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Evolving Hungarian-American Academic Relations

Chistopher Ball

Abstract: This article is a retrospective of the last thirty years of US-Hungarian relations with special focus on university relations. I do this by telling my story of moving to Hungary in 1994, then building new American-Hungarian academic programs over the last 20 years. I discuss the successes and struggles of each period as well as the particular challenges today. I conclude with thoughts on a path forward and argue that we need exchange programs and partnerships between our countries more today than ever. This is a written version of my keynote address given at the AHEA 2023 Annual Conference.

***Keywords**: US Hungarian Relations, cultural diplomacy*

Biography: Christopher Ball is Associate Professor of Economics in the College of Arts and Sciences at Quinnipiac University, Hamden, CT. He is the inaugural faculty chair of the Central European Institute, the István Széchenyi Chair in International Economics, a permanent, endowed faculty position. The position was established in September 2008. Ball worked in Budapest, Hungary, from 1994–98 at the Hungarian Atlantic Council and as a fellow for the Institute for Current World Affairs. In 2003, he was hired by Quinnipiac as an assistant professor of economics in the School of Business. Building on his unique connections in Hungary, Ball launched a foreign lecture series in the business school bringing notable individuals from Hungary to speak at Quinnipiac. In 2008, he became the first endowed chair at Quinnipiac and began focusing on building programs with the Central European region. In 2011, he established CEENET Inc., which is a private association of professionals in Connecticut with Central European connections who promote bilateral business and diplomatic relations between Connecticut and Central Europe. In 2013, he was inaugurated as the Hungarian Honorary Consul for Connecticut. He continues to serve in that role, and the Hungarian Honorary Consulate is housed at the Central European Institute. In addition, Ball served as executive vice president of Light Sources Inc., a multinational manufacturer headquartered in Orange, Connecticut, and currently manages his private consulting business. Christopher.Ball@quinnipiac.edu

Background and Overview

The year 2024 marks exactly thirty years since I moved to Hungary in August 1994. When I boarded my plane in Huntsville, Alabama, I thought I'd be in Hungary for one year, get some international internship experience in my field of economics, then return to the United States in 1995 to pursue a PhD in economics. It wasn't until 1998 that I returned to pursue my PhD, but by then my perspective and interests had changed.

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As an American with no prior Hungarian connections, I have become a lifelong advocate of connecting Hungarian people[1] with Americans. I now speak Hungarian, have a Székely-Hungarian wife, and my children speak Hungarian. At Quinnipiac University, I founded programs around, raised funds for, and now hold an endowed chair in economics named after "The Greatest Hungarian" and Hungary's great economist: István Széchenyi. The programs around the chair serve as bridges to bring Hungarians to the United States and Americans to Hungary. The programs blossomed over the years and grew into the Central European Institute (CEI),[2] which has a similar endowed chair with programs for Poland. Finally, since 2013, I have also served as the Honorary Hungarian Consul to the State of Connecticut.

In spring 2023, the American Hungarian Educators Association (AHEA) was gracious enough to invite me as a keynote speaker for their annual conference. I took that opportunity to step back a bit and take a broader look at the thirty years I have been working on US-Hungarian relations, and, for lack of a better phrase, with special emphasis on university relations. This article is a summary of that talk.

US-Hungarian relations do not take place in a vacuum. They take place in the ever-evolving context of political relations between the US and Hungary. Therefore, I break the subject into ten-year periods, starting with the 1990s and continuing to today. Interestingly enough, there is a sort of 'mood of the time' for each of those periods, and I believe it is helpful to keep that in mind when thinking about both the past and where things might or should go in the future.

The 1990s: Hungary Re-Joins the West

When the Soviet Union collapsed and the nations of Central Europe were once again free, there was a sense of optimism on both sides of the Atlantic. Americans talked about *The End of History*, turning the title of Francis Fukuyama's 1992 book into a commonly used phrase to refer to the end of the Soviet Union, which was seen as an aberration, an almost counter-natural artifice in the organic flow of history. The artificial division of East from West was truly left behind in the ash heap of history, and we could all once again be one big, happy trans-Atlantic, Western community of nations with a shared history, shared values, and a shared culture.

