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The Asianization of national fantasies in Hungary: A critical analysis of political discourse

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Chris Moreh

University of Northumbria, UK

Abstract

This article presents a critical analysis of the Hungarian government's 'Asian' political discourse. It argues that in the wake of the economic recession, Hungary became more radical in its turn towards Asia, promoting a discourse that goes beyond economic relations and touches on sentiments of national identity and belonging. Via a discourse-historical analysis of three interrelated discursive events, the article shows how economic, cultural and racial discourses are reinforcing one another in building on the myth of cultural and racial affinity with Inner Asia and the Far East. This process is similar to the Eurasianist discourse in Russia and other ex-Soviet republics, and may have serious social and geopolitical repercussions.

Keywords

Asian Century, Asianization, discourse analysis, Hungary, national identity, political discourse, Turanism

The outlook on the global economy and cultural marketplace is arguably changing, a shift often described as 'Asianization' or the coming of an 'Asian Century', in which actors will have to renegotiate their 'place' in a new world order (Mahbubani, 2008). These concepts most commonly denote an altered *globalization* – either as *from above* expansion of 'Asian' soft power (Yang, 1997), or *from below* in the form of immigration and demographic change (Jayasuriya and Kee, 1999) – or the development of new *regional* identities (Funabashi, 1993; Oga, 2008). While the former two are truly global phenomena, for obvious geographical reasons the latter aspect has had little influence on 'western' countries, except maybe for Australia, where Asianization has become a

particularly contentious political topic (see Kenny, 2012), and Russia, due to its ‘Euro-Asian’ stretch (Laruelle, 2008).

This article analyses political discourses of ‘Asianization’ in Hungary, a country situated uneasily on the eastern fringes of ‘the West’ (Melegh, 2006). Like other countries in east-central Europe, Hungary has followed the burdensome path of a ‘return to Europe’ after the fall of the Iron Curtain, only to find itself amid the deepest crisis since the Second World War (*Spiegel*, 2010). Having focused primarily on European Union (EU) accession – which was finally achieved in 2004 – the Hungarian political class had remained oblivious to the rapid economic restructuring taking place in Asia (Tálas, 2008). In the past few years, however, as the combined outcome of the economic recession and political change, we are witnessing the emergence of an ‘Asian discourse’, which goes beyond mere economic considerations and touches on sentiments of national identity and belonging. In 2010 the Conservative–Christian Democratic FIDESZ-KDNP coalition has won a two-thirds supermajority providing them with unfettered legislative power (a result replicated in the recent 2014 elections). At the same time, the radical-nationalist Jobbik (Movement for a Better Hungary) became the third largest political power in the Parliament only seven years after being constituted as a party. Political rhetoric become highly critical of EU policies, and the government sought to renew economic relations with Russia, the Middle East, the Caucasus and China, in order to reduce its dependence on western financial institutions. These steps were presented as part of a wider ‘eastward opening’ policy, which was also supported by Jobbik, the party having seemingly overcome its initial Russo- and Sino-phobia, replacing it with a radicalizing Euroscepticism.

As I shall argue in the following, the discursive ‘Asianization’ of Hungary is more akin to the ‘culturalist’, ‘essentializing’ discourse of ‘Eurasianism’, with claims of belonging being formulated on cultural, ethnohistorical and biological considerations rather than on geographical desiderata (Laruelle, 2008). The ‘Asianized’ cultural geography is reduced in the meantime to the mythical spatiotemporal location of an assumed ‘ancestral homeland’. Before analysing this distinctive political discourse, I will briefly discuss the ontological and historical grounding of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ necessary for the interpretation of the discursive events I later describe.

At home in Asia: a national ontology of ‘homeland’

Debates regarding the country’s place in the world have a long tradition in Hungary. In a comprehensive review of the different propositions, Melegh (2006) puts forward his own argument that a major discursive shift occurred in the early 1980s, from a bipolar discourse of rival modernities to a new/old ‘qualitative-regional schema’ envisaging an East–West civilizational slope. As he argues, the ‘reinvention’ of this hitherto suppressed discourse has been instrumental in the ‘reintegration of centrally planned socialist economies and societies into a hierarchically organized world economy’ (Melegh, 2006: 189). The consolidation of this civilizational hierarchy ascending westwards, along which societies place one another and compete for higher positions, has also shaped the process of EU integration in which Hungary has been a regional exemplar.

