
Politics of memory

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**The Fight for the National Legacy becomes a Fight for
Political Legitimacy: Hungary 2006 as a (Central)
European Example***

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Summary

The 2006 commemorations of the '56-Revolution in Hungary resulted in repeated mass demonstrations against the government and street rioting of the extreme right. The paper examines the representation of the Hungarian parliamentary and extreme right's claim to be the only legitimate heir of the '56 Revolution, seen as a foundation of the present, democratic 3rd Republic; and consequently to be the only true bearer of national history as a whole. The reconstruction of enacted historical patterns and symbols used in the 2006 (and following) demonstrations attempts to retrace the references to the political and social division of the country – in the political discourse and landscape – with a focus on the representation of the right wing claim for national legitimacy through the use of artifacts like '56 monuments, the Museums Statue Park and the House of Terrors. The paper thus follows the assumption, that *memory politics* has become a central issue in post '89 claims of political legitimacy in East Central Europe because of the necessity to *redefine* the national past. Therefore, the Hungarian political patterns in this field are compared with other Central European examples, especially the Polish right – and with similar developments across the former Iron Curtain.

Key words: Hungary, politics of memory, extreme right, 1956, political legitimacy

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The autumn 2006 anti-government demonstrations and the accompanying street riots have helped mar Hungary's image as the model for Central Europe's consolidated "new democracies." With a rather marginal, predominantly extra-parliamentarian¹ radical right, the nascent democracy's selective cooperation with the strongest parliamentary opposition party, the "national-liberal" FiDeSz, has been described as a key factor of the far right's integration in both the parliamentary and constitutional system. Since 2002, however, repeated protests and riots have reversed this image. Questions loom both near and far about Hungary's "civil-war mentality" (Barbaczy et al., 2007) and has become the focus of much analytical and political debate.

These "civil-war" like protests and the aggravated polarization between a social-liberal (governmental) and a national-conservative (oppositional) political camp, the latter of which includes the parliamentarian radical right,² appears closely linked to differences in the interpretation and appropriation of national history as a tool for political legitimacy. As well, growing public discontent seems to be linked to specific historic dates. The most recent outburst accompanied the March 15, 2008 national holiday celebrations commemorating the 1848 Revolution in Budapest. The most massive protest to date coincided with celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution in October 2006. The annual calendar of national holidays and the subsequent public representations of Hungarian history seem to fuel political dissent against the established post-1989, Third Republic. The public's manipulation of these dates is not coincidental. They are largely a symbolic message of citizens overcoming the divisive orders of former regimes like the Horthy-era or the Hungarian version of "Real Socialism."

Though national holidays add spectacle to the street riots, they are not the sole-catalyst. The political unrest that coincided with the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Revolution began six months earlier, following the release of then acting Prime Minister and leader of the Hungarian Social Democratic Party's (MSzP), Ferenc Gyurcsány's so-called "lie speech." The secretly taped closed-door speech made in May 2006 attempted to prepare the Social Democratic MPs to back drastic budget cuts and important structural reforms of

¹ Excluding the MIÉP representation in the parliamentary period 1998 through 2002

² With the exception of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) that tries to place itself between the two camps.

the social security system with their newly elected majority.³ The massive public reaction to Gyurcsány's "confession" that his party's sweeping success in the spring 2006 elections was actually based on "lies" about the country's economic situation, translated almost immediately into street protest. Shortly after the speech's September 17 airing on public radio, small bands of radical right wing groups took to the streets of Budapest to call for Gyurcsány's resignation. By the next day, having been joined by other groups, they gathered in Kossuth Square in front of Parliament. For roughly two weeks, Kossuth Square became the central and uninterrupted stage of street protests. Various (and conflicting) groups of the extra-parliamentary radical right and representatives of the parliamentary opposition-party FiDeSZ (HVG 26.9.2006) kept vigil until the end of the campaigns for local and regional elections. Not surprisingly, FiDeSZ, the main party backed by the protestors, won in a landslide victory on the evening of October 1, 2006.