The mood in Hungary at the time was also one of jubilation. The hot topic in Hungary in the early to mid-1990s was whether Hungary should (re)join the West or choose its own, so-called "third path." By the mid- to late-1990s, opinions had coalesced around (re)joining the West, improving trans-Atlantic relations, and seeing Hungary return to its place as a Western European nation.

The US encouraged this, and there was bipartisan support for efforts to aid the transitioning countries with their (re)emerging democracies. Public, pseudo-public, and private money flowed in to fund mostly American- and German-led organizations to promote the development of civil society in Hungary, all aiming to set the foundations for democracy after communism in one form or another.

[1] By Hungarian people, I generally mean those individuals identifying as Hungarian and living today in historic Greater Hungary.

[2] Information on the endowed chair and the CEI can be found here: www.qu.edu/cei.

As a side note, I used "re" intentionally because there was, even then, an odd disconnect, at least between the typical American and typical Hungarian view. Americans saw the defeat of the Soviet Union and the collapse of communism as the liberation of a region that needed to be brought into the alliance of Western nations. Hungarians, however, always pointed out that they were already a Western Christian nation before America even existed, and therefore the Hungarian people were not joining the Western nations, they were returning to them like a rightful heir returning home to claim family land. The Soviet division had been an artificial one. Post-communism was hence the return to the natural order of things, albeit a post-World War version of it.

This period was characterized by funds flowing in from every direction to support pro-US-Hungary projects on every level. Hungarians received grants to go to the US, to bring Americans to Hungary, and, generally, to establish their own civic organizations. Americans came in droves for conferences, study tours, and the like. I was personally involved in Eötvös Loránd University's American Studies Program at the time. My wife worked at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University's legal philosophy department, organizing international conferences in Hungary with academics who were pouring in regularly from across Europe. It was an exciting time.

This was the period when the United States was perhaps at the pinnacle of its being seen by Hungarians as Reagan's proverbial "shining city on a hill." Western Europe was looked up economically, politically, and – at least partially – culturally as well. The US and Western Europe were happy to welcome the Hungarians (back) into the fold.

I was not running academic programs at the time. I was working at the Hungarian Atlantic Council[3] on Hungary's accession to NATO with many of the leaders from the Antall Government and with a board including many future political leaders like Viktor Orbán and others. It afforded me the chance to see a Hungarian perspective while also attending international conferences and working with the US Embassy, which provided an American and international perspective. There were differences to be sure, but, for the most part, everyone was rowing the boat in the same direction, so to speak.

By the end of the 1990s, the luster was fading. The Americans seemed to feel that "The West" had won in 1989/90, took its victory lap into the mid-1990s, and by the end of the 1990s saw the region more as "been there, done that." The money dried up for the American civic organizations in Hungary, and those ex-pats went home.

Germany's East-West reunification was also showing that it was going to be a harder and longer road forward than anyone expected. Ethnic war broke out in Yugoslavia. Americans were fighting among themselves and trying to impeach a president over his less-than-illustrious behavior in the White House. A 1997 Asian economic crisis was calling into question the

[3] To complete my timeline, I worked at the Atlantic Council until summer 1996, then received a two-year Crane Fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs (ICWA) which allowed me to travel, explore, and write about the region. My topic was "Local Economic Development in Greater Hungary." I was interested in how the different communist regimes affected local Hungarian communities and economies in the various neighboring countries. Anyone interested can find my ICWA newsletters from that period here: https://www.icwa.org/christopher-p-ball-newsletters/.

Western/Washington consensus on capitalism and democracy. Yeltsin was out, and a new guy named Putin was stepping up in 1999. And we all seemed most concerned with the impending doom called “Y2K.” Attention was simply focused elsewhere. The trans-Atlantic reunion’s honeymoon was over.

The 2000s: Hungary Settles in Europe

I returned to the United States in July 1998 to pursue a PhD in economics at Texas A&M University. In 2003, I was hired as an assistant professor of economics at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut.

Hungary, in the meantime, had joined NATO in 1999 and was on course to join the European Union. US-Hungarian relations were still positive, and both the Hungarians and Americans seemed to believe that a democratic Hungary was now standing on its own, no longer “in transition.”