This proposed model, however, reflects the logic of a unipolar world, increasingly seen as being replaced by a truly multipolar world system, in which the ‘West’ loses ground and the civilizational slope transmutes into an undulating, hummocky

hierarchical terrain. This view is upheld by academic economic advisers to the Prime Minister's Office, and, for instance according to Németh (2011), the 2008–9 recession should not be seen as a 'global crisis', but 'rather a crisis of western values, or defined more broadly, of the western system' (Németh, 2011: 16). Under such circumstances, political discourse is shifting again, driven by the 'rediscovery' of yet another new/old theory that would place Hungary right at the heart of the new system, in an 'ethical' home untainted by the West's 'crisis of values'.

Comparable processes are undergoing more widely, and in this article I will often draw parallels with Russian Eurasianism, which similarly maintains that 'Russia must "unlearn the West" and reject the imperialism of European identity' (Laruelle, 2008: 1). Moreover, they both seem to be rooted in the 19th-century ideology of Turanism, which requires some specification (cf. Laruelle, 2004).

The term 'Turan' or 'Turanian' was introduced as a linguistic concept in the 1860s by German linguist Max Müller, but it soon reacquired its putative original geographical and ethnonymic Sanskrit meaning, denoting the Central-Asian territories north of Iran, inhabited by nomadic tribes hostile to the Persians (Szendrei, 2010).¹ By the end of the century the concept had entered into widespread use, gaining additional racial overtones in the influential work of Zsolt Beöthy (2010 [1896]). In the first half of the past century Turanism became part of the extreme right's official rhetoric, falling into disrepute after the Second World War as a Nazi ideology, and being evicted from popular knowledge during socialism. It was only after the regime change that elements of Turanic thought were revived in certain extreme-right circles (Paksa, 2012).

The best way to conceive of Turanism old and new is as a 'search' for the 'ancestral homeland' (*őshaza*). During the 19th century the pursuit was literal, driving many explorers to eastern countries and shaping several branches of Hungarian 'oriental studies', but in more general terms it represents a mythopoeic process unifying the ontological and historical dimensions of 'home'. To describe this process it is useful to follow Heidegger's differentiation between *inhabiting* – the mere utilitarian act of taking shelter in a place – and *dwelling* – or 'the manner in which mortals *are* on the earth' (Heidegger, 1971: 146, italics added). In this latter sense, 'home' is more than a place, it is 'an emotionally based and meaningful relationship ... between people and their environment' (Dovey, 1985: 33). Thus, according to Dovey (1985: 34) 'being at home is a mode of being whereby we are oriented within a spatial, temporal, and sociocultural order that we understand'.

It is through this 'emotional relationship' and comprehension that the ontology of 'home' serves as basis for a national identity. The mythical connection with an ancestral homeland is a recurring element of national fantasies, be it either in the form of a search for the Hungarian *őshaza*, the German *Heimat*, as sung by Hölderlin, or the Jewish longing for the ancient *moledet* (Sand, 2012). What unifies these very different conceptions is their 'essentialist', non-territorial character. As Beistegui (1998) has discovered, even in Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin 'what takes place is the abandonment of the terrain of the territory and of its logic of territorialization in favour of a dwelling that is essentially homeless' (Beistegui, 1998: 178). It is this form of national 'dwelling' which brings together the ontological and the historical aspects of 'home' in the perpetual search for the 'ancestral homeland', a 'historical-destinal' (*geschichtlich*) arch between a mythical past and a desired future (Beistegui, 1998).

I shall now turn to the exposition of the ‘discursive construction of national identity’ (Wodak et al., 2009) via the political discourse of ‘Asianization’, a manifestation of the underlying national ontology of ‘homeland’, by first providing a definition of ‘discourse’.

The ‘Asian discourse’

Following Wodak (2001), I define ‘discourse’ as ‘a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts, which manifest themselves within and across the social fields of action as thematically interrelated semiotic, oral or written tokens’ (Wodak, 2001: 66). Along these lines, I consider the ‘Asian discourse’ to be constituted by thematically interrelated ‘discursive events’, which activate and reinforce specific knowledge. What makes the chosen examples ‘discursive events’ instead of mere ‘linguistic acts’ is the heavy media emphasis they have received (see Jäger, 2001).