Despite the opposition's success in regional and local elections, the protestors' call for Gyurcsány's resignation was not heeded. On the contrary, the acting-government (and unchanged parliamentary majority) reaffirmed his status with a vote-of-confidence. Protests and rioting thus began anew on October 23, the national holiday commemorating the 1956 Revolution, and continued again in 2007 on this very same occasion.

This analysis will not delve into all of the events surrounding these first long weeks of demonstrations and street rioting. They are, however, an example of the developing common political action fostered by the extra-parliamentary far-right and the right-wing conservative parliamentary opposition (FiDeSZ). The symbolic sharing-of-the-stage in front of Parliament and on many sites throughout the country, translated into regional and local electoral success for the latter. Beyond these initial moments of public discontent and their political relevance as part of FiDeSZ' election campaign, the public's use of national holidays and Hungarian history, especially the 1956 Revolution, must be analyzed in order to get a sense of the "dramatization" these historical references brought and still bring on the political stage in Hungary.

The first day of protests ended with a reenactment of the central event of the '56 Revolution: the forceful and violent occupation of the public television (MTV) centre located close to Kossuth Square. The takeover of MTV, however, was not the first historic parallel to be drawn by the protest's main actors. In 2006, protestors called for the immediate resignation of the gov-

³ For all facts around the beginning of the escalation of Hungarian domestic politics I essentially refer to Varga 2006, for the 1956 commemoration also to *Kronológia 2007* and the other documentations published in the weekly HVG and the daily *Népszabadság* as quoted in the bibliography.

ernment and for new parliamentary elections, just as the former dissidents demanded a democratic and independent Hungary on October 23rd 1956. Protestors also drew connections between the former illegitimate communist state that controlled Hungarian Radio and refused its public access to government, and the dwindled legitimacy of the present government (following the release of Gyurcsány's speech) that remained in power and essentially "in control" of mass public media. Moreover, the 2006 protestors besieged Hungarians and international onlookers with the apparent similarities between the sympathetic, but ultimately constrained political figures, then Prime Minister Imre Nagy, now the acting-President of the Republic, László Sólyom. These parallels are, of course, historically inconsistent, and have repeatedly been denounced as such. Yet for a large segment of the public taking part in the protests on Kossuth Square, these connections were sufficient to legitimize the ultimately unsuccessful storming of the public TV headquarters. The action was of course entirely symbolic given the fact that the protests already had non-stop live television coverage by the private station Hír-TV that has close political ties to FiDeSz. As well, news websites like Index and Népszabadság (the national daily newspaper) covered the protests with only short delays and included video coverage. Thus, the move to capture MTV headquarters can only be seen as the intention to establish a strong link to the 1956 Revolution, rather than acquire an access-way to the public.

The almost immediate violent escalation of the protests (and subsequent riots) has long been attributed to two factors: the participation of "experienced" football-hooligans, skinheads and similar right-wing groups, and an unprepared, reactive police force, apparently taken by surprise (especially by the MTV assault). Despite declarative efforts by FiDeSz to control the violence, they were never able (nor willing) to draw a clear distinction between peaceful protesters and opportunistic rioters. The ambiguity of symbolic references actually provided a common ground for both groups.

This common ground projected itself on the political stage and the accompanying public discourse. The shared use of historical symbols, memorial rituals, and "sense" of national history merged the two camps. Ideological and organizational differences between the radical and the parliamentary right-wing were cast away as a matter of political convenience and opportunity. The result was the appearance of *one* community with the same collective memory.

"Living in Truth"

The key bridge between the 1956 and 2006 protests was the outcry against "lying" as an instrument of acquiring and legitimizing political

power. Long before 2006, the vast majority of Central and Eastern Europeans understood their communist regimes to have been built on lies. The most eloquent expression of this, Václav Havel's essay "Living in Truth" (1986), became a popular metaphor against one of the essential instruments of state-socialism, the political propaganda and manipulation of mass media. The current Hungarian government's legitimacy, whose legality could hardly be contested within the framework of the constitution, was questioned from the very beginning of the protests. Protestors, referencing the "post-socialist" image of the ruling MSzP drew a picture of a country still governed by elite, an image typically projected on the left by the CE radical right (Smolar 2006, Rupnik, 2007: 162f).