Quinnipiac had traditionally been a small regional university with ambitions to be nationally and eventually internationally recognized. I was mainly just looking for a tenure-track job, but during all my interviews I mentioned that I had this “odd relationship with Hungary” and would like to pursue it further. Most universities said, “Maybe after tenure, you could take a group of students overseas or something.” At Quinnipiac, the professors replied, “I can’t promise anything, but if you’re willing to do the work and it’s good for students, Quinnipiac would likely support it.” I have been very blessed over the years that Quinnipiac has indeed proved to be very fertile ground for building new, international programs.

In 2005, I launched an international speaker series at Quinnipiac, which I used to bring over many of the people I knew from my Atlantic Council days in Hungary. This brought both international exposure to Quinnipiac and forged connections between Quinnipiac and the Hungarian community in Connecticut.

My initial goal was simply to raise funds for a scholarship program to bring young students from the Székelyföld (Szeklerland) area in Romania to Quinnipiac. Quinnipiac’s goal, however, was to endow academic chairs at the university. In 2007, we struck a deal. A member of the Hungarian community agreed to endow a chair at Quinnipiac, but one that would oversee scholarships and programs with Hungary rather than research a specific topic, as is typical of endowed chairs at other universities. The endowment would finance the chair’s salary and an operating budget. The university would finance two scholarships a year. My first scholar, by the way, did come from Székelyföld, and, over the years, probably thirty percent have come from Hungarians living beyond Hungary’s current borders. That is the same arrangement we have today, except that today the university only finances one scholarship per year.

In 2007/08, we publicly launched Quinnipiac University’s first endowed academic chair, the István Széchenyi Chair in International Economics. The name was chosen to keep the donor’s name anonymous and to be a name all Hungarians would recognize. The mission of our

scholarships was to bring young Hungarians to America to learn as much as they could and then return home to Hungary to put their knowledge to use in the best ways they see fit, much as Széchenyi did himself. Additionally, the broader mission of the chair was to build programs that serve as bridges between the people of the United States and the people of Hungary in the areas of academics, business, and culture. The idea of a bridge also fit well with the Széchenyi name.

The scholarship program is called the Hungarian American Business Leaders (HABL) Program. Our objective is to bring young Hungarians to the United States to work at American companies, soak up American customer-oriented business practices for the longest time possible, and then encourage them to move back home.

The MBA is the perfect degree/vehicle for this. Hungarians finish their university in Hungary, then come to Quinnipiac for the MBA. This allows us to partner with Hungarian higher educational institutions but to sidestep any problems related to what degree the students get. Additionally, and especially true at the beginning though less true today, Hungarian university education has tended to be very technical but weak on "soft skills." American MBAs are generally strong on soft skills, so the degrees complement each other well.

Finally, we structured this as a program as opposed to just a scholarship. A Hungarian entering the US in the HABL Program is technically under my purview for the entire time they are in the US, during and after their MBA at Quinnipiac. This means that we can offer scholars a J-visa, which allows them to work part-time during their MBA and to work another 18 months full-time after graduating, as long as the work experience is related to their field of study.

The program still runs today. The scholarship provides a small startup stipend to help them with transportation costs and covers all course, tuition, and housing expenses during the MBA. Students are also required to start working part-time as soon as possible, which provides both experience and some self-financing. After finishing the MBA, they move out on their own and are completely self-financed.

This program, however, required me to develop quality partners in Hungary and a network of business partners in the US. For this reason, I began hosting cross-border trade missions, bringing Hungarian business delegations to Connecticut and taking Connecticut business delegations to Hungary. In Hungary, we launched an annual alumni and executive business event in Zebegény, which grew from ten people in 2008 to its peak of about 200 by 2018.

The real key, in the end, is finding and attracting good people for the HABL Program. For that, I needed the right partner in Hungary, and that turned out to be Matthias Corvinus Collegium (MCC). At the time, in 2008, MCC was a small, intimate, and innovative collegium. MCC attracted top students and had a slight preference for students from outside of Budapest.

The students were mostly earning degrees at Corvinus University, but, at the time, Corvinus was a large public university and wasn't too helpful in finding students, relying on traditional methods like posting a flyer on a board with 800 other flyers.

