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From Barbarian to Digital Heroes

On the Images of the European Union in Hungary

To date, Brussels has not provided any guidelines of how the institutions of the EU should portray themselves in the media.¹ It has only initiated scientific projects that analyze the frames of a common visual policy.² One remembers the boring repetition of family-like photos made at EU summits, in which the country representatives stand under the flag of the EU as a happy family. (The delegates of the “newborn” member-states are in the center of the photos, while the representatives of the old, big members are located behind them, everybody smiles, everybody is happy...).

Another typical visual pattern is the documentation of moving: politicians arrive in or depart from somewhere. One could analyze the symbolic structure of power, the gender constructions, the mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion, etc. in the pictures. A third visual pattern is the self-representation of nations as EU member states.

Between 1990 and 2004, during the accession process, opinion research in Hungary showed an increasing skepticism on the one hand, and a very abstract imagination of the EU and its institutions, on the other. Not only the imagination but also the knowledge of the EU was limited and rough. The European Union doesn't seem to be an “imagined community” for the Hungarians yet. The protracted debate about the EU enlargement resulted in a lack of confidence in the symbolic

¹ See: http://europa.eu.int/comm/avpolicy/stat/studi_en.htm.

² See e.g. the *Iconclash* project: <http://www.node-research.at/lp.php?id=160>.

position and self-representation of the nation.³ Parallel to this, Hungary tried to re-draw the mental map of ex-communist Europe, and targeted a central economic, social and cultural position in the region.⁴

1. *A concise history of the images of Europe in Hungary*

Hungary reached the lowest point of skepticism exactly at the end of the accession to the EU in 2004. This has a long prehistory. The position of Hungary in Europe was discussed incessantly during the last century, and this discussion used to determine the ways of political and economic modernization.

The *fin de siècle* was a turning point: Hungary opened up to the West (instead of following Bismarck-Germany and Russia).⁵ From that time on, the metaphor of the *ferry* has been used to symbolize, on the one hand, Hungary as a borderland between the East and the West, and, on the other, the transmission and translation of various values and cultures. The ferry that is not only moving but also transporting something became one of the positive images of the Hungarian political and economic elites. Paradoxically, the ferry had its negative connotations like anxiety, instability and dependency as markers of an unstable national identity, too.

After WWI, in 1920, the political discourse changed radically and an anti-European campaign unfolded in the country. Between the two world wars, nationalism, revisionism and irredentism determined the image of Europe, though Hungary's new geopolitical position was heavily discussed in the small circles of the intelligentsia.⁶ Naturally, traditionalism and modernization had also existed as ideologies earlier, although, until the end of WWI, both had been legitimate national

³ Kovács, János Mátyás: Westerweiterung: Zur Metamorphose des Traums von Mitteleuropa. *Transit*, Nr. 21, 2001. 3–20.

⁴ See e.g. the meetings of the Visegrád Four, Hungarian minority politics, and Hungarian investments in Eastern Europe

⁵ See Litván, György: Begegnungen an der Donau. In Heindl, Waltraud – Litván, György – Malfér, Stefan – Somogyi, Éva (eds.): *Eliten und Außenseiter*. Bd 2. Wien-Köln-Weimar, 2000; Litván, György: La démocratie hongroise de 1918 et les vainqueurs. In Cipaianu, George – Vesa, Vasile (eds.): *La fin de la Première Guerre Mondiale et la nouvelle architecture géopolitique européenne*. Cluj, 2000. 63–74.

⁶ See Zentai, Violetta: The 'West' Envisions the West. Images of the West in the Leading Progressive Hungarian Literary Journal in the Inter-War Period. *Ethnologia Europaea*, Nr. 29, 1999. 69–84.

programs. Liberalism lost its legitimacy as a national program only in the 1920s, after the Soviet Republic in 1919 and the peace treaty in Trianon in 1920. The binary oppositions of the subsequent “Populist versus Westernizer” discourse were the following: East versus West, Europe vs. Asia, conservatism vs. liberalism, tradition vs. modernity, nation vs. state, *Volk* vs. *citoyen*, religion vs. secularism, village vs. town, *Bauerntum* vs. *Bürgertum*. The populist arguments focused on the concept of enemy, in which the representatives of modernization, financial capital, liberalism, the media, etc. were branded as strangers.⁷

At the end of WW II, the image of Europe changed again. The liberation of Hungary by the Soviet army resulted in a more positive image of the East than it had been earlier, while the victory of the Allied powers over Germany produced a friendlier picture of the West, too. For a while, it was the metaphor of the *bridge* that symbolized Hungary’s position in the new Europe. In 1948, the communist takeover broke this new image and dichotomized the imagination of Europe: the communist propaganda tried to mobilize the Hungarian society against the Western “*imperialists*” and “*capitalists*” while in private life, the West as an *ideal world* embodied a higher quality of life, consumption, fashion, etc.

