The symbolic landscape of an illiberal regime: glorifying the interwar era in post-2010 Budapest

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Abstract: Since 2010 the Fidesz party, led by Viktor Orbán, has gradually eroded democratic institutions in Hungary using methods commonly applied by illiberal and authoritarian regimes. Previous studies explored how memory politics play a crucial role in maintaining the populist rhetoric, essential for Fidesz rule. This article aims to shed light on the spatial representation of Fidesz power in urban space. Drawing on the literature of symbolic space appropriation in general and the memory politics of Fidesz in particular, I analyze the transformation of two emblematic, centrally located squares in the capital of Hungary: Liberty and Kossuth Square. I argue that the interventions/transformations of these squares inscribe the re-evaluated and distorted "official" narratives of national history into the landscape, turning these places into a hallmark of the populist and illiberal character of Fidesz' rule.

Keywords: Symbolic landscape; Hungary; Populism; Illiberalism, Budapest

A paisagem simbólica de um regime iliberal: glorificando o período entre guerras na Budapeste pós-2010

Resumo: Desde 2010, o partido Fidesz, liderado por Viktor Orbán, tem erodido ou esvaziado, gradualmente, as instituições democráticas na Hungria, utilizando vários métodos comumente aplicados por regimes iliberais e autoritários. Estudos anteriores exploraram como as políticas de memória desempenham um papel crucial na manutenção da retórica populista, essencial para o governo do Fidesz. O presente artigo analisa a representação espacial do poder do Fidesz. Baseado na literatura de apropriação simbólica do espaço em geral e da política de memória do Fidesz em particular, o texto enfatiza a transformação de duas praças emblemáticas, localizadas centralmente na capital da Hungria: a praça da Liberdade e a praça Kossuth. Defendo que as intervenções/transformações destas praças inscrevem as narrativas "oficiais" reavaliadas e distorcidas da história nacional na paisagem, transformando estes lugares em uma marca registrada do caráter populista e iliberal do governo de Fidesz.

Palavras-chave: Paisagem simbólica; Hungria; Populismo; Iliberalismo, Budapest.

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The Marie Valerie bridge spans the River Danube connecting the historical towns of Esztergom in Hungary and Štúrovo in Slovakia. The bridge – opened in 1895 – was blown up in 1944 by the retreating Wehrmacht, and due to intransigence between Czechoslovakia and Hungary, its remnants stood as a memento in the river for decades. With financial contribution from the European Union, the bridge was rebuilt and re-opened in 2001. Viktor Orbán, back then the prime minister of the Republic of Hungary said the following in his inauguration speech on 11th October 2001:

> Let me thank also the European Union, without whose help it would have been harder to rebuild this bridge. [...] Today's inauguration of the bridge is a message for the European Union as well: [...] we have cleaned up even the last wartime-ruined bridge. Slovaks and Hungarians are also mentally ready and matured to become members of the European Union. [...] I have arrived with Mr. Verheugen, commissioner of the European Commission, by the same ferry. This has been the last ferry between the two banks; it is clear for all that the past has ended with this ferry trip. When we walk through the bridge now, all will feel that the future has started.[1]

The reconstruction of the bridge was a positive manifestation of the foreseeable European Union membership of Hung ary and Slovakia, and it was also proof that Hungarians were prepared to join the EU. The bridge also symbolised the end of division/fragmentation, and a path to the future, which is about being connected and integrated, about building and rebuilding bonds both the material and symbolic sense.

Since 2001 – as the proverb goes in Hungarian – much water has run down the Danube. The Republic of Hungary was renamed as Hungary soon after Fidesz party won the elections in 2010. On 11th October 2021 Viktor Orbán as PM of Hungary addressed the audience in a different tone when celebrating the 20th anniversary of the Marie Valerie bridge's inauguration:

> We longed for the homeland of our homeland, for Europe, [...] Today the mood of that time has flown, it has evaporated. Even twenty years ago, Brussels was on our side, it supported us, and it helped us to rebuild this bridge. Today Central Europeans are seen ever more frequently not as equal partners, but as second-class Member States. [...] This is a threat that is difficult to combat, and we often find ourselves in the role of

[1] Address of Dr. Viktor Orbán prime minister in the inauguration ceremony of the rebuilt Marie Valerie Bridge Párkány-(Stúrovo)-Esztergom). Available at: https://adoc.pub/t-a-r-t-a-l-o-m-j-e-g-y-z-e-k-i-a-magyar-kztarsasag-nemzetkz.html. Accessed on: 10 Oct. 2021. Translation: Éva Merenics.