MCC was small and often included students from high school through university, so they knew each student very well. I would give talks to students two to three times a year. MCC faculty, staff, students, and I got to know each other well, and very soon MCC leaders could identify early on the students who would likely be most interested in our scholarship a year or two later. This was a huge opportunity for the students and MCC. It was in everyone's interest to make it

work. All the incentives were aligned, I had a pipeline of reliable talent, and we have had amazing scholars over the years.

I did partner with Corvinus as well in 2008, but only for MBA exchange programs. Those have now seen more than 100 Quinnipiac MBA students travel to Hungary, and over 100 Corvinus

MBA students travel to Connecticut. I led both programs personally, taking the students to visit companies every day and forming new alumni networks as a result.

The blessing of being a professor, I have often said, is that in addition to getting to do what you love (i.e., teach and research in your field), you start with students and end with friends. That has definitely been true of all the students in the HABL Program and Corvinus-QU MBA exchanges.

The US-Hungarian situation during this period was, in hindsight, rather neutral. If it was overly enthusiastic in the 1990s, it was just neutral in the 2000s. Hungarians still wanted to come to the US, perceiving it as the place to go to learn business skills. It still held some of that glow as "the shining city on a hill." The HABL Program was attractive, and there were few other international opportunities, so I had numerous excellent applicants to choose from every year.

Some other similar amazing programs were running at this time, namely in Buffalo, NY, and in Missouri. Though we were aware of each other, we were not competing. We were small private players, and the Hungarian market of students was a large one. Those programs are excellent and I have recommended them to Hungarians over the years.

The Fulbright Commission was still running, of course, and there was another Hungarian scholarship fund created from the remaining 1990s US AID money. Again, none of these seemed to compete with or dominate the scene of US-Hungary higher education relations.

Hungary, a new NATO member, was supporting the US War on Terror. In 2005, Hungary joined the European Union and had plenty to focus on, from legal harmonization to learning to navigate the new European political landscape. International relations felt like they were maturing, with all involved settling into their roles and relationships.

Politically, this proved to be a relatively cool period for US-Hungary relations. For me, it was a quiet time to build.

The Late 2010s: Hungary and America Pivot

By the 2010s, the programs at Quinnipiac had grown beyond what even I had initially anticipated. The cross-border trade missions had grown into real events, and I had to form a private non-profit named CEENET (Central and Eastern European Network) to handle these events. We ran multiple trips a year and organized two very large events during this period, attracting hundreds of participants.

The Széchenyi Chair launched our Art as Ambassador programs around this time as well. The idea was – and is – that art is a unique ambassador for a country's history, culture, and perspective. We first hosted a small exhibit of Ambassador Nancy Brinker's Hungarian art collection at Quinnipiac[4] and then a second, larger exhibit of both the Sauska and Brinker collections at a private gallery in Southport, Connecticut. We were then involved in taking leaders from the Boca Raton Museum of Art to Hungary for an art tour, followed by a Hungarian art exhibit at the Boca Raton Museum.

[4] It was actually during this initial exhibit and hearing Nancy Brinker's story of learning about Hungary through art while she was US Ambassador to Hungary that inspired the name of these programs.

The Széchenyi Chair then launched an artist-in-residency program, which was sort of a short-term version of our HABL scholarship. Young Hungarian artists came to the US for a few months to mix with the New York art community and host small exhibits.

This range of activities was all within the mission of the Széchenyi Chair. The work and scope of these activities attracted the attention of the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, and I was asked to serve as Honorary Consul to Hungary, being inaugurated into that position in 2013. The honorary consul’s job, by the way, is to foster relations between the people of Hungary and the US in four areas: academia, business, culture, and diplomacy.

Our long-run goal at Quinnipiac has always been that the Széchenyi Chair be replicated for other countries and that one day we would have multiple chairs for multiple countries. We therefore launched the Central European Institute, and in 2014 announced our second endowed chair, this time for Poland, but modeled completely after the Hungarian chair with the same structure, scholarships, and related programs.

The momentum of our programs was extremely positive, but this was the period when, from my perspective, US-Hungarian relations started to change.

The new FIDESZ regime started in Hungary in 2010. Among other things, FIDESZ turned Hungary’s focus from the US toward Asia. Coincidentally, the US Obama Administration was doing the same thing, turning the US focus toward Asia broadly and toward China specifically.