The ensuing analysis centres on three discursive events that took place during the period 2010–12: two of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s speeches, one on 5 November 2010, the second on 26 July 2012, and a talk given by then National Economy Minister György Matolcsy on 16 November 2012. These discrete events can be read as one sequence in a wider discourse promoting the necessity to open towards Asia, not only for economic reasons, but also because of a supposed cultural and racial affinity. In their media representation, the three discursive events have been reduced to certain themes (clichés), and I have also identified these themes as pertaining to different – economic, cultural and racial – sub-discourses. I shall contextualize these discourses *inter-textually* – relating them to other ‘texts’ – *extra-linguistically* – describing other connecting events – and *historically* – providing the background knowledge for their interpretation.²

The ‘eastward opening’: economic discourse

The theme dominating the ‘Asian discourse’ is that of ‘eastward opening’. The event giving it prominence was a speech delivered by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on 5 November 2010 at the Hungarian Permanent Conference (MÁÉRT), an official meeting between the Hungarian government and leaders of minority Hungarian political organizations abroad. In this speech, the PM presented his views on the economic rise of India and China, creating a ‘completely new situation for the whole of western civilization’, of which the Hungarian government should be aware when designing its foreign policy:

It does not result from this that anyone would want to reconsider the old, ancient Hungarian wish to be part of the western world, the western civilization, that it is there where we want to fit in; it only means that this fact will appear from now on in a different system of relations than before. Figuratively, or simplistically speaking, we are sailing under western flag, but an eastern wind blows in the world economy. And the sailor, who does not take notice of the wind he should turn his sail according to, will probably doom himself and his cargo to wreck. (Orbán, 2010c: para. 8)³

The speech was interpreted by commentators as proposing a ‘realistic foreign policy’, contrary to one ‘driven by ideology’ (MTI, 2010). The heavy emphasis on being part of the ‘western world’ placed the symbolic imagery of the turbulent sea exclusively in the domain of economics, as a graphic argument for the need to strengthen economic and trade relations with rapidly developing Asian countries in line with policy agendas adopted by other European governments.

The expression used in the speech was ‘eastern wind’ (*keleti szél*), and only following its dispersion in media rhetoric did ‘eastward opening’ (*keleti nyitás*) become part of the official governmental discourse. The ‘eastern wind’, however, had been present in the Prime Minister’s symbolism for some time. On 30 November 2009, while in opposition, Viktor Orbán had given a very similar speech on the occasion of his party officially establishing relations with the Communist Party of China. He had then said:

Hungary’s place on the world map is obvious: we are NATO members, and members of the European Union. This means that we are sailing under western flag, but today an eastern wind blows in the world economy. We need to turn our sail accordingly. (FIDESZ, 2009)

This speech section, despite being almost identical with the one presented before, has a stronger pragmatic undertone due to its context. The later speech was delivered only two months before Hungary officially took over the presidency of the EU in the first half of 2011, and did not reflect the rhetorical changes since this earlier talk.

During the summer of 2010 the Prime Minister often expressed his views on the imminent demise of ‘western capitalism’. His thoughts were put forward most comprehensively during his annual lecture at the *Bálványos* Summer Free University and Student Camp:

The situation is that, as the consequence of the capitalist deformation of the past 2—30 years, regions other than Europe have emerged at a tempestuous pace, because they adhered to certain *values*. Such are China and India, and a few more. Europe has to face a situation in which it will return ... so the western world, our civilization will return on the economic map of the world, to the position it occupied 150 years ago.[...] This is seemingly just an economic question, but I have never seen a restructuring in the world history – neither have I read of any – where a change in economic power relations of such a magnitude would not be followed by the *political and military restructuring* of the world. (Orbán, 2010a: para. 7, italics added)

The core idea of the lecture was the concept of ‘value’, the precise meaning of which remains undisclosed. The argument mirrors Németh’s (2011: 16) views regarding the ‘crisis of western values’ quoted earlier, and it is also reminiscent of the civilizational claims of Eurasianism (Laruelle, 2008).