The right-wing's (both parliamentary and radical groups) portrayal of a "post-socialist" left is essential to accentuate and escalate the political polarization of the MSzP. The image presents them as more of the same "old Socialists" of the MSzMP (Horváth 2006, 170), whose democratic re-foundation was born out of the reform-wing of the former communist party.

The assumption of a "truth-cleavage" between "national" political organizations and the rest of the political parties had previously been articulated in FiDeSz's slogan: "more than a change of government, though not a regime change."⁴ The right's campaign also focused on its leading role in the "national" conservative coalition from 1998-2002, and urged the public to allow them to resume the "unfinished system change" of '89 to a "true" ("valóságos") political reorganization through its governmental program (Draskovich, 2006: 131). These ideas have long been central to both the radical and parliamentary rights of not just Hungary, but also for its Central European counterparts (Bayer, 2002; Smolar, 2006; Rupnik, 2007: 162f).

To develop a symbolic image of an actual system change, FiDeSz put a heavy emphasis on "memory-building." This involved rebuilding the National Theatre (Nemzeti Színház), a monument to Hungary's "national" style of architecture;⁵ the production of monumental films on national history and heroes (Attila, Széchenyi, etc.); an extensive and partisan commemoration of the millennium of Hungarian statehood (2000), which reintroduced the "sacred St. Stephen Crown" as a state symbol; and opening a controversial permanent exhibition in the so-called "House of Terrors," (Horváth, 2006:

⁴ "Több mint kormányváltás, még sem rendszerváltás." Quotation according to Draskovich (2006: 131)

⁵ The plan of the precedent, social-liberal government-coalition of a theatre building in modern style in the centre of Budapest was replaced by a "neo-eclectic" building as part of a new *Hungarian* Art Centre on the Pest Danube shore (for more details see e. g. Kurtán et al., 2002).

173/4) depicting Hungary's importation of totalitarianism and communism with a neglect of the Horthy-era (Kovács, 2003).

These efforts to re-write and, more importantly, re-construct national history in the public sphere can be categorized into two groups (Kurtán et al., 2002): one that seeks to restore the representation of the "true" nation, whose historical symbols, images and narratives have been distorted "under communism;" and one that seeks to uncover the lies of the communist-era. The former's claim for the "true" representation of the Hungarian nation is a core argument of FiDeSz political discourse and the chief message of the Hungarian and other Central European radical right parties and organizations (Bayer, 2002: 273, Rupnik, 2007: 162f). The latter, who the "House of Terrors" essentially is devoted to, intends to reclaim the anti-communist traditions for only the right-wing political camp (Kovács, 2003). Both features of self-representation are characteristics of the Hungarian and the other post-1989 ECE right-wing political parties and organizations, including the party comprising the Polish coalition-government under Jaroslaw Kazcynski (Smolar, 2006).

Disappointment in Hungary's recent election results, culminating in the right's assertion of electoral fraud, played a key role in the massive street mobilization of the defeated FiDeSZ' electorate. Although official vote-counts were supervised by a minister of the interior from their party, the outraged electorate relied on the assumption of the above-mentioned "truth-cleavage" that deems their party the political embodiment of the best of the nation. Right-wing supporters claimed that the voters could only have been distracted by means of mass-manipulation, i.e. post-communist propaganda (Draskovich, 2006). This first massive public display of distrust in Hungary's post-1989 democratic institutions laid out the symbolic and organizational framework, manifesting itself in the streets, for the "popular" upheaval against the re-elected socio-liberal coalition in 2006. Prime Minister Gyurcsány's so-called "confession" conveniently upheld their cries for honesty in the political realm.

In this context, the variety of historical references provided the stage for a ritual of affirmation and the re-possession Hungary's national history; the cultural emblems of the protests reminded one more of a Renaissance representation of feudal power (Warburg) than of a 20th century political protest.