If I described the early 2000s as cool compared to the 1990s, then the 2010s were when relations turned downright cold. The new FIDESZ regime was a return of the late 1990s government but with a more defined view of itself, of the European Union, and of the ills facing both Europe and Hungary. It was no longer impressed with America, and our once “shining city” was being overshadowed by the rapid rise of China as both an economic and a political powerhouse. To Hungarians generally, America looked more and more like the past. China seemed more like the future.

Diplomatic relations during this period turned very ugly. Without bringing political views into the discussion, I believe part of the problem was that everyone’s interests were simply elsewhere, and in a meaningful way. That is, the two countries were not trying to get along. They were both intentionally turning their attention to other matters which both viewed as more important. Like with any partnership when neither partner wants to make it work anymore, things just fell apart.

From the perspective of academic programs, a few other things happened at this time that complicated matters for my programs. First, the Bologna education system was expanded into Hungary and across Europe. This changed the dynamics for undergraduate education so that Hungarians no longer had an incentive to stay in school for a four-year undergraduate degree, and then another two-year graduate program. It had not occurred to me, but part of the reason my Hungarian scholars had been so well trained was that, in addition to a more theoretical orientation in general in Hungary, they all had both undergraduate and master’s degrees before they came for an MBA. This also meant they were usually twenty-four or twenty-five years old when they arrived in the US.

Under the Bologna system, they finished their undergraduate degree in about three years and then usually took a break. This meant, for me, that they had less training and were much younger when they came to the United States. That is not a problem in and of itself, but when the program

is premised on work experience, it is harder to place a twenty-one-year-old than a twenty-four-year-old, and they have less education, so the strength of matching a soft-skills MBA with hard theory training was weakened.

Second, the Erasmus program expanded across Europe and into Hungary. Suddenly, all my applicants had already done a semester abroad in Europe. This is a wonderful thing, but it also meant that "studying abroad," in the US in my case, was no longer novel. Applicants started saying they might return to Amsterdam or come to Quinnipiac. They weren't sure. And, by the way, before they apply for the HABL Program could I compare life in Hamden, Connecticut, with life in Amsterdam or Barcelona. Hmm...

Finally, on the American side, the Great Financial Crisis of 2007/08 sparked a new trend in US MBA programs: the "junior MBA." When the recession hit, students in college wanted to remain an extra year rather than enter the workforce or be unemployed. At the same time, adult MBA students, who were primarily financed by workplaces, saw their workplace funding dry up as businesses cut costs. Universities responded by offering undergraduates the chance to stay in college and earn an MBA.

While this solved university financial problems, for my programs it meant that our Quinnipiac MBA students were also now twenty-one years old. The traditional HABL scholars had benefited from older adult MBA students and from the fact that adult MBA students took classes at night. That meant HABL scholars made an immediate network of business contacts for themselves and took a lot of night MBA classes, freeing them up to work during the day.[5] It took a few years for these changes – Bologna, Erasmus, and younger American MBAs – to come to full fruition, but by the mid-2010s I could see the effects.

Today, MBA classes are held during the day and MBA students rarely hold any real jobs. HABL scholars make friends but do not step into an immediately helpful professional network like before. These changes have just made everything a little more difficult.

My programs became more challenging but still manageable. Additionally, political relations between Hungary and the United States were quite bad during this time. There is no other way to put it. Sadly, however, they could still worsen, as I was about to see.

The 2020s: North-South-East-West and Standing on Your Own

By chance, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out right around the time several other major changes occurred in Hungary, especially in higher education, which is especially relevant for my work. The changes started to happen pre-pandemic but largely took place during the pandemic, when many university programs, especially those with a travel component, were on hold. Emerging from the pandemic in, say, 2022, the higher-education landscape was dramatically different than the one we had known pre-pandemic.

In 2019, Corvinus University was "privatized" – for lack of a better word – with its own endowment of approximately one billion US dollars. Corvinus then embarked on a new path to

[5] Legally, they can only work part-time during the semester, but night classes allowed them a lot more flexibility in scheduling those work hours in any case.

attract more paying students and to improve its global rankings. For the latter, it needed quality researchers who publish in well-ranked international journals.