> modern-day Davids facing the Goliath of Brussels. [...] We want to be good students of history. We must not only rebuild bridges, but also remember who destroyed them. If we fail to do so, such things will happen again and again. [...] Every era has its symbols. The Marie Valerie Bridge continues to be a symbol. Its message to us is this: we are the future of Europe, and we must never again allow the destruction of the bridges that connect us to one another. Our destiny continues to be shared, while our tasks have multiplied, and our responsibilities increased.[2]

Not only is the richly decorated rhetoric apparently different, but the content is in stark contrast with the previous speech. PM Orbán talks about the feeling of disillusionment of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries vis-á-vis the European Union. He even recalls the biblical fight between David and Goliath to give a sense of the gravity of the envisaged struggle, where the European Union is pictured as a gigantic enemy, with which the CEE states are in a mythical wrestle. The first speech awaits a bright future in the foreseeable European Union integration, whereas the second one depicts a constant fight.

The analysis of the two texts (or the excerpts above) could have been further elaborated. Hereby I only use these excerpts to illustrate first the populist shift in rhetoric, characteristic of the post-2010 Hungarian governments. Second, at a more general level, to exemplify the importance of symbolic edifices, and above all, the (re)articulation of memory and (re)appropriation of symbols by political power.

It is commonsense that political regimes thrive to create their own symbolic landscape, which broadcasts the main ideologies, serves as a spatial proof of their existence, and provides the stage and palimpsest for celebration and demonstration of power in public space. References to the past both in rhetoric and performative act of commemoration is an essential element in consolidating a new power. As Hobsbawm notes, "[R]evolutions and 'progressive movements', which break with the past, by definition, have their own relevant past" (Hobsbawm, 2012, p. 2). This chosen past is often not a remote one, but a more recent, with which continuity can be established smoothly. Memory politics is then also tailored to canonize that selected past, while other periods and heroes are erased, reinterpreted, or appropriated. This is the point of departure of this article.

When in 2010 the Viktor Orbán-led Fidesz party gained a two-third majority in the parliament of Hungary, they soon baptized the landslide victory as a "revolution in the

[2] Address of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in the ceremony marking the twentieth anniversary of the inauguration of the Marie Valerie Bridge. Available at: https://primeminister.hu/vikstories/address-prime-minister-viktor-orban-ceremony-marking-twentieth-anniversary-inauguration-marie/. Accessed on: 10 Oct. 2021.

polls". Indeed, soon fundamental changes shook Hungary's social, political, economic, and cultural life. Fidesz won the two consecutive elections in 2014 and in 2018 and gained governing majority.[3] This enabled the 2nd, 3rd, 4th Orbán governments to gradually dismantle the basis of rule of law, to curtail the freedom of press and juridical independence, to question the values of liberal democracy, and heavily and openly criticize the European Union – as the second excerpt above demonstrates.

Nevertheless, in the present article I focus on some aspects of memory politics of Fidesz which shed light on how the "break with the past" and finding the "relevant past" described by Hobsbawm above, was translated in the symbolic landscape of the capital, Budapest. Drawing on the example of two centrally located squares, Liberty Square and Kossuth Square, I illustrate how the changes in the symbolic landscape of these demonstrate the shifts in the memory politics related to three significant, traumatic historical events in Hungary's 20th century history: the Treaty of Trianon ending World War I, the Holocaust and the 1956 Uprising. It is argued that Fidesz found its "relevant past" in the interwar Horthy-era. The connection is fabricated by presenting the anti-communist and national-Christian-conservative character of both regimes. This enables a novel wave of decommunization, which results in the re-evalution of the 1956 Uprising and helps to maintain the "enemy" rhetoric, central to populist narrative.

The transformation of these squares inscribes the re-evaluated "official" narratives of the above crucial events into the landscape, turning these places into a hallmark of the populist narratives and illiberalism of Fidesz' rule. In the light of emerging populist voices and parties in the European Union (and outside of Europe) the durability of the Fidesz regime makes the topic current. Besides, this review is underpinned by the fact that the twelve years of absolute power provides enough time, legislative and executive power to implement major shifts in the politics and in the landscape of memory as well.

The article first provides a brief overview of the literature exploring the significant shifts in memory politics of the Fidesz rule since 2010. Then I introduce possible directions on how geography might approach the study of memory. This is followed by the two case studies and some final considerations .

[3] During the review process of the article, the Fidesz won the parliamentary elections on 4th April 2022. The 5th Orbán cabinet (the 4th in a row since 2010) governs by decree (at least) until 1st November 2022. Available at: https://abouthungary.hu/news-in-brief/parliament-votes-to-extend-special-legal-order-in-view-of-war-in-ukraine. Accessed on: 20 June 2022.