The Requisites of Protest

A closer look at the images cultivated in the protests – later deemed a "happening" by the founding leader of the radical right party MIÉP, István Csurka (HVG 26.9.2006) – shows a manifold of political symbols exalting the self-representation of the participants and their aspirations. The images

evoked a whole “panorama” of political purposes and historical references, and fit into both the above-mentioned categories. The images and historical references were an essential part of the battle fought on the political stage and solidified support via the use of *memory-politics*.

The reference to the 1956 Revolution was, as mentioned above, the core message of the protesters (von Ahn 2007). The widespread use of the 1956 Hungarian revolutionary flag (with a hole replacing the communist emblems) could be seen in conjunction with a modified version of the European flag (where holes replaced the twelve stars). Often 1956 symbols accompanied posters of the decade’s old revolution and were constantly referenced in slogans and speeches. Attempted reenactments of the 1956 Revolution were also a favorite of protesters, beginning with the occupation of the MTV Building. One of the most iconic scenes of the October 2006 riots was the “hijacking” of a Russian tank from an historic open-air exhibition of 1956, which was set into motion and driven some meters along the lines of riot-police (HVG 23.10.2006). Even a protest occurring on March 15th 2008 – though the “wrong” holiday for references to 1956 – included references to the failed anti-communist revolution, including a one-man demonstration in front of Hungary’s public radio station in Budapest, and the repeated incendiary statements calling for a “revolution” due to the lost referendum on higher health and education fees. No matter the case, there always seemed to be a motive for renewed rioting on Budapest’s streets. The only noteworthy effect, however, was the movement of official commemorations indoors (Népszabadság 16.3.2008).

Referencing the same historic background, the (still-conflicting) radical right groups presented themselves in the 2006 protests as political actors with names like the “Hungarian National Council 2006,” and the “National Revolutionary Council.”⁶ The convention of an improvised “Constitutional National Assembly”⁷ (HVG 26.9.2006) had been proclaimed not only by the radicals, but in cooperation with FiDeSz MPs to demonstrate their support of the so-called “Civic Circles.”⁸ The intention – or at least the symbolic message – was to replace not only the “delegitimized” government, but also the “dysfunctional” constitutional system of representative democracy. This group went as far as to propose a new constitution that included popular, presidential and even monarchist attributes.

Whereas these “alternatives” to the present system of representative democracy have mainly been put forward by the radical right, actual consen-

⁶ “Magyar Nemzeti Bizottság 2006” and “Forradalmi Nemzeti Bizottmány”

⁷ “Alkotmányozó Nemzetgyűlés”

⁸ “Polgari Körök”

sus was built upon FiDeSz's first massive street mobilizations following the deceiving elections results of the first round of the 2002 parliamentary elections and the party's organization of its supporters in a movement of "Civic Circles", conceived as an alternative to the party-system (Draskovich 2006, 131f, Horváth 2006, 176f).

Further historic references go beyond the 1956 revolution. Many embrace the whole "panoptical" of national symbols. The so-called Árpád flag, the battle emblem of the Hungarian kingdom under the Árpád house and out of public use since the fascist Szálasi-regime, resurged as a symbol of the radical right. The Árpád flag was often partnered with various representations of "Greater Hungary," depicting the country and its borders as it was prior to the World War I peace agreements at Trianon. Though traditional costumes were popular among the radical right, they also appeared in modern representations, from skinheads to "national" bikers.

Following the collapse of communism, contemporary democratic politics forced FiDeSz to distance themselves from the more radical fringe elements of right-leaning parties (though the "clin d'oeuil" of prominent FiDeSz representatives repeatedly engaged in radical right activity, including MP Mária Wittner, herself a former activist of the 1956 Revolution and victim of its repression). These lines, however, seemed to disappear during the protests when FiDeSz added its own color to the barrage of imagery. FiDeSz's orange party-color, distinct from the historic repertoire, projected itself as a new national color for a new Hungarian future. At least on a visual-level, many commentators claim this symbolic gesture succeeded.