A ‘value’-oriented new economic thinking, as promoted in this talk, would become the cornerstone of the government’s self-described ‘unorthodox economic policy’ encompassing the ‘eastward opening’. More problematic than the ‘unorthodox’ economic vision, however, is the implication of a possible ‘political and military’ policy restructuring, which can be explicated in the context of the cultural discourse as discussed in the next section.

First, I propose to cross-check the meaning of ‘value’ inter-textually. On 10 June, five weeks before his lecture, the Prime Minister had made a visit to the Suzuki factory in Esztergom, occasioned by the launch of the new Swift model, and he there addressed Mr Suzuki, thanking him for his company’s loyalty:

Our clothes are slightly dingy, we are a little more disorganized, we have let ourselves go a bit in the past eight years, there are signs of decadence here and there, but we believed in the *values* on which your world is built, in honour, in diligence, in responsibility and in respect, and we can prove it. We, as members of the European Union, sail under western flag, *but as you also know*, we are *an eastern nation*, and for us, just as for you, the principal commandment is that every agreement has to be kept. (Orbán, 2010b, italics added)

The 'values' ascribed to Japan are 'honour', 'diligence', 'responsibility' and 'respect', and are presented as also reflecting Hungarian attributes. The maritime metaphor reappears here in a different construction: read co-textually, the repeatedly emphasized values are contrasted to those of the EU, 'but' attributed to Hungary on the basis of a 'known' eastern origin. From an intertextual viewpoint we see how 'eastern' origin takes the place of the 'eastern wind' and the necessity of an appropriate rotation of the sail. Here, a specific 'knowledge' is invoked, which is presumed to be shared by the audience.⁴ This idea, however, takes us to another sub-discourse, one emphasizing not an economic rationale but a cultural one.

The 'half-Asian nation': political and cultural discourse

The Prime Minister's first visits abroad were to China and Russia, while Kazakhstan, Georgia and Azerbaijan were later also included in the economic policy of 'eastward opening' (Rácz, 2012). The major discursive event that brought a cultural discourse to surface was Prime Minister Orbán's speech at the National Association of Entrepreneurs and Employers (VOSZ) on 26 July 2012:

Since we are among ourselves: according to my philosophy and conception, being united is not a matter of will; being united is a matter of power [force]. The first condition of unification is power. If there is power, there is union. If there is no power, only faction, there isn't any unification either. This might not be true for every culture; there may be countries where things do not work like this, say, with the Scandinavians, I could imagine. But with such half-Asian progenies like us, it is definitely the case. (Orbán, 2012: para. 24)

This opposition media has given an offensive construction to this discursive event based on two key ideas: one is concerned with the message involved in the concept of 'power', the second relates to the 'half-Asian' origin of the Hungarian nation. The speech was especially controversial because it expanded the economic meaning of the 'eastward opening' to political and cultural terrain, and for being ambiguous regarding the future of western liberal democracy. Earlier in the speech, in comparing the elections of 2010 with the regime change of 1990, the Prime Minister stated:

Back then we had to build up new political and economic systems. Now, for the time being, we do not need to build up new political systems, but new economic systems have to be built in central Europe, and let us hope God will protect us from having to conceive other types of political systems besides democracy, and having to introduce them for the sake of economic survival. (Orbán, 2012: para. 2)

While the message conveyed seems far from adulatory vis-à-vis Asia, reiterating the negative topos of the civilizational slope (Melegh, 2006), it is nevertheless not opposing the views expressed earlier on eastern 'values', but complementary to them. Intertextually, the conclusion drawn about the necessity of 'power' (or force) to unite and lead a 'half-Asian' nation, shows the same deterministic conviction as the acceptance of eastern 'values' due to having an 'eastern origin'. As such, it resembles the Eurasianist idea 'that culture constrains the liberty of the individual: Individuals must respect the essence of their national group (often expressed in an ethnicist terminology), not try to oppose it' (Laruelle, 2008: 12).