The transformation of memory politics

Memory and symbolic politics have been fundamental tools of the Fidesz party. During the first Orbán government (1998-2002), several symbolic projects were launched to arouse national sentiment showcasing Hungarian innovativeness in films or in exhibitions dedicated to scientists. Nevertheless, the new building of the National Theater, or the Millenáris Park (a previous brown field which was turned into a public park with cultural institutions) might be mentioned as architectural projects illustrating the first Fidesz government's rhetoric (Palonen, 2013, p. 548-549). However, the rather peripheral location, the limited accessibility, and the low symbolic value have not rendered them representative spaces of Fidesz power .

Since 2010 numerous articles and volumes have been published about the nature and durability of the Orbán regime (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018; Bogaards, 2018). Authors agree that the regime is characterized by populist rhetoric, where the source of power is the "people", who gave the government the mandate to act in parliamentary elections. However, since 2014 elections have been criticized as being "unfair" (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018, p. 1174). Notably, who belongs to the "people" has "become an exclusive rather than inclusive category" (Palonen, 2018, p. 9), which is created in a constant discursive process of othering. In the last decade the "other" were migrants, left-liberals, Brussels, NGOs and more recently LMBTQ activists. Writing about the similarities between the regime built by the Fidesz in Hungary and PiS in Poland, Sata and Karolewski proposed the concept of Cesarean politics, which rests on three pillars: patronal politics, state capture, and identity politics. In the latter, as they argue, the "discursive process of othering serves to strengthen the imagery of the homogenous 'true people', served by the Caesar against 'dangerous others' in a continuous existential fight" (Sata and Karolewski, 2020, p. 217). Importantly, the enemies are present and active for the time being, but the rhetoric often builds on, or recalls past events (see the Orbán speech from 2021 above: "we want to be good students of history") both to evoke enemies and to find predecessors, similar warriors of "true people", underpinning the importance of memory politics for the illiberal Orbán regime.

Andrea Pető's recent article is particularly to-the-point in explaining the nature and inner logic of the illiberal memory politics. As she argues "The illiberal state is an assemblage of previously existing and well-functioning ideas like nostalgia and anticommunist nationalism" (Pető, 2021, p. 7). Applying the term, the illiberal polypore state (Grzebalska and Pető, 2018) she states that such a regime "feeds on the vital resources of the previous political system while simultaneously contributing to its decay by setting up parallel institutions and channeling resources to them." Then discrediting, delegitimizing, and defunding the previous/long existing institutions runs in parallel with constructing an alter-

native memory produced by newly established institutions. Nevertheless, – as Pető continues – the new regime requires new truth, which is a post-truth, where the content does not matter, just the framework (Pető, 2021). Notably, the new narrative does not only enter schoolbooks, or appears in publications of the new institutions, but – as the examples will illustrate – becomes manifest in public space in forms of statues, street names and memorials commemorating figures from the interwar era.

When analyzing Orbán's EU confrontative narrative strategy, Péter Csigó and Máté Zombory links it to the general memory crisis in Europe. As they note, the foundations of common European identity rests on the acceptance of the Holocaust as a universal suffering and the acknowledgment of the victimhood of the lost millions. When in 1990 the former Socialist countries started the EU accession process, the rules of recognition politics were left unquestioned. However, these countries attained victimhood, arguing that they not only suffered from the Nazis, but from the totalitarian Communist regime as well. This double victimhood narrative was accepted, and critical tones on both sides were wiped under the carpet. According to Csigó and Zombory the illiberal reappropriation of recognition political discourses partly capitalizes on the sentiment of those, who feel betrayed and losers of post-1990 social-economic-political transformations (i.e. capitalism, the European integration, privatization). The country's victimhood has been expanded from being a victim of totalitarian regimes to being a victim of all current political debates, which leads to the conclusion that "all opponents of the victim-nation must stand on the side of the universal evil" (Csigó and Zombory, 2021, p. 18-19). Therefore, memory and recognition politics get interlinked, twisted, and used as a token in contemporary political debates and power strategies, not only inside Hungary, but at the European Union level as well, given that "Orbán's strategy aims to normalize 'illiberal democracy' as part of the liberal universe. This strategy uses the political weaponry of recognition to create the semblance that it accepts the basic constitutional rulebook of EU polity. Recognition political language allows Orbán to take a legitimate position and delegitimize his adversaries" (Csigó and Zombory, 2021, p. 12).