A Brief Spotlight on Political Memory

The selected imagery, besides looking good on television, was intended to invoke the use of memory in a political context. Indifferent to the chronological order of history, memory as a political device allowed the groups to build their own historical pretext. This allowed for the co-presence or co-representation of distinct and separate moments (in time and space). Different and even juxtaposing symbols now had the same meaning, which some analysts refer to as a specific historic narrative, a "politics of history" (Kochanowicz 2007), or even a "philosophy of history" (Draskovich 2006, 130f) of the national right-wing. For *social or political memories* – a notion that intends to cover the function of memory for group-identities – the range, combination, and order of the symbols and texts derives from their importance for these group-identities and their functionality in the distinction from other groups (Halbwachs 1992). The political and analytical critique of the radical right's use of history largely focuses on its distortion, falsification, and misuse, as well as on their "cultural traditionalism" (Smolar 2006) and

their claim of a “monopoly on national traditions” (Bayer 2002, 272). Yet these studies often solely focus on the radical right’s interpretation of history. Where the analysis fall short is the right’s use of memory politics as an instrument of public mobilization.

Memory politics, as an attempt to reach the broader public, differs in comparison to the current argumentative use of history in public debate. The invocation of memory politics, though restricted to the choice of a considerably small field of political references, helps to lay the foundation for an entire political movement at all levels of government (official, governmental, institutional) and society (in the interrelation of different memorial communities).

Collective memory (Maurice Halbwachs) further fastens distinct political and social groups to the same history, historic places, and “archives.” “The term ‘collective memory’ evolved in the 1980s and 1990s along with a discourse on *collective identities*. Up until then, the term ‘identity’ had been mostly applied to individuals. New discourses on both memory and identity were backed up by a ‘constructivist turn’ in the humanities. This turn was built on two basic assumptions. One is that cultural symbols (such as texts, images, and rituals) and their historically changing media matter; they play an important role in the formation of identities. The other premise is that the past is always reconstructed according to the needs of the present. As the present is in no way stable, reconstructing the past is a varying and open-ended project” (Assmann 2007, 34). The importance given to these symbols as a means to construct group identity makes memory, especially in times of political change, an open and privileged field for the legitimization of political meaning.

In the book series on French “Lieux de mémoire” (engl. 1996), historian Pierre Nora focuses on this competitive aspect of “longue durée” to the representation of *one* national history and identity. Competition becomes even more crucial in the increasingly polarized political climate of East and Central Europe, where the political programs of the “national” right include as a core issue a “battle for memory.” In the era of de-communication, this allows for the rearrangement of national history as a basis for legitimate political power (Smolar 2006). Therefore, the analysis of *collective memory* puts an emphasis on the exclusion or inclusion of groups represented under a unifying or divisive memorial perspective as well as on the *imaginaire* of these groups.

The attention and use of memory politics by Central and Eastern European right wing groups is particularly important for the construction of a collective identity, i.e. the creation of *one* national identity. Their use of the *unifying* aspects of memory – “collecting” a symbolic representation of all major historical events – naturally excludes interpretations from the memo-

rial collective considered to be foreign of treasonous to the respective nation. Historical selectivity is a common instrument used by both Hungarian and the ECE right-wing to devalue the arguments of competitors in political discourse (Horváth 2006, 172f, Huterer 2007).

In Hungary, the role of the “traitor” is most often projected on the Liberals (SzDSz), the repeated coalition partner of the Social Democrats. The party’s roots in the pre-1989 democratic opposition, as well as the fact that many of its members were involved in the 1956 Revolution, account for this characterization. Because some prominent members of SzDSz hail from Jewish (as well as communist) families, right-wing groups cling to tired anti-Semitic representations of the “traitorous Jew.” Anti-Semitism has long been a key recruiting tool for Hungarian (Antiszemita közbeszéd 2000-03) and ECE (Rupnik 2007) right-wing groups.

