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From a follower to a trendsetter: Hungary's post-Cold War identity and the West

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ABSTRACT

The article attempts to make sense of recent developments in Hungary's relationship with the EU and the US by explicating the logic behind the formation of its post-Cold War identity. The article's central theoretical argument derives from social identity theory (SIT) in social psychology which argues that social groups strive for positive distinctiveness and provides concrete hypotheses concerning the identity management strategies that groups use to enhance their relative position. Extrapolating the identity management techniques predicted by SIT to international politics, I suggest that states may enhance their relative standing by imitating more advanced states (strategy of social mobility), trying to displace the higher-ranked state (strategy of social competition), or finding a new arena in which to be superior (strategy of social creativity). The article argues that Orban's government post-2010 steps in domestic and foreign policy can be conceptualized as attempts to redefine Hungary's identity by moving away from the strategy of social mobility pursued since the end of communism towards the strategy of social creativity.

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1. Introduction

As multiple observers have noted, since Viktor Orban's center-right Fidesz party and its coalition partner, the Christian Democratic People's Party, returned to power in the spring of 2010, Hungarian-American and Hungarian-EU relations have become increasingly troubled if not openly acrimonious. Hungary has been accused of "democratic backsliding", disregard of the EU's norms, corruption, as well as aiding and abetting Russia's revisionist behavior in the former Soviet space. According to one recent analysis, the period since 2010 "will go down in the 21st century history of Hungary as the most turbulent and debated period of Hungarian foreign policy" in the quarter century since the end of communist rule (Gazdac and Kiss, 2015, p.108).

Tensions in relations between Hungary and the West are especially puzzling since the former has been widely acknowledged as the "ideal reform country": a steadfast follower of the West and one of the trailblazers in Eastern Europe's transition to markets and liberal democracy (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015, p. 90). Orban himself famously started his political career in 1989 by demanding the Soviet military withdrawal from Hungary at the rally celebrating the reburial of Imre Nagy, the hero of the 1956 anti-Soviet uprising. "If the country had a single iconic moment of liberation, it was Orban who delivered it" (Traub, 2015). Why did a quarter century after jubilation over its "return to Europe" Hungary emerge as the first EU country to distance itself from the post-1989 liberal consensus?

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social identity theory (SIT) in social psychology which argues that social groups strive for positive distinctiveness and provides concrete hypotheses concerning the identity management strategies that groups use to enhance their relative position.¹ Extrapolating the identity management techniques predicted by SIT to international politics, I suggest that states may enhance their relative standing by: imitating more advanced states (strategy of social mobility); trying to displace the higher-ranked state (strategy of social competition); or finding a new arena in which to be superior (strategy of social creativity).

The article argues that Orbán's government post-2010 steps in domestic and foreign policy can be conceptualized as attempts to redefine Hungary's identity by moving away from the strategy of social mobility pursued since the end of communism towards the strategy of social creativity. It highlights major factors leading to the disillusionment in the social mobility identity management strategy despite its achievements and then analyzes some of the key ingredients of the post-2010 social creativity efforts. The next section introduces SIT and a typology of strategies by which states can improve their international standing. Subsequent sections apply these theoretical insights to Hungary's search for international identity since the end of the Cold War as a plausibility probe.

2. Social identity theory and international politics

According to Social Identity Theory, a well-developed and experimentally tested theoretical framework in social psychology, people derive part of their identity from membership in various social groups—nation, ethnicity, religion, political party, gender, or occupation (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Hogg and Abrams, 1988).² Because membership reflects back on the self, people want their group to have a positively distinctive identity relative to other similar or slightly superior groups (Tajfel, 1978, pp. 63–64; Tajfel and Turner, 1979, p. 40; Turner, 2006, p. 359; Brown and Haeger, 1999).

When the reference group ranks higher on criteria which are important to the group's identity, it may decide to pursue an identity management strategy—social mobility, social competition, or social creativity. Groups may improve their status by emulating a higher status group, competing with it for dominance, or establishing their excellence in a different area that does not compete with the dominant group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Similarly, states may enhance their relative standing by imitating more advanced states, trying to compete with the higher-ranked state using the existing criteria of the assessment of status among states, or finding a new arena in which to be superior.

If the boundaries of higher-status groups are permeable, a lower-status group may conform to the norms of an elite group to gain acceptance, pursuing a strategy of *social mobility* (Tajfel, 1978, pp. 93–94; Ellemers et al., 1990). For states, this means adopting the values and practices of the dominant states. Since the end of the Cold War, Eastern and Central European states have adopted political reforms and capitalism to be admitted into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), organizations that symbolize identity as part of the West (Kelley, 2004). However, the problem with a social mobility strategy is that it goes against a tradition of diplomatic autonomy, risks losing distinctive identity, and implies a humiliating relationship of tutelage (Dore, 1975). To illustrate with an example popular in discussions of Russia's foreign policy objectives, Russia under Putin refused “to be a second Poland in Europe,” a rising regional power that successfully embraced a strategy of social mobility. It aspired to be nothing less than a great power staking its own unique position in global affairs and defending its distinct civilizational identity (Hill and Gaddy, 2015, pp. 326–328).

If elite group boundaries are impermeable, the lower-status group may strive for equal or superior status through a strategy of *social competition* (Ellemers, 1993). Social competition aims at besting the other state in established areas of superiority (Turner, 1975). In international relations this strategy is historically associated with the behavior of established or aspiring great powers. Indicators of social competition include arms racing, rivalry over spheres of influence, military displays, military intervention against a smaller power, or acting as a spoiler, preventing cooperative efforts by others from succeeding.

Social groups do not have to compete to attain higher status. In the third strategy explicated by SIT, social creativity, the lower-status group seeks positive distinctiveness “by redefining or altering the elements of the comparative situation” (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, p. 19). This may be done by reframing a negative characteristic as positive, or finding a new dimension on which their group is superior (Lemaine, 1974). To illustrate, China's nineteenth century “self-strengtheners” adopted the slogan of “Chinese learning as the essence, western learning for practical use (usually abbreviated as *ti-yong*),” suggesting that traditional Chinese culture had valuable features, even if the West had made advances in technology and military power (Lieberthal, 2004, pp. 24–26; Fewsmith, 2001, pp. 20–21). Elites in late developing countries often develop ideologies portraying how their traditional cultural values of spirituality, community, and justice are superior to Western rationalism, individualism, and materialism, exemplified by German romantic conservatism, nineteenth century Russian Slavophilism and the Eurasianism strand of Russian intellectual thought (Walicki, 1989, p. 166; McDaniel, 1996, pp. 24–25, 44; Shlapentokh, 2007). In a more recent example, defying the “End of History” thesis, the East Asian elites advanced the concept of “Asian values”—stressing that their societies are more harmonious, orderly, and communitarian than the liberal West (Zakaria, 1994).

A lower-status group may also identify an alternative dimension of comparison (Brown and Ross, 1982). Similarly, social creativity may also enable a state to achieve prestige on a different criterion for evaluation, such as a developmental model,

¹ For applications of social identity theory to international relations, see Mercer, 1995; Larson and Shevchenko, 2003, 2010, 2014a, 2014b; Clunan, 2009, 2014.

² For application of social identity theory to identity management strategies in international relations, see Larson and Shevchenko, 2003, 2010.

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