The discursive event has been kept alive for many weeks following the speech, due to other extra-linguistic events that were discursively constructed in relation to it. The pre-eminent one was the official visit to the Parliament of the representatives of several

Asian ‘tribes’ taking part in a ‘tribal meeting’ (*Kurultáj*, in Turkic languages) in Hungary. The *Kurultáj* is a festival celebrating the ‘equestrian-nomadic’ culture of nations ‘sharing a Hun-Turkic consciousness’, and invoking a Turanian vision of the origin of the Hungarians (kurultaj.hu). The first *Kurultáj* was held in 2007 in Kazakhstan, while in the following year the ‘tribal meeting’ was organized in Hungary, and has been held biennially ever since. In 2012, 24 tribes from 13 regions were present at the festival and received in the Parliament by government officials.⁵ As András Zsolt Bíró, chair of the Hungarian-Turan Foundation and main organizer of the *Kurultáj* stated at the event, ‘almost all nations sharing a Hun and Turk consciousness have sent their representatives. Hungary can become the centre of spiritual unification’ (Hrečka, 2012). It is against this extra-linguistic background that the ‘half-Asian nation’ speech has been reinterpreted and disputed. The fact that the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly officially received the organizers and participants at the Parliament was seen as a formal acceptance of Turanism, a theory that remains repudiated by the Academy of Sciences.

Since the great political success of the radical-nationalist Jobbik, the position of Turanism seems to be changing, and Turanists are able to make their voices heard more widely. As it happens, the ‘anthropologist and human biologist’ András Zsolt Bíró is himself maintaining close relations with the radical party, and received its ‘Pongrátz Gergely Cross of Merit’ in January 2013 for his scientific research kindling racial imaginaries (Jobbik, 2013).

The ‘red dot’: ethnic and racial discourse

The revival of Turanism and its apparent dispersion in Hungarian political and public discourse was aided by developments in the field of genetics. Although it has had a racial undertone ever since Beöthy’s (2010 [1896]) book, this was an unscientific romantic racism dominant in the first half of the 20th century. The latest technological advances, however, have allowed probing the evidence previously supported only by linguistic and ethnographic data. The research led by András Zsolt Bíró centred on ethnographic and genetic data collection in a Kazakhstani tribe called Madjars. The scientific community has been aware of the existence of Madjars and their cultural similarities with Magyars (Hungarians) since 1965, but thorough research could only be undertaken in 2006. Results of the genetic tests have been published in 2009 in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* (Bíró et al., 2009), and have since become the primary evidence for the genetic affinity between the two peoples. According to the article:

Genetic distances based on haplogroup frequencies were used to compare the Madjars with 37 other populations and showed that they were closest to the Hungarian population rather than their geographical neighbors. Although this finding could result from chance, it is striking and suggests that there could have been genetic contact between the ancestors of the Madjars and Magyars, and thus that modern Hungarians may trace their ancestry to Central Asia, instead of the Eastern Uralic region as previously thought. (Bíró et al., 2009: 305)

Despite the careful wording of the paper, its propositions are usually presented as indisputable proof.

As mentioned earlier, besides his research Bíró is also involved in the institutionalization of Turanism and the organization of *Kurultáj*, which has served as the extra-linguistic context to the interpretation of the ‘cultural discourse’ as exemplified by the Prime Minister’s speech on 26 July 2012. On 16 November that same year, another

discursive event has caused controversy, this time a talk given by the National Economy Minister György Matolcsy at a small meeting in a provincial town. The talk aimed to showcase the results of the ‘unorthodox’ economic policies of the previous two years. Following the talk, in reaction to a question from the audience, the minister defended the PM’s views regarding the ‘half-Asian’ provenience of the Hungarians:

We are proud of having come from Asia. On the bottom of our infants, in about 30 out of 100 cases, for six weeks there is a *small red dot*, just like in the case of Japanese babies. I have been told about this by Japanese scientists, I didn’t know before.[...] My point in mentioning this is just that sometimes others know more about us than we do. While talking with Chinese delegations many times a week, they all begin their talks saying that, well yes, between us there is some deep, deep, deep... maybe even *kinship*. (Matolcsy, 2012, italics added)

While the speech was presented satirically in the media, and offensively turned into a discursive event as part of the ‘Asian discourse’, the context of the comment has to be taken into consideration. As an unscripted and unplanned reaction to an attendee’s question, it is a radically different genre than the speeches I have previously presented. On the other hand, the extemporaneity of the remark reflects a coherent and substantiated opinion rather than a discursive tool for achieving a certain aim. Going beyond the satirical interpretation of the minister’s comment, we can perceive a clear sign of the penetration of the ‘Asian discourse’ into popular cognition, and its connections with the ethnic and racial propositions of Turanism become obvious in the detection of *congenital dermal melanocytosis* (or colloquially ‘Mongolian spot’) as a shared biological trait between the Hungarians and other Asian nations.