The broad significance of 1989 and the ensuing “political challenges” (Assman 2007, 34) born out of transition in East and Central Europe, allow for a growing disparity (and even instability) of political meaning as it relates to the construction of a *memory of communism* and the reconstruction of a *national memory* distorted by the one-party state’s propaganda. For the latter, the political transition enhanced an immediate and obvious necessity to rewrite or reconstruct the “national history.” It put a heavy focus on the “material” basis of its public representation: the change of national symbols (flags, emblems, etc.), the removal, replacement, or renewal of national monuments, the “re-baptizing” of public space by renaming streets, etc. In this process, the right wing groups emerged as a visually distinct political camp, using various readings and representations of national history to distinguish themselves. Even the size of the “cocarde” that people wear to commemorate the March 15 holiday was transformed by FiDeSZ during the 2002 election campaign. It evolved from a unifying national emblem to a partisan symbol of political distinction (Horváth 2006, 174).

The *memory of communism* naturally turned out to be an even fiercer political battleground. In an analysis of two contradictory attempts of its “musealisation” in Hungary, the Statue Park near Budapest⁹ and the House of Terrors, Éva Kovács states that in “a time of communicative memory...no structured, consistent discourse about communism” is “yet available” for the public: this allows for a “political playground,” open to “almost everyone”, where “historical truth” is established as a result of “political usability” (Kovács 2003¹⁰).

⁹ The Szobor Park/ Statue Park near Budapest, reassembling the main socialist monuments of the city, that have been removed since 1989, was the first of a series of open air museums of this kind in the former Soviet bloc, that opened its doors to the public already in 1991.

¹⁰ Translation of the quotes by the author of the paper.

This “usability” is largely determined by the presence of historic references in symbols and rituals and their effective use in public space. The occupation of this public space by the protesters (as well as in the mass media) therefore enables the construction of a collective memory. This becomes a mechanism to make their political views more mainstream and subsequently delegitimize their political competitors; they are excluded from the common, supposedly national, narrative (Horváth 2006).

In this context, the appropriation of the political heritage of the 1956 Revolution is considered by Hungarian right-wing parties and groups a key issue for their legitimacy in contemporary politics (von Ahn 2007). Whereas the left has been able to manipulate the negotiated, peaceful transition of the “Velvet Revolution” to their political advantage, the right has used the more defiant (and perhaps more “heroic”) perspective of the March 15th “*longue durée*.”

1956/ 1989 – Who’s Revolution? Whose memory?

The protestors’ overwhelming use of the 1956 Revolution and its contextualization in the frame of memory politics suggests that the official 50th anniversary commemoration may have contributed to the escalation of political “competition” by the Hungarian right-wing given that much of their legitimacy derives from this event (von Ahn 2007). By claiming this event, right-wing groups were surely disgruntled that their rivals, the government-controlling “post-socialist” MSzP, were able to officially commemorate Hungary’s most important revolution to the international media. Further exacerbating the right’s anger was the fact that Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány hosted much of the anniversary events. Gyurcsány, MSzP’s first and only leader since its foundation in 1989, has long marginalized right-wing issues by claiming them as his own. The key example is his attempts to thwart the right-wing’s monopoly on the politics concerning Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries. He declared them to be a political responsibility (as Hungarian Prime Minister) in the framework of European integration and under the realm of “nation politics,” an unusual term for the left (“*nemzetpolitika*”, Gyurcsány 2005, 111f). Further, Gyurcsány has long tried to separate himself from the heritage of the Kádár-era and this still-popular socialist leader. Instead, he has claimed his political heritage to be akin to Imre Nagy, his historic opponent and a key figure in the 1956 Revolution (Gyurcsány, 2005 speeches).

One cannot be sure the extent to which these commemoration events provoked the right; however, the complex “choreography” of abstention and participation on behalf of FiDeSz leaders during the official ceremonies provide a backdrop to the subsequent protests. This system of attending or boycotting events is not limited to the memorial stage. FiDeSz members engage

in this practice at various official appearances by the prime minister, including his parliamentary speeches. These rudimentary acts are intended to delegitimize the ruling party's historical legacy. For this reason, a closer look at the primary aspects of the disputed revolutionary heritage (and its manifestations) should offer some insight on the patterns of the current political polarization.