After the 1956 revolution (which brought a turbulence of images), the communist propaganda began to work with softer means of controlling visual policy in the Eastern bloc. The West lost its characteristics as an enemy, while the *topos* of the East (the Soviet Union) as an idol became empty. By the 1970s and 1980s, Hungary invented a special kind of self-representation, the consumer-oriented “*fridge socialism*” (“*goulash communism*”), in which it portrayed itself as the most Western part of the Eastern bloc. In the middle of the 1980s, the oppositionists among the Hungarian intellectuals (together with their Czech, Slovak, Polish, Russian an Austrian friends and colleagues) launched a controversy about *Mittleeuropa*.⁸ At that time, the metaphor of the *bridge* became revitalized.

⁷ See Kovács, Éva: Volkstümliche und Urbanisten – warum ist diese Kontroverse in Ungarn? *ÖZG* (Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften) Nr. 3, 1994. 262–278.

⁸ See Bojtár, Endre: Eastern or Central Europe? *Cross Currents*, Nr. 7, 1988. 253–269. <http://www.hti.umich.edu>; Busek, Erhard – Wilfinger, Gerhard (eds.): *Aufbruch nach Mitteleuropa*. Wien, 1986; Konrád, György: *Mein Traum von Europa*. *Kursbuch*, Nr. 81, 1985. 175–193; Konrád, György: *Der Traum von Mitteleuropa*. In Busek – Wilfinger (eds.): *op. cit.*, 97; Le Rider, Jacques: *Mittleeuropa*. *Auf*

After the political transition in 1989/90, the new political programs and slogans stressed: “We are (in) Europe.” The new democratic parties referred with euphoria to Europe as a new self-image directed against the Soviet past of Hungary. Up to the middle of the 1990s, the positive picture of Europe remained constant in the media; at the same time, it was overshadowed by the revival of the “Populists versus Westernizers” debate.¹⁰ The Hungarian political elite (and partly the economic elite, too) split along the lines dividing East and West. Relations to the imagined Europe became one of the most important points of orientation in the media.

2. *The images of Europe today*

In the following, we will analyze the cover pictures and caricatures of the Hungarian weeklies in April and May 2004, that is, in the last phase of the accession to the EU. Interestingly enough, Hungary’s accession didn’t prove to be a real cover story. While weeklies published lots of articles in these days, the tabloids rejected or marginalized this topic: their covers continued to display the “ordinary” celebrities in these weeks.

2.1. The old metaphor of the ferry

„Has the ferry stopped?“ – it was with this question that the *Heti Világgazdaság* (World Economy, the weekly of the Hungarian establishment) commented the accession. The title of the cover paraphrased the statement of the then Prime Minister Péter Medgyessy (“The ferry has finally docked”), which he made while signing the accession treaty in 2003. The confusion of images (how could a ferry *finally* dock, without losing its definitive function, eternal moving) refers to the old Hungarian imagination of the inequality between East and West, and initiated a symbolic reckoning with the hundred-year old sense of shame. (*Picture 1.*)

den Spuren eines Begriffes. Wien, 1994; Schöpflin, George - Wood, Nancy (eds.): *In Search of Central Europe.* Cambridge, 1989.

⁹ See Kovács, Éva – Tóth, István János: Le partis avant les elections. *La Nouvelle Alternative*, Nr. 17, 1990.

¹⁰ See Kovács, János: Uncertain Ghosts. Populists and Urbans in Postcommunist Hungary. In Peter Berger (ed.): *Limits of Social Cohesion.* Westview Press, 1998.



Picture 1. „Has the ferry stopped?“
(HVG, 1 Mai, 2004.)

Moreover, the metaphor of the ferry represents an evident break with the metaphor of the bridge, and, as a result, with the dream of *Mitteleuropa* and the positive image of the East. This picture communicates only one Europe, which lost its center and doesn't adapt to the East any longer. But, this isn't a novelty. The fifteen-year long process of distancing the East (including the former Soviet Union) ended in 2004 with this paradoxical statement. The humorous magazine *Hócipő*¹¹ makes fun of this long farewell from the East on its cover: on a famous election poster from 1990, it exchanged the head of the Soviet general with that of a Hungarian cowboy.¹² (Picture 2., 3.)

¹¹ Hócipő = Snowshoes, *my shoes are full of snow* = colloquial Hungarian: “enough of that!”