I have had the privilege of meeting with the new leadership at Corvinus, with the Corvinus Institute for Advanced Studies (CIAS) and have been serving on the new Tenure and Promotion Committee for Corvinus since 2020. I have been able to verify firsthand that it is attracting a new generation of quality faculty with good international reputations, at least in my field of economics, where I have some capacity to judge. I see this as a very good thing.

Around the same time, MCC was restructured with an even larger endowment of funds. MCC went from a small, intimate, and entrepreneurial organization to a massive giant overnight. Their mandate and mission were in some ways unchanged; it still focused on quality education and educational experience, but in other ways, it became a new organization altogether.

MCC offices and affiliates opened in every university town and in many other towns as well, both across Hungary and beyond. MCC bought the Libri bookstore chain in Hungary, opened a chain of cafés named after the philosopher Roger Scruton, opened an advocacy/think tank organization in Brussels, and purchased a university in Vienna.

From my perspective, speaking only about the programs I run, the good thing about both the Corvinus and MCC changes is that both organizations have much more money and a global outlook. In the past, I had to finance programs either from my QU CEI budget or find other funds to finance them. Today, quality projects and joint endeavors can be jointly funded, wholly funded by these organizations, or funded by the Quinnipiac CEI. There are more options.

Incidentally, Quinnipiac also emerged from the pandemic a different organization. We hired a new president in 2018, and all leadership positions were slowly filled by new people. This is part of the natural process of change, but it too happened largely during the pandemic and at the same time as the changes in Hungary. So, once again, for me, it was like going to sleep in 2020 and waking up in 2022 to a very different world. Most relevant for this discussion, however, is that the new Quinnipiac leadership is strongly in favor of experiential learning, and that includes sending our students abroad.

The positive aspects of all these changes, then, have been that there is new interest in sending our Quinnipiac students abroad, and I now have larger, wealthier partners to work with in Hungary. It also helps that Corvinus now charges tuition and has an interest in attracting international students, including those from the US. They have new dorms to offer, a new mandate for their international office, and new student services that bring them more in line with American norms in terms of student service overall.

I am very happy to report in this regard that I have been working with both Corvinus and MCC to offer scholarships, exchanges, internship opportunities, and the like. We are now offering a six-month study abroad and paid internship for Quinnipiac students to go to Corvinus and work at Morgan Stanley. MCC is providing annual financing for one of our HABL scholars each year, so we are back to two per year. As of this writing, we have hosted three MCC fellows who came for three-month stints at our university. Many Quinnipiac professors are talking with people in Hungary to build new programs, student exchanges, faculty trips, and so on. The Hungarian Fulbright Commission visited our campus and met with leaders from our medical school, law school, and engineering school, in addition to the traditional areas of the arts and sciences.

For me, the negative implications of these changes have meant more competition. Both MCC and Corvinus now finance trips all over the world. I can no longer sell Quinnipiac as "the American university" and think people will find it unique. Hungarians today have many more options than they did when I started.

On my side of the Atlantic as well, I have always had to sell Hungary to the American Quinnipiac students, but they used to have few other options, especially if they wanted to do something abroad in business, for example. Today, there are perhaps 10-20 different international trip options for our students in every field of study, from business to engineering to medicine. The sales pitch at home is tougher.

Traditionally, I could also rely on one thing: while Hungary might have been a hard sell at home, the US was at least an easy sell in Hungary. Today, Hungarian students can choose to study anywhere in Europe, and many places in Asia, and an MCC fellow can spend three months abroad essentially anywhere in the world. And they can still, of course, apply for Fulbright scholarships if they have more serious academic interests.

During this same period, two new players also entered the space. First, the Hungarian Initiatives Foundation in Washington, D.C., reshaped itself, changing its name to "Hungary Foundation" (HF). The HF now focuses its funds on its scholarship programs in both Hungary and the US.[6] Second, the Ludovika University of Public Service emerged as yet another player in Hungary's higher education landscape, and one that has American Studies as well as a range of International Relations programs and institutes. Universities across Hungary, also having been recently "privatized," began reaching out as well, each with its own international mission.