Another aspect of the discourse worth highlighting is the conviction that ‘sometimes others know more about us than we do’. This is important, as it denotes the recognition of ‘eastern’ epistemes, a prerequisite for a multipolar worldview. The roots of such epistemic recognition had already appeared, notably, in the writings of academic researchers responsible for developing the previous government’s ‘China strategy’. For example, Tálas (2008) described how, at the turn of the 20th century:

there was a widespread belief in China that the Hungarians, of Inner Asian origin and whose ancestors had been living on the north-western borderlands of today’s China at the feet of the Altai and Tien Shan mountains some 2000 years ago, during the Han dynasty, are in fact the westernmost located and most civilized representatives of the ‘yellow race’. (2008: 200)

We have previously seen how the acknowledgement of such a belief was adopted for legitimizing purposes by Prime Minister Orbán when addressing Mr Suzuki (‘as *you also know*, we are an eastern nation’), and the question of whether this recognition could penetrate popular consciousness more deeply is thus a valid one.

Hungary’s ‘home’ in Asia: marginal or mainstream?

By identifying and analysing the three sub-discourses I have presented above, we were able to explore the depth of the political discourse of Asianization in Hungary. As we have seen, the ‘realistic foreign policy’ of ‘eastward opening’ relies on the myth of cultural and racial affinity with Inner Asia and the Far East. Like the doctrine of Eurasianism, the ‘Asian discourse’ maintains a ‘belief in a country’s specifically *Eurasian* or *Asian* national essence’ (Laruelle, 2008: 8). The greatest difference between the two is that while Russia can build on its ‘undeniable geographic reality’, Hungary must resort to the mythopoeic fantasy of the Turanic ‘ancestral homeland’.

Today, the idea of Turan is as ill-defined as it has always been, and its proponents can share very different views as to how broadly it should be interpreted (see note 1). These differences can lead to disagreements as to whether Hungary should foster relations with China or rather raise its voice in support of Uyghur and Tibetan ‘relatives’. Despite such debates, the general perception of an ‘eastern origin’ is thought to advance the policy of ‘eastward opening’, and it has apparently influenced political discourse, as we have seen especially in the two 2012 discursive events. The idea, however, has appeared earlier in the conservative media, a good example being a television programme broadcast on 12 November 2010, few days after the Prime Minister’s ‘eastern wind’ speech and his visit to China (Világ-panoráma, 2010). Here, the guest orientalist Róbert Cey-Bert approved of the Prime Minister’s ‘maritime metaphor’, adding that ‘it is positive that the captain knows that eastern winds are blowing, but in order for us to have enough energy to turn the sail, we have to make use of our internal energies, the energies stemming from our eastern origins’. According to Cey-Bert the ‘eastern roots’ are present in the Hungarians’ ‘collective subconscious’, and the consolidating Asian discourse has the potential of bringing it to the surface.

The aim of this article was to analyse ‘political’ discourse, but the question we must raise here, and seek to answer in any further inquiry, just as Laruelle (2008) did in her study on Eurasianism, is whether the Asian discourse has penetrated social cognition, whether it is becoming mainstream or remains marginal in popular knowledge. It is probably useful, in this respect, to see the interplay between ‘knowledge’ and ‘discourse’ in more interactive terms, as discourse may not only rely on ‘knowledge’ for its own legitimization, but can itself create or reinforce the knowledge base that would later provide it with legitimacy, by adopting a ‘transformative strategy’ (Wodak 2001: 71).

As Laruelle (2008: 9) concludes, Eurasianism ‘is not a marginal phenomenon in any sense’, and her assessment that the doctrine ‘is contributing to the diffusion of a strictly ethnic and culturalist justification for the feeling of failure’ (2008: 10) again accurately describes the discourse analysed in this article. The ‘failure’ lies in both cases in the low positioning on the ‘East–West civilizational slope’, and essentializing discourses serve as tools for the rejection of a unipolar world system (see Melegh, 2006).