¹² The Hungarian cowboy has another symbolic meaning on this cover. He – in Hungarian: the „*csikós*” – was an emblematic figure of the *goulash-communism* in Hungary as a sight of the Puszta for the Austrian and German tourists. See Kürti, László: A puszta felfedezésétől a puszta eladásáig. [From the Discovery to the Sale of the Puszta]. In Fejős, Zoltán – Szijártó, Zsolt (eds.): *Turizmus és kommunikáció*. [Tourism and Communication] Budapest, Pécs, 2000. 112–128.



Picture 2. *Tovarishi, koniec!*
Election poster of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (1990)



Picture 3. *I have never thought I would see Hungary's return to Europe!* (*Hócipő*, 1. Mai 2004)

2. 2. *The counter-images: Tribes, hordes and barbarians*

The Hungarian “cowboy” brings us to a second type of EU images. The first meaning of this metaphor roots in socialism, allegedly the Hungarians used to live an “uncivilized” life (they lived in villages, were alcoholic, destroyed the environment, etc.). This (self)-representation has a long tradition, not only in the Eastern but also in the Western half of Europe.¹³ The caricature in *Hócipő* and the cover of *Magyar Narancs* convey upon this image unambiguously. (Picture 4., 5.)

Both pictures reflect on the Western projections of “Easternness” with self-irony. Therefore, this visual representation narrates Hungary’s accession to the EU as self-colonization, in which the Hungarian people are shown as archaic natives.¹⁴ The European Union as a circus, the

¹³ See Todorova, Maria: *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997; Wolf, Larry: *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press, 1994.

¹⁴ See Kiossev, Alexander: The dark intimacy: maps, identities, acts of identification. In Bjelic, Dusan I. –Savic, Obrad (eds.): *Between Globalization and Fragmentation*.



Picture 4. „We’ve arrived!“
(*Magyar Narancs*, 29. April 2004.)



Picture 5. „The lion is ready to jump“
(*Hócipő*, – 1 Mai. 2004.)

accession as a scene in the circus, the Hungarian cowboy (the *csikós*) as a frightening lion criticize the long hesitation by Western Europe over the issues of EU-enlargement.

A version of this kind of self-representation offered by another caricature of the *Hócipő* portrays the economic potential and habits of the Hungarians. (Picture 6.)

2.3. An irredentist trip: Trianon-Europe

From the outset, the radical right-wing clearly rejected the accession ceremonies. Their version of the new European geopolitical map articulated their usual revisionism and irredentism and served to remind their readers of Trianon. Just as the Hungarian ruling elite did in 1921, the weekly *Demokrata* campaigned for their beliefs in 2004. This time, however, the enemy was the European Union rather than the Entente. (Picture 7., 8.)

Cambridge, 2002. 165–190; Melegh, Attila: *On the East/West Slope. Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Central and Eastern Europe*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2005.



Picture 6. “The Hungarian invasion” Copyright: Ferenc Sajdik
(*Hócipő*, 1. Mai 2004.)

This “map game” – i.e. the cartographic representations of “historic Hungary” – has had a long tradition in Hungarian national discourse. The map of so-called historic Hungary is a very popular icon for revisionists and can today be found not only in the booklets of right-wing populists but also on T-shirts, postcards, websites, etc. *Demokrata*’s agenda is unambiguously illustrated on its cover: the Hungarian EU-accession is a false territorial revision because Transylvania, Ruthenia and the Banat are still missing in Hungary’s map. Of course, the cover can also have a non-nationalistic meaning. Namely, it is unfair that EU did not consider Romania, Ukraine, Croatia and Serbia to become member states soon. However, the inconsistency between the state names (see „Románia“ = Romania, „Szerbia“ = Serbia und „Horvátország“ = Croatia) and the illustrated territories (Románia = exactly Transylvania, Szerbia and Horvátország = exactly the former South-Hungary; Mára-maros = exactly Ruthenia) are clearly dedicated to a revisionist message. The title’s cover “Outside and inside” draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the “whole” of Hungary was not admitted to the EU and that portions of the Hungarian population (i.e. Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries) remain outside of EU borders.



Picture 7. Rezső Vértés: *The Shadow of Trianon* (Hungarian National Museum, Archive of Historical Photographies, No. 96.171)



Picture 8. „Outside and inside“ (*Demokrata*, 1. Mai 2004.)