Delegitimizing Hungarian (and European) left liberals is maintained rhetorically by constant othering, while in parallel the nation has been rearticulated as the basis of legitimacy (Palonen, 2018, p. 9). Both the enemy-creating mechanism of populist rhetoric and the toolkit of illiberal memory politics explained above are traceable in the recent transformations of the memorialization and spatial representation of three historical traumas of 20th century Hungary.

The geography of memory: symbolic landscape and its appropriation

Recognizing the inherent power in the spatial manifestation of preselected memories, political regimes are usually eager to produce and control emblematic symbols and places by creating monuments, or by (re)naming streets (Meusburger, Heffernan and Wunder, 2011). A memory cast in stone, following a certain agenda, eternalizes one single narrative in a fixed aesthetic, serves the specific purposes of the political power, limits the freedom of remembering and forgetting. Therefore, a monument contributes to the erosion of memory (Forty, 2001, p. 7): certain elements of the past become visible, whilst other details remain obscured.

Besides what/who is memorialized, the location and spatial position of a memorial site are equally relevant, as the "geography of memory locates history and its representation in space and landscape" (Foote and Azaryahu, 2007, p. 127). Geographers mainly contribute to the research of public memory by analyzing "the spatial, locational and material patterns and dynamics of these commemorative practices, generally in public spaces" (Foote and Azaryahu, 2007, p. 127).

From the point of view of spatiality, we can examine how a given place has been transformed and used by consecutive powers. When analyzing the Vittorio Emanuele II Monument in Rome, Atkinson and Cosgrove (1998) show how the "official" rhetoric of this centrally located place and monument was modified in the beginning of the 20th century by different regimes.

Another analytical approach might focus on the preferred/applied symbolic space appropriation strategies of a given political regime. Symbolic space appropriation strategies refer to the various procedures that aim to inscribe a given power's control over a territory. Among the most widely used procedures renaming streets (Alderman and Inwood, 2013; Azaryahu, 1996; Palonen, 2008), toppling statues and installing new memorials (Azaryahu, 2011; Foote, 2003) might be mentioned. Nevertheless, grand civic architecture (Dissard and Kurşunlugil, 2020) and religious buildings (Harvey, 1979) might also be listed here as projections of power which intervene in an existing spatial fabric and recall the desired past either in grandiosity or aesthetic style.

In democracies, the design of a memorial site is usually preceded by a discussion or consultation with different stakeholder groups, while spontaneous, grassroots commemorative practices might also be embraced and supported, even at the national level. Whereas in authoritarian regimes, the centrally directed memorialization leaves no or very limited space for civil initiatives (Foote and Azaryahu, 2007). Neither kind of regime can guarantee the durability of a memorial project: it not only can fail due to power's

interventions, but also it's fate relies on how effective it is in engaging in social practices (Erőss, Michalkó, and Galambos, 2016).

After the landslide victory of Fidesz in 2010, the "revolution" was also reflected in the comprehensive renaming of public spaces. On the one hand, foreign names and historical figures were replaced by Hungarian names. On the other hand, certain historical figures were reassessed as leftists, collaborators or advocates of dictatorship, and their names were thus erased from the cityscape (Palonen, 2018; Akçalı and Korkut, 2015).

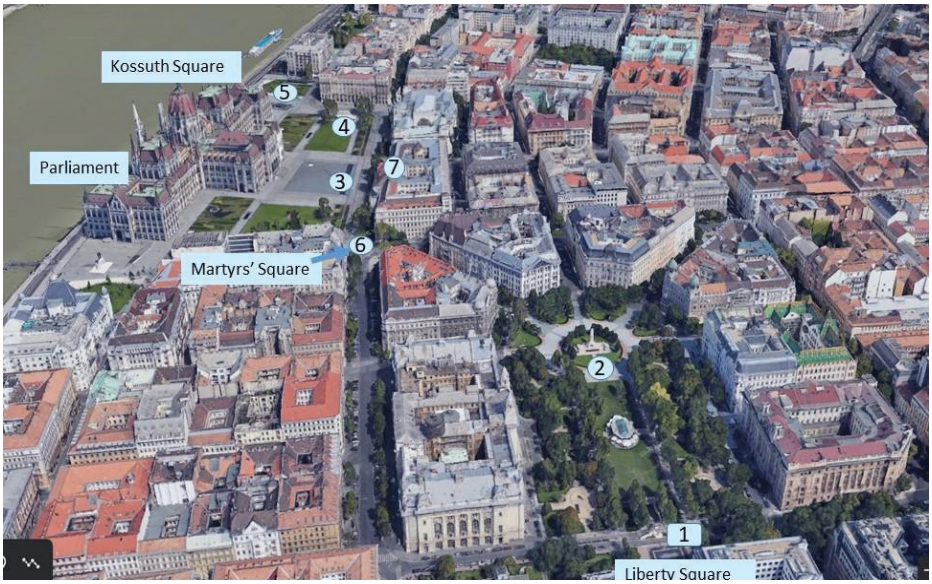
When evaluating the changes in symbolic landscape, creation is equally important as erasure. In post-2010 Hungary the new hallmark of national heroes includes – among others – figures, whose career and activity can be linked to the desired national values and the symbolic reunification of the nation across borders. Additionally, they might provide historical continuity with the interwar Horthy era. For instance, among the newly re-baptized street names political and cultural figures of the conservative political traditions active or favored during the interwar Horthy era appeared (e.g., writers Albert Wass or Cécil Tormay). Nevertheless, the transformations of two central squares of the capital manifest a different spatial scale and level in the commemoration of the Horthy era in post-2010 Hungary.