The diffusion of Turanic origin theories underlying the ‘Asian discourse’ takes place primarily through the activity of intellectuals at the fringes of mainstream academia, who nevertheless adopt different strategies ‘to gain academic legitimacy’ (Laruelle, 2008: 9). This process of legitimization takes place not only through the colonization of the official political discourse but also through publications – often in prestigious international journals, as we have seen in the case of Bíró et al. (2009) – and access to influential media outlets. The long-held cause of the radical-nationalist Jobbik party to change the official position of the Academy of Sciences on the question of the Hungarian ‘ancestral homeland’, together with its representation in textbooks, may also gain momentum with the party’s increasing political influence (Jobbik, 2009).

Concluding remarks

This article discussed several ‘discursive events’ representative of a wider ‘Asian’ political discourse in Hungary. I have shown how this discourse relies on older national imaginaries and ethnic origin theories, arguing that the concept of ‘home’ bears a special significance in Hungary’s negotiation of its place in an emerging new world order

dominated by Asia. As Mathews (2000: 192) observes, ‘one’s home is where in the world one most truly belongs’, and this ‘belonging’ can be ‘negotiated’ on different premises. For East Asian countries, such grounding for a new regional identity formation – similarly fuelled by the ‘Asian miracle’ of the early 1990s – has been a geographical one (Funabashi, 1993). ‘Geographic realities’ also play a role in Eurasianist propositions in Russia and other ex-Soviet republics, although there it is a cultural element that makes adherents feel ‘at home in Asia’ (Laruelle, 2008: 46). As I have argued, Hungary compensates for its geographical remoteness through the mythopoeic vision of the ‘ancestral homeland’ and an uninterrupted cultural and racial continuity with this Asian past.

While the discursive similarity between the Hungarian ‘Asian discourse’ and Eurasianism is rather striking, from a geopolitical perspective it raises the question of the grander political significance this connection may gain. There is evidence that the diffusion of Eurasianism is helping to establish an ‘ideological balance’ in the Russo-Turkish world: ‘the implication is that Russia and Turkey are no longer competing for the mythical territory of Inner Asia – which both Eurasianists and pan-Turkists claim as their people’s ancestral homeland – but are Eurasian allies’ (Laruelle, 2008: 171). Building on the emerging ‘Asian discourse’ and a dissatisfaction with European politics, Hungary may wish to present itself as a new strategic partner to this alliance, as instrumental to the cause of transforming ‘their status as Europe’s “periphery” into an identity-building and political framework that would allow them to triumph over the West’ (Laruelle, 2008: 171). This issue has indeed gained significance with the latest controversy around a Jobbik MEP who has been accused of spying for Russia (Orenstein and Krekó, 2014), and it is likely to remain topical in the years to come.

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Notes

1. In popular conceptions the Turan stretched to include all the territories supposedly inhabited by kin-nations. In the strictest usage, it referred to Altaic-Uralian peoples like the Finns, Estonians, Turks, Mongols, Japanese or Koreans. More inclusive definitions incorporated the Chinese, the Tibetans and the Indians, and, according to the most extreme vision, such ancient empires as the Sumerian, Aryan, Iranian, Scythian, Hittite, Assyrian or Etruscan empires (Paksa, 2012: 33).
2. In doing so I follow Wodak (2001: 67), who distinguishes between four levels of context: the ‘co-text’ inherent in the structure of a text or language, the ‘intertextual and interdiscursive’ context, the ‘extra-linguistic’ one relating to social and institutional frames of reference, and the ‘broader socio-political and historical contexts’.
3. All speech texts are available in Hungarian; the English excerpts presented in this article are the author’s translations.
4. For a critical discourse analytic interpretation of ‘knowledge’ in terms of ‘social cognition’, see van Dijk (2003).
5. The nations represented included Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Bashkiria, Tatarstan, Dagestan, Yakutia, Japan and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

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Author biography

Chris Moreh is a PhD candidate in social sciences at Northumbria University (UK). His wide-ranging research interests and experience include international migration, discourse analysis, nationalism, transnational citizenship, gentrification, and the ethnography of Japan. He has published in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, and is author of *Alcaláí Románok. Migráció és társadalmi differenciálódás* (L'Harmattan, 2014).