While all of these things make it harder in some ways for those of us traditionally involved in higher education relations, it also provides many more interested students and opportunities. In general, this should mean that each particular US opportunity, like mine via the QU CEI, will specialize over time in what they do best as they compete with other programs to attract students. Students on both sides of the Atlantic will be able to find opportunities that more precisely fit their particular interests, both academically and geographically.

In many ways, then, I strongly support all of this. The long-run effect will be many more Americans spending time in Hungary and more Hungarians in America. I believe that is a good thing. It has been part of my mission since landing in Hungary in the 1990s. I am honored to be a part of it personally and thrilled to be able to see it happening during my lifetime. That being said, in many ways, I have to work harder today than I have since I launched programs at Quinnipiac.

Political Divisions

Although this section is named "The 2020s: North-South-East-West and Standing on Your Own," the title "the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" kept coming to mind as I wrote it. The "Good" here is that there are more opportunities and, often, more funds than before. The "Bad" is that it's more

[6] In the interest of full disclosure, I currently serve on the academic advisory board for the Hungary Foundation.

challenging, complex, and competitive. The “Ugly” comes from the political side and is part of the continuing narrative of my thirty-year retrospective.

The United States and Hungary have not only continued to drift apart during this time, they have truly torn themselves apart in a way that is oddly domestic and partisan yet international. The political divisions within the United States have deepened, moving each political side further apart within our country. Hungary has somehow managed to become a political lightning rod within United States domestic politics. Much of this is self-inflicted on both sides, in my opinion, but whatever the causes, it has worsened dramatically and has become an increasingly bad problem for people doing the kind of work I do, and for me in particular.

Today, it is common for parents to want to talk to me to ensure that it is safe in Hungary. Is it racist? Is it fascist? Is it anti-Semitic? And so on. And those are just the politically charged ones. Sadly, at the time of this writing, I still get safety questions about the war in Ukraine as well. These are trying times indeed.

We all have our views of Hungary and America and the politics in both countries. My point here is not that, *per se*. My point is that those views and related actions are damaging US-Hungary relations, both on a personal level and in the context of university programs. The extremes in both the US and Hungary now say the most vile things about each other, both governments are picking sides in each other’s politics, and it is becoming an ever-worsening problem.

The problem has grown worse in recent years, as we all know. Traditionally, I could duck the troubles because my work is with academic partners in Hungary, but not today. The “the-academy-is-immune-to-politics” claim started to fall apart when FIDESZ battled with Central European University, eventually forcing most of its activities to relocate to Vienna. FIDESZ has since been openly battling the culture wars today that are extremely popular topics on US campuses, in US media, and hence likely search topics for any academic’s internet query about Hungary.

If those challenges were not big enough, MCC is now an international mouthpiece for conservative politics. Their hosting of Tucker Carlson of Fox News fame hit US news outlets like wildfire. Since then, they have hosted multiple American conservative leaders, and they have become a dominant player in the conservative intellectual movement in Hungary, working closely with other organizations that co-hosted the American CPAC meetings in Budapest, and so on.

The Hungary Foundation is openly conservative as well, and more publicly now than ever before. Their initial funding came from the Orbán government, and they have partnered with MCC and other conservative groups in Hungary as well.

Let me state clearly and publicly, given the sensitive nature of this. I fully support everyone’s right to pursue and publicly proclaim their views. I support that for those on the left, right, and center. The problem today is that it has become the defining dividing line that first interests students. I also have American conservative students coming to me in order to go to Hungary because of all the reasons listed above.

I, however, do not want any of my programs to ever be seen in any political light. It is also a stumbling block to all honest academic inquiry, in my opinion. When Americans go to Hungary or Hungarians come to America with preconceived biases on their shirt sleeves, and then seek

out other like-minded individuals to confirm their biases, they will always confirm their biases. That is the opposite of my objective with international cultural exchange.

I believe we should go with an interest in learning about other people, their cultures, and their perspectives. We can disagree all we want in the end, but we must first listen in the beginning; something that happens less and less today within our own countries, and therefore, even less so between our countries. It is personally sad to me, and professionally challenging, to say the least.