Liberty Square's Monument to the Victims of German Occupation: "whitewashing" the Horthy era

Liberty Square is advertised as "one of the must-see destinations when you visit Budapest" due to the mix of scenery and history[4] that make it one of the most important symbolic spaces in the modern history of Hungary (Figure 1). The square has been the subject of a series of symbolic space appropriation campaigns carried out by consecutive political powers over the last two hundred years (Boros, 2019). Some of these monuments stand to this day, while others were toppled, or moved to a different location. Consequently, the square is haunted by the ghosts of historically-politically engaged monuments, and spatial mnemonics of different regimes. Without going too much into details, I will introduce some of the cornerstones 20th century Hungarian history that are linked to these squares and are irreplaceable elements of public memory.

[4] Available at: https://free-budapest-tours.com/the-history-and-stories-of-budapests-liberty-square/. Accessed on: 10 Oct. 2019.

Figure 1 – Liberty Square and Kossuth Square in Budapest. 1) Monument to the Victims of German Occupation; 2) Soviet War Memorial; 3) National Flagpole; 4) Kossuth Memorial; 5) István Tisza Memorial; 6) Monument of National Martyrs (Previously Imre Nagy Memorial); 7) Memorial of National Unity



Source: GoogleEarth, author's edit.

The first is often referred to as the Trianon trauma. The name derives from the Treaty of Trianon, signed on 4th June in 1920 during the Paris Peace Conference, following World War I. According to this treaty, as one of the losers, Hungary lost 2/3 of its territory, mainly inhabited by various ethnic groups (Romanians, Slovaks, Serbians, Croats, Ukrainians). Approximately 3 million Hungarians also resided in these territories, who thus became minority citizens of the newly established neighboring states. In the interwar period Hungary was governed by Miklós Horthy, a former admiral of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. He came into power after the collapse of the Socialist Federative Republic of Councils in Hungary in 1919. In the Horthy era territorial revision was the absolute priority of foreign politics while everyday life was deeply infused with irredentism, which actively used the public space as well.

Perhaps the most well-known irredentist monument of the Horthy era stood on the north side of the Liberty Square. Unveiled as early as 16th January 1921, the sculptural ensemble symbolized the seceded parts of the country: the north, the east, the west, and the south. A flowerbed was planted in between the figures, displaying the map of the pre-WWI Kingdom of Hungary (Zeidler, 2007). In his address, Nándor Urmánczy, an important

figure in the irredentist movement, deemed the memorial as a place for national pilgrimage, the "furnace of revenge and hate". The National Flagpole was added to the four statues on 20 August 1928 (Figure 2). The 8-meter-long Hungarian national tricolor, which hung on a 20-meter-high flagpole, bore several inscriptions referring to the territorial revision of the country after which Hungary would regain its lost territories. A remarkable symbolic element of the memorial was its base, compiled of soil brought there from the territory of the 72 counties of the pre-Trianon Kingdom of Hungary, from major historical battlefields and the WWI cemeteries of Galicia and Doberdo (Zeidler, 2002). Nándor Urmánczy was an active propagator of erecting similar National Flagpoles all around the country. These were not only meant to commemorate the lost territories but also symbolized the unity of the nation . By 1939 the number of flagpoles rose to 350 (Dömötörfi, 1991).

Figure 2 – National Flagpole on the Liberty Square in the interwar period. Today the Soviet War Memorial stands in its place

Source: Available at https://www.kozterkep.hu/9167/ereklyes-orszagzaszlovetito=73686.