The designation of October 23 as the national holiday to commemorate the 1956 Revolution was a unanimous decision of the first freely-elected parliament in 1990. The decision was based on the appearance of a broad societal consensus and on the desire to recognize the victimized revolutionary leaders as the predecessors of the new democratic statehood. Like other cases in Central and Eastern Europe, it was a core ritual of 1989's transformation process. The 1956 Revolution, however, became a new and "insecure" territory for academic documentation and research. Moreover, both the revolutions occurring in 1956 and 1989 were from the beginning oriented along divisive societal lines based on the subsequent interpretation of these events as well as along the emerging (partisan) political differences of the then "new democracy." All of the political actors who laid claim to the "political myth" (Litván 2000) of Hungary's Third Republic attempted to make it a part of their own political heritage.

By recalling only a few details of the solemn public reburial ceremony held in 1989 for the corpses of the executed revolutionaries of 1956, one is reminded of the beginnings of the political polarization. Cooperation, in terms of how the ceremony was organized, was minimal at best between the socialist state's reform wing and the democratic opposition that had only briefly been included in transition negotiations. Even today, the MSZP's official statement declaring the event as a "day of national reconciliation" (Rainer 2001) are criticized for being a questionable compromise with the "culprits" of 1956. The culprits included, among others, one leading figure of the "reformers," then foreign minister and one of the Third Republic's Prime Ministers, Gyula Horn (MSZP, 1994-98). He had participated in the fight against the revolutionaries as a young member of the so-called Workers Militia ("munkásörség"). Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of the National Conservative Coalition (1998-2002) and a long-time FiDeSz leader, was the only speaker at the Heroes Square ceremony to be born after 1956. His speech, which repeated the former revolutionaries' request that the Soviet Union withdraw (they were still present in Hungary), was a first step in building up his political image as a "national" leader. Moreover, this speech violated the government's agreement to abstain from referencing current political issues in the ceremony. The political dispute over 1956's heritage is not only ongoing, but seems to build every year on this national holiday (HVG 23.10.2006) and came to a head in 2006.

The attempts, however, to *historize* official state commemorations of 1956 have failed, primarily because a “structured, consistent discourse about communism” that could contextualize a consensual narrative of the revolution is rare in Hungary. “Witnesses” and dialogues of the events both seem to be “exposed” to “memory-politics” (Kovács 2003) as their ultimate partisan ground of “truth.” The failure to incorporate the 1956 Revolution in an undisputed “national heritage” becomes especially obvious when the government attempts to eternalize history in the form of national monuments. For example, the dispute over a graveyard memorial for the anonymous martyrs of the 1956 Revolution and victims of Stalin’s persecutions left the unidentified corpses scattered between several (unstable) monuments.

Memory politics about the 1956 Revolution must therefore be considered predominantly anchored in a political context, disguised in the form of a moral judgement about historic actors and events. The logic behind the House of Terrors exhibition is built on this assumption in order to highlight the Hungarian nation as a victim of 20th century totalitarian regimes (both Nazi and Soviet). The House of Terrors exhibit, a regular stage for political manifestations of its governmental sponsor FiDeSz and radical right groups like MIÉP, thereby constructs a distance between contemporary history and its public. This allows the whole period of communism (from Stalinism to 1989) to be integrated into one narrative (Kovács 2003). This narrative allows the right-wing to not only manipulate the ongoing political polarisation of Hungary, but also dispel the popular nostalgia for the Kádár-era and the contribution of the so-called reform socialists during the transformation process. Most importantly, it allows the right to establish a new social memory about this period. The accusation of the left as the “children of the Kádár-era” has become a popular attempt to delegitimize respective political adversaries.

In a provocative essay vigorously contested by members of the left-wing establishment and (until recently) soundly ignored by right-wing historians, Gábor Gyáni speculates if the Kádár-era could simply be “forgotten” (Gyáni 2005). Further, he claims the right’s politically-motivated construction of the House of Terrors combined with the left’s nostalgia for the period prevents historians and the public from having a decisive debate about contemporary Hungarian history. According to Gyáni, the accusation that one group is the “children of the Kádár-era” used to close any argument on the subject. Instead, public debates should open up the question for the *habitual memory* of this period and its various “traditions,” a question that potentially addresses the whole nation’s disrespect for political and social differences. Without a cleansing debate, however, the 1956 events remain a political device (an unrestricted use of memory-politics) for practically every group or party.