2.4. *The idols of the official accession campaign*

America versus Europe. The roots of the imaginations discussed above, stretch back to the political culture of the 19th century. Nevertheless, the official propaganda by the government chose other idols to celebrate the accession. In 2003, the government campaign began with Tony Curtis, an American film star with Hungarian descent. His Hungarian background is enigmatic: his family (of Jewish origin) emigrated to the United States from the former Czechoslovak Republic in the 1930s, today this region belongs to Ukraine; he cannot speak Hungarian. Curtis posed in the media in short trousers and a Texan hat to advertise the European Union for the Hungarians. The crux of the message is the following: in the past, you had to leave this country if you wanted to make a world-wide career, now Europe would be the continent of your dreams. However, no doubt about it, Tony Curtis made the impression of a foolish, old American tourist in the media...

The Hungarian beauty. The second master-idol of the official rituals during the accession was the Hungarian Queen of Beauty 2004, who



Picture 9. „Servus, Europe!“
(HVG, 29. April 2004.)

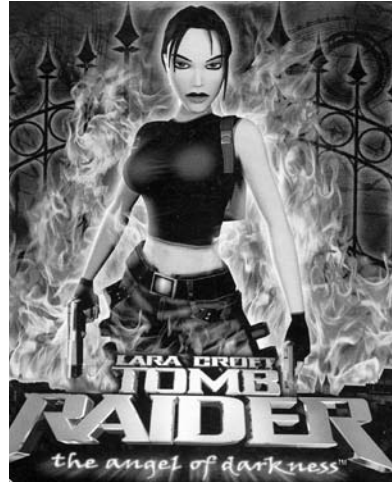
greeted us from the giant posters in the central places of the capital. The embodiment of Europe as the beauty is a commonplace used by German, French and British newspapers, too.¹⁵ (Picture 9.)

The icon of the beauty, which appeared not only in the weekly *168 Óra* (168 hours), but also in the official propaganda materials, lost its sacred historical and iconological meanings. From an icon to an idol, it became a profane personality, which Hungary should identify itself with as a new EU-member. The message “we are beautiful” produced a self-representation, as if Hungary “earned” the EU-membership by its beauty. This sexualized image based on the above-mentioned attitude of self-colonization, of the passive female body, serves to awaken the desire of the West to have her.

¹⁵ This image reflects the medieval icons of Europe. „*Europe: A Lady in a very rich Habit, of several Colours, sitting between two Cornucopias: the one full of all Sorts of Grain; holding a Temple in her right Hand, and with the Fore-finger of the left Hand, points at Scepters and Crowns; a Horse amongst Trophies and Arms; a Book, also, with an Owl on it, many Musical Instruments by Her, and a Palat for Limner with Pencils. All which shews it to be the principal Part of the World, for Religion, Arts and Arms.*“ See Ripa, Cesare (1603): *Iconologia*, Fig 185. <http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/Ripa/Images/ripa047a.htm>



Picture 10. *Culture and Hungary - our pART in Europe* (Ministry of Cultural Heritage, 2004. Graphic Design: Hanga Máthé)



Picture 11. *Lara Croft* (Demo CD, Core Design, Eidos, 2003.)

Conclusion

The covers and caricatures of the Hungarian newspapers during the period of the accession revived the old visual narratives on Europe very superficially and confusedly. One of the reasons could be a global feature of increasing the number of self-references in mass communication. But, a more important reason is the skeptical attitude of the Hungarian public towards the EU, which robbed them of the visual creativity. Another common characteristic of imagining Europe is ambiguity: all pictures show the emotions of insecurity and dissatisfaction with regard to whether or not Hungarians are “fit for Europe”. As a result of this, the accession has a mirror-effect: in the pictures the European Union is not to be seen, one finds self-portraits instead that stress Hungary’s *alterity*. The only visual novelty – one may regard this just with mixed feelings – is the widening of the discursive horizon toward the USA. It refers to the old-new question of loyalty as to which continent, which constellation of power Hungary should prefer? The unfortunate choice of an old American film star couldn’t answer this question yet...

Instead of offering a pessimistic conclusion, I would like end by showing a rather enigmatic cover picture. In the spring of 2004, the Hungarian Ministry of Cultural Heritage published a brochure entitled „Culture and Hungary – Our Part in Europe.“ Its content provides correct and often astute information about Hungarian culture. However, on its cover there are figures that strongly resemble cartoon or computer game characters (e.g. the Pokemon series or the Tomb Raider film). In the picture’s background, the pillars of the Hungarian National Museum are recognizable; the Hungarian tricolor is also invoked by the prominent display of green and red. While these symbols can be easily identified, they are not definitely linked to specific persons or cultural meanings. Are these, then, Hungary’s enigmatic European citizens who have yet to be represented?