When the Soviet troops occupied/liberated Budapest, they chose the place of the National Flagpole at Liberty Square to erect the memorial dedicated to the Soviet soldiers who lost their lives during the battles in Budapest in 1944-1945. The Soviet monument was unveiled on 1st May 1945. The four irredentist statues, that did not fit the new narrative anymore – were removed in August 1945. Today the Soviet war memorial is encircled by the statues of two US presidents, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush and the US Embassy is only a few steps away.

Considering the symbolic importance of the square, it is well established why the 2nd Fidesz government chose this square to place a new monument. On 31st December a government decree ordered the installation of a monument at Liberty Square, dedicated to the victims of the German Occupation in Hungary.[5] Although Hungary entered World War II as a German ally, on 19th March 1944, it was occupied by the German army. Soon ghettos were established and deportations of the Jewish and Roma populations were ordered. With the active co-operation of Hungarian armed forces approximately 400-500.000 Hungarian citizens, overwhelmingly Jews and tens of thousands of Roma were exterminated in death camps. Importantly, laws restricting Jews were passed long before the Nazi occupation: first in 1920, then in 1938, 1939, 1941 and 1942. Similarly, labour service of Jewish men was ordered by Hungarian authorities during World War II. Following the war, confrontation with the trauma of the Holocaust and the clarification of responsibility remained partial (if at all).

Under such circumstances, the idea of a memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation was instantly objected both inside and outside of Hungary (Fehér, 22 Apr. 2014). Daily protests and street actions slowed down the construction but could not prevent its finalization: the last figures were put place during a Saturday night in July 2014 (Nolan, 2014). The final version of the monument was condemned by professionals (artists, art historians): The critiques mainly concerned its didactic aesthetic and its spatial position (squeezed in between the service road of an underground garage and a road with constant car traffic considered not fitting for a memorial) (Figure 3 and 4).[6]

[5] 2056/2013, XII.31. Government decree. *Magyar Közlöny/Hungarian Bulletin*. 2013/225. 31 Dec. 2013. Available at: https://net.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A1300565.KOR&timeshift=20170101&txtreferer=00000003.TXT. Accessed on: 23 Dec. 2021.

[6] As the respected sculptor, György Jovánovics summarised: "This is not an up-to-date work. [...] Viennese neo-baroque mixed with social realist kitsch" (Földes, 2014). For more detail regarding the critics and chronology of construction and protest see Erőss (2016).

Figure 3 – The Monument to the Victims of German Occupation. The Eagle representing Nazi Germany and Archangel Gabriel as a symbol of Hungary

Source: Author's photo.

Figure 4 – The Monument to the Victims of German Occupation, standing on a little piece of land, squeezed in between roads on Liberty Square

Source: Author's photo.

Nevertheless, both concerns were dwarfed by the outcry over its message and the symbols that were chosen to depict the narrative. According to the objections, the interpretation of the monument relativizes the responsibility of the Hungarian government and armed forces at the time of the occupation, having actively assisted in the extermination of nearly half a million Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust (Ungváry, 2014). The role Hungary played in World War II, including the details and circumstances of German occupation or the Jewish Holocaust, especially the role the Hungarian state and collaborators played in it, is one of those topics that is still not widely known and/or accepted by the wider society. The state monument suggests that the evil eagle (Germany) is the perpetrator, while Archangel Gabriel (Hungary) is an innocent victim, who lost its power during and under the reign of Nazi Germany. In an open letter, leading historians clearly pointed out why this interpretation of history is unacceptable: "the monument is based on a falsification of history, it cannot serve its [alleged] function. By presenting the victims of the Holocaust and the collaborators as a single victim, it insults the memory of the victims" (Horváth, 2015). As Krisztián Ungváry, historian, commented: the monument's symbolism and the political intention behind it tries to "whitewash" Hungary's role in the Jewish Holocaust in Hungary (Ungváry, 2014). The monument not only blends together victims and perpetrators, but fails to represent the responsibility of the Hungarian state".[7] Importantly, the monument bears an additional interpretation. Since 2011, Hungary has a new constitution, called the Fundamental Law of Hungary. In its preamble one can read that "We date the restoration of our country's self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, from the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected organ of popular representation was formed." As Pető explains, this reading canonizes the "double occupation" of the country, shifts the responsibility to the occupiers and attempts to make the collaboration with Germany invisible (Pető, 2021, p. 5).