The heroic images of 1956 (and other similar events in ECE countries) partly result from the absence of a contextualized collective memory and from the lack of a historical narrative of post-war state socialism. These images further depict the 1989 transition as yet another “soft revolution.” Right wing talking-points emphasize the need to accomplish a still unfinished system change and are almost entirely based on the un-heroic images surrounding the compromise of 1989. Street riots and violent demonstrations are condoned as long as they are directed against the perceived heirs of communism and winners of the aforementioned compromise.

Right-wing parties’ symbolic references to Hungary’s supposed historical tradition of civic revolts against illegitimate governments, commemorated by the two national holidays, March 15 and October 23, are based on this image of an “unfinished revolution” of 1989 and feed their supporters a sense of underachievement.

1989 – Reopening a European “battle for memory?”

As time passes, right-wing groups throughout Central and Eastern Europe are putting a heavier emphasis on memory politics. In 2000 the contested National Conservative Coalition in Austria reopened the question of financial compensation for the German minority forced into exile from Czechoslovakia after 1945 by the so called Beneš-decrees. Hungary’s Fi-DeSz-led government joined in, representing the similarly-affected Hungarian minority of Slovakia. As well, the plan to open a documentation center in Berlin for all post-World War II expulsions (with a heavy focus on displaced Germans) has become a divisive issue for Polish-German relations. The previous Berlusconi-led government in Italy opposed Slovenian membership to the EU because of Italy’s historic *irrendenta* claims and similar questions concerning the Trieste border and the Istria archipelago. There is also a high probability that the new Berlusconi-led government will create similar difficulties for Croatia’s accession to the European Union. These examples of symbolic politics only scratch the surface. They are considered symbolic because they lack policy consequences and are based on the comparatively narrow field of national identity construction where only image matters.

Aleida Assmann observed that the confrontation of collective memory and “political challenges” often heralds insecure feelings about the past. These sentiments are true for the post-communist countries in Europe, and seem to have especially acute ramifications for those countries that bordered the former Soviet-bloc. Each has been affected by the “disappearance” of their national identity constructions as the former members (or neighbors) of the Iron Curtain. Austria, in particular, is no longer a neutral state, no longer the “bridge” between East and West, and no longer a “meeting point.” Its

coveted place in diplomatic history is now largely overshadowed by the burgeoning capitals to the east.

One could argue that the widening and deepening of European supranational political institutions (EU, NATO, etc.) may usher in a new era of insecurity as fringe political groups struggle to gain a footing in an evolving political climate. At the very least, European publics can expect a growing reliance on memory-politics. Attempts to create and/or capture a post-World War II European narrative by polarized political parties may lead to increased anxiety on the part of European publics already wary of the European Union's enlargement process. One need only recall the 2005 Moscow Commemorations of the Allies victory in World War II, which was also presented as a sort of global summit. This induced the public to question the event's official narrative as a celebration of liberation. Estonia and Lithuania, both EU member states, refused to participate. Vike Freiberga, then President of Latvia, used the stage to criticize the above-mentioned narrative. The end of World War II is often considered the mythical point of inception of the European integration process. A special European Council meeting in Stockholm held in 2000 highlighted this narrative, as well as the importance of the Holocaust, which leaves many a Central and Eastern European public wondering about the place of Communism during the post-war period.

The political and technocratic elite's neglect, or at least their apparent unease in addressing this issue seems to open the European stage to the symbolic politics of national identity, as displayed for example by the Kazsynski brothers in the Polish government. The European political system's current framework appears to guarantee an inevitable showdown with the national battlefields of memory politics. Until the political establishment holds a "structured, consistent discourse about communism," or at the very least, analyzes the "habitual memory" of both sides of the former Iron Curtain, the manipulation of history will continue to subjugate European politics.

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