather amateur events seem to be gradually becoming more professional, and growing in size. Importantly, Kurultáj (Figure 1), a major one among these festivals – organised by the Magyar-Turán Foundation (Kurultáj 2012) four times so far – in 2012 became for the first time a semi-official event by benefitting from a public support of approximately 310,000 USD by the Hungarian government (Ehl 2012). The event attracted up to a quarter million visitors (ibid), including high-ranking officials from countries considered to belong to the Turanian family of nations (i.e. Turkey, the Central Asian republics and a number of ethnic groups from Russia). In November 2012, a smaller but similar event with Kazakh riders called 'Vostochniye Skachki' (Eastern Gallop) was organised in Eger (HEOL 2012), a city paradoxically associated with a heroic battle against the Turks in Hungarian historiography (see above). In the recent past, the area around Szigetvár (another Hungarian town famous for fierce battles against Ottoman forces) has increasingly been transforming into a region attracting Turkish tourists (Kálnoky 2013).

Figure 1: Searching for Turan at the Kurultáj festival.

Source: Kurultaj.hu

Politics and foreign policy

Among the parliamentary parties neo-Turanism is openly embraced by the far-right Jobbik (Akcali&Korkut 2012), and to some extent by the governing party Fidesz (Ehl 2012). In April 2013 Jobbik even proposed to create a national day for the Turanian kin peoples; even if the majority of MPs abstained from beans this time (NOL 2013), the proposition itself is telling. While Fidesz may be divided on the embrace of Turanism, one of its MPs – Sándor Lezsák – is the Kurultáj festival's patron. Moreover, it was another Fidesz MP –László Kövér, the Speaker of the National Assembly – who proposed to support the event. Most recently, while condemning some of the EU's criticism towards Hungary Kövér said that if this is the direction the EU takes, then Hungary should consider leaving the union (EurActiv 2014).

The notion of an "Eurasianisation of Hungary" (I have not seen it being laid forward elsewhere) is to some extent inspired by the idea of a "Putinisation of Hungary", a label that several journalists (TWP 2010, Rauscher 2012, Kirchick 2012, Lindberg 2013) described the country's development with since current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán took power in spring 2010. While a comparison of Hungary with Russia is probably far-fetched (The Economist 2010), it is meant to criticise the leadership style and a number of policies of the Hungarian government. Illustratively, in early 2014 it was suddenly announced that Hungary agreed with Russia on co-financing the construction of new units of the country's only nuclear power plant: despite being the largest investment in Hungary since 1989, the content of the intergovernmental agreement has not been made public (Sadecki&Kardaś 2014) and was strongly criticised for not having been preceded by consulting experts, let alone NGOs and other interest groups. Criticism is more generally targeted at the creation of enemy images (Koenen 2011), but more importantly, at constitutional reforms that may serve to weaken democratic institutions (Halmai 2011, Küpper 2011, Sólyom 2013) and at laws endangering the freedom of press (Vásárhelyi 2011).

In a wider context, some (e.g. Haraszti 2012) see a trend of Hungary moving towards a "Eurasian" style of governance characteristic of so-called 'managed democracies' such as Ukraine, Russia (Demdigest 2012), and a number of East Asian countries. According to Haraszti, such a model is based on an often unclear division between public and private ownership and management, and a strong state influence in matters traditionally treated as belonging to the private sphere in liberal democracies. Accordingly, explicit criticism – if not dismissal – of a liberal democratic order are clearly present for instance in the Hungarian Prime Minister's recent utterance: "I don't think that our European Union membership precludes us from building an illiberal new state based on national foundations", going on to cite Russia, Turkey and China as successful models to emulate, "none of which is liberal and some of which aren't even democracies" (WSJ 2014). According to some experts (Demdigest 2012), the stake is high as other young democracies in Europe may be following suit. Russia has in fact offered Hungary (Barabás 2011), Bulgaria (novinite.com 2011), and Serbia (SNP Nashi 2011) to join its Eurasian Union.

Hungary's Minister of Foreign Affairs has been emphasising the importance of an on-going 'race for the East' –that is entering new alliances with for instance China in light of the economic crisis (Máté 2012, *cf.* Kálnoky 2013). A number of concrete measures were recently taken that signal a Hungarian (re)orientation eastwards. Through the foreign policy of 'Opening to the East' (*Keletinyitás*), particular attention is directed towards regions like Turkey (Kálnoky 2013), China,

Russia[88] and Central Asia, not least Kazakhstan (Fidesz Eger 2012). Educational exchange programs have been started with countries like Azerbaijan (Index 2012) and Jordan (MHO 2013). Chambers of commerce are being set up in for instance Azerbaijan to attract Hungarian enterprises (Index 2012). Most recently, Hungary closed its embassy in Estonia while it is opening a new one in Mongolia (NOL 2014). While trading with non-democracies is nothing unique to Hungary, what is distinctive is the nexus between such policies and ideology and culture.

Hungary's difficulties with dealing with non-democracies were illustrated by a severe incident in autumn 2012 when itsent home an Azerbaijani officer who murdered an Armenian colleague in Budapest. While Baku promised his sentence would continue in his home country, in reality he was treated as a national hero and was even promoted upon return in Azerbaijan. Hungarian media and opposition scent a dirty deal behind the scenes, saying that Azerbaijan had promised to buy bonds for 3 billion euros from the cash-strapped Hungarian government in exchange for the officer's release (DW 2012). Developing contacts with different countries is of course not negative in itself, but with exactly whom, how, and at what price?

Conclusion

Geographical metanarratives can be a powerful force and, not least when instrumentalised in politics, often serve to legitimise a society's geopolitical and cultural (re)orientations. Therefore such metanarratives tend exactly to emerge as mobilising tools at times when new such orientations are desired by power elites and/or important segments of the society more generally. As I tried to show, Hungary is both an illustrative and a topical case of a country undergoing a partial but significant reorientation. While it clearly saw its place in Europe as well as within the country's current borders up until recently, considerable efforts havenewly been undertaken to approach certain Eurasian societies; not least Turkey, Russia, and in Central Asia. Such orientations are not just based on pure geopolitical and geo-economic rationales (as in a number of western countries), but are also supported by new-old metanarratives such as neo-Turanism and other forms of "Eurasianisms". By complementing the purely commerce-based activities with cooperation in fields such as education, cultural exchange and politics, Hungary is more and more linked to hybrid or non-democracies also politically, at

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[88] When it was in opposition during 2002-2010, Fidesz explicitly objected for example to the South Stream gas pipeline on the grounds of avoiding increased energy dependence on Russia; but it has recently agreed with Gazprom to welcome this project (Presseurop 2013).

a time when the government has been criticised of semi-authoritarian tendencies and democratic deficits. At the same time, a number of Eurasian countries – notably Turkey and Russia – appear to welcome such a reorientation of Hungary, as well as of other countries in (south) eastern Europe. This can be explained by the fact that Turkey's rising neo-Ottomanism and Russia's growing neo-Eurasianism are promoting geopolitical agendas that are in line with Hungary's 'Opening to the East' and neo-Turanism.

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