A long history and good reputation help me a lot these days, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. It helps that I have been doing this officially since 2005. It helps that the more than one hundred students – students of all ethnicities, creeds, colors, and orientations, mind you – I have taken to Hungary over the years, and loved their experience. Nearly all stay in touch with me regularly and attend Hungarian-related events I host. Many of them have returned to Hungary once or more, taking their friends and family. It helps that the programs I run started in 2005, so I have been running them under Presidents Bush, Obama, Trump, and now Biden and under both the MSZP and FIDESZ governments in Hungary. If I were starting from scratch today, it would be much, much harder.

The Path Forward: A Call to Action

I believe that now, more than at any time since 1990, we need more US-Hungary exchanges. We need that at every level, with every political and interest group.

The geopolitical trouble between the US and China encourages people to look across the Atlantic once again. As long as that trouble doesn't become dangerous, we should take advantage of that small wind in our sails.

The new generation has already been showing more interest in "experiences" than in the past. The pandemic catalyzed that trend. People are eager to travel, live, and work abroad. As long as the world stays safe, I believe this trend will continue. People are seeking physical vacations in interesting locations, unique experiences they can have in person, and so on. I believe that the in-person premium will only grow over time, and that should put additional wind in the sails of US-Hungary exchanges.

We need to defend the importance to Hungarians of coming to the United States. Doing that is tied to the challenge mentioned earlier regarding the generally more competitive world of university relations today. We need to see what is special about our organizations. It is often tied to what is special about the United States, then secondarily to what is special about our work inside the United States. We must rethink these things and sharpen our focus.

There are plenty of areas of common ground academically. Data science, computer science, cybersecurity, and related topics are all the rage in the US and Hungary. Hungarians still tend to be better trained theoretically and mathematically in these fields. The United States still tends to be the world leader in commercializing ideas and innovations. Those are natural areas in which to cooperate.

As Hungarian universities turn to global markets, we can build programs based on long-running relationships. We can partner at different levels, and offer joint diplomas, research fellowships, undergraduate and graduate opportunities, and so on. I am building programs with Corvinus that leverage American multinationals in Hungary, like Morgan Stanley, to provide opportunities for

students at Quinnipiac. For Corvinus, if our programs work, they could become a template to attract students from other countries or Americans from other universities. Hungarian universities with US partners could even offer their degrees coupled with studying in America as a package for other international students.

But the world is indeed a new one. It has changed a lot in recent years. It is politically divided within our respective countries and between them as well. The way to overcome that is precisely to meet in person.

When we meet in person, share some Hungarian wine and food, and talk, we relearn that people are multi-dimensional. Going to a foreign country is a perfect opportunity for people to open their minds, talk, and share and exchange ideas.

I will share a final reflection on some experiences. For years, I brought Hungarians to the US for a short, one-week MBA international experience. Every day we would visit two companies, tour facilities, etc. Inevitably, by mid-week, they would ask me, “Do all Americans respond to questions with ‘That’s a good question,’ then follow with a response? Not all questions are actually good, you know?” This became a huge discussion on the bus, at lunches, dinners, and so on. On the last day, those same people would say, “You know, I realized that this approach made me feel more comfortable asking my questions. I can see why you do it.”

The American MBA students I took for two weeks to Hungary were the same. Every year, after a few company visits, they would complain: “Professor, I asked my same question to all the companies for three days now and none of them answered it right.” “Maybe you’re asking it wrong,” I would reply. By the end of the trip, they had learned to ask differently, but that required thinking differently and understanding the Hungarians’ perspectives better.

The lesson for all of us is that how we think shapes a lot of what we understand and how we interpret the world. To start to understand a different perspective, you have to spend time and have intent. You have to soak up the feelings, mood, or culture of a different people to even start to understand them.

When you physically travel abroad and interact with other people daily, you begin to do that on every level and in every dimension of your life. And that is when the learning starts. That is when engaging with different people and sharing opens up new worlds for us all. That is when the opportunities to find common ground emerge. I have seen it happen many times over the years for Americans and Hungarians alike. If we have any hope of ever resolving our differences, we need friends and colleagues, and to be able to have civil conversations to find those avenues forward.

Like most things in life, it is simply about finding “the win.” We need to explore our own and our partner’s interests and find ways to work together and help each other. What could be more wonderful than that?