Hereby it is important to notice the circumstances in which the memorial was born. The decision was made without any prior consultation, and it was communicated in a government decree issued on 31st December. The sculptor – who also designed the statues around the National Theatre – was directly appointed[8] by the minister responsible for the implementation of the project, the plan of the memorial was accepted without obtaining official expert statement of the landscape committee and the construction company was commissioned without a tender. The hasty process was explained with the approaching

[7] The Living Memorial and the Szabadság Square resistance. Available at: http://www.silentheroes.eu/attachments/02/04_01/LivingMemorial_PRESS.pdf. Accessed on: 8 Oct. 2021.

[8] The National Theatre was also built by an appointed architect, without artistic competition (Palonen, 2013) during the first Orbán government.

anniversary of the occupation (70th anniversary on 19th March 2014), but according to the opponents, the non-transparent, top-down decision-making about a monument, which lack any previous public discussion about this traumatic part of the country's history (Newton, 2014; Horváth, 2015) was rather an example of the illiberal turn in politics and cynical abuse of power (Fehér, 1st Aug. 2014).

Notably, the monument has never been officially inaugurated and it has never been used in any official ceremony or commemorative event. Consequently, it has not become part of the symbolic landscape of the Fidesz government, neither was it accepted as a monument or memorial by the public. In contrast to the neglected official memorial, an ever-changing counter-memorial, called Living Memorial was compiled from personal relics, photos, flowers, and it has been kept alive by activists and has evolved into a place of civic protest (Erőss, 2016; Mikecz, 2021).

Renovation of the Kossuth Square: Glorifying the Horthy era

Kossuth Square lies few steps away from Liberty Square (see Figure 1). Until the mid-19th century it was on the outskirts of Pest. By the turn of the 19th century the previous dump was transformed into a magnificent square of the rapidly developing capital of the Kingdom of Hungary. The square is dominated by the Parliament (House of the National Assembly), designed by Imre Steindl. Besides its political and symbolic function, the square has been a traffic hub with a subway station, trolley and tram lines passing by, while the MPs cars occupied the area in front of the main entrance, thus by the end of the 1990s the square resembled rather an open-air parking lot. Hence, by 2010 there was a consensus that it is high time to completely renew it. When the resolution about the reconstruction of Kossuth Square was passed in 2011, it swept aside any plan that would envisage a green and sustainable urban square. Instead, the reconstruction of the state-owned square was imagined in a manner which "accentuated its position for the national heritage" (Akçalı and Korkut, 2015, p. 84).

The relevant state document specified the restoration of "pre-1944 artistic image of the square."[9] The complex reconstruction project was named after Imre Steindl, who designed the Parliament. According to the director of the Steindl Imre Program, Tamás Wachsler, "[t]he reason why 1944 was chosen as date of reference is because the country lost so-

[9] 61/2011 (VII.13). Available at: https://mkogy.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=a11h0061.OGY. Accessed on: 10 Oct. 2017.

vereignty that time (however, the iconoclasm of statues started in 1945)".[10] Such a narration recalls the wording of the new constitution that entered into force in 2011, stating that the country lost self-determination on 19th March 1944 (the Nazi occupation of the country) and only gained sovereignty back after the first free elections in 1990. Additionally, similarly to case of the Memorial to the victims of German occupation at Liberty Square presented above, claiming victimhood is in line with the logic of illiberal (memory) politics (Csigó and Zombory, 2021).

The sanitization of the interwar Horthy era offers two further historical parallels that can be drawn upon in the present. First, the symbolic reanimation of Horthy era allows for the continued recycling of the Trianon trauma. To this day approximately 1,5-2 million Hungarian live in the territory of neighboring countries as ethnic minorities. In 2010 one of the very first acts of the Fidesz government were the formulation of simplified naturalization. It made possible acquiring Hungarian citizenship in a simple procedure to those, who, or whose ancestors were once citizens of any Hungarian s tate formation. The act was celebrated as historical justice or as Toomey noted "as steps towards the ultimate redemption of Hungary's national honor without ever truly removing the spectre of Trianon from Hungarian life" (Toomey, 2018, p. 17).

Second, Orbán claimed the 2010 election to be a revolutionary victory over the left, while Horthy came to power after the fall of the Socialist Federative Republic of Councils in Hungary in 1919. The historical parallel between the two regimes is thus constructed by the image of a power (and strong leader) that saved the country from the Communist/leftist enemies. Those who voice criticism about the government's decisions can be subject to othering, labelled as alien by terms like leftist, liberal, cosmopolitan, and eventually the enemy of the nation (Palonen, 2018; Bozóki, 2017). The (re)articulation of the dichotomy between "us" and "them", maintaining the battlefield rhetoric is in line with the populist logic of Fidesz (Bozóki, 2015; Enyedi, 2018). The process of othering constitutes Fidesz (and its leader, PM Orbán) as the true representative and guardian of the nation in the present (see Sata and Karolewski, 2020). By appropriating the term nation, its content is hegemonized and constituted by the nationalist, conservative and Christian values that Fidesz uses in its rhetoric.

The Steindl Imre Programme aimed to create the "main square of the nation". In the first phase (besides the pedestrian friendly rearrangement of traffic and new green areas[11]) it entailed the revision of the statues and memorials to recreate pre-1944 conditions. In

[10] Available at: https://mandiner.hu/cikk/20140314_wachsler_steindl_imre_elkepzelesei_szerint_ujult_meg_a_kossuth_ter. Accessed on: 3 Feb. 2020.

[11] In practice it meant the clearing of forty trees, see Akçalı and Korkut (2015).

practice it meant: 1) removing certain statues and memorials which were installed after 1945;[12] 2) renovating the statue of Ferenc Rákóczi II, leader of an uprising between 1701-1711 against the Habsburgs; 3) replacing Lajos Kossuth's (a key figure of the 1848-1849 revolution and war of independence) memorial installed in 1952 with a replica of the first version from 1927; and 4) recasting and reinstalling memorials or statues which stood there before 1944, but were demolished/moved after 1945.

In the first group we find statues which fall victim to the post 2010 wave of "decommunization" (Palonen, 2019). The statue of Mihály Károlyi, prime minister of the first, short lived republic after World War I belongs to this group, which was removed from the nation's new "main square" and transported to the outskirts of a small town. Károlyi, born into an aristocrat family, was a radical democrat and pacifist. After handing over power to the Communists, he emigrated and died in exile. During the Horthy era, he was considered a traitor, and one of the prime perpetrators of Trianon (Palonen, 2019). His figure remains controversial to this day.

The other two memorials are both linked to the 1956 Uprising. Following World War II Hungary became part of the Soviet Bloc. An uprising erupted against the Communist dictatorship on 23rd October 1956. Imre Nagy, a Communist Party member became prime minister and proclaimed a Republic, but the uprising was crushed by the Soviet troops on 4th November. Nagy and many others were sentenced to death, thousands spent years in prison and hundreds of thousands fled to the west. The peaceful democratic transition in 1989 was launched with the symbolic act of Imre Nagy's reburial and the politicians of the re-established Republic of Hungary considered themselves heirs of the 1956 Uprising.

As part of the Steindl Imre Programme, the eternal flame commemorating the 1956 Uprising, raised in 1996 in front of the Parliament, was transferred to the opposite bank of the Danube. At present, it stands forgotten in a little square. The statue of Imre Nagy, with his figure standing on a ramp, overlooking the Parliament, was placed in 1996 on the Martyrs' Square (nr. 6 on Figure 1), at the southern corner of Kossuth Square in the direction to the Liberty Square. In 2018 the statue was transferred from its original location to a park next to the National Assembly Office Building, where it stands deprived of its original meaning. In both cases the removal was justified with the pre-1944 authenticity argument. The same argument was used in 2019 to rationalise the re-erection of the recast Monument of National Martyrs at Martyrs' Square. Its original was raised in 1934 to commemorate the victims of the Socialist Federative Republic of Councils in Hungary and stood until 1945.

[12] The popular statue of Attila József (a poet lived in the interwar period and had a cult during the Socialist era) was installed in 1980. It was moved closer to the Danube, but out of sight.

The third intervention is the case of the Kossuth memorial. The original memorial was erected in 1927, removed in 1950 and replaced in 1952 with a new version sculpted by Zsigmond Kisfaludy-Strobl. Again, by applying the authenticity argument, this latter version, composed during the Communist regime, was removed in 2013 and the pre-war version was recasted.

Finally, the fourth group contains statues which were erected before World War II and were demolished in 1945 or soon after. The statue of Gyula Andrássy (foreign minister of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy) and the memorial of István Tisza belong to this group. Tisza was the Prime Minister of Hungary from 1903 to 1905 and between 1913 and 1917. He was a conservative aristocrat, a loyal supporter of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy who perceived Socialists and ethnic groups as a major threat to Hungary and the Monarchy. He opposed universal suffrage and enacted a forced Hungarianisation to enhance the assimilation of ethnic minorities. The country entered World War I under his rule. He survived three assassination attempts, but not the fourth in 1918. Tisza's legacy was appropriated by the national conservatives, to whom he became a martyr. The original Tisza memorial was erected in 1934.

Although the renovation of Kossuth Square was supposed to reinstall the pre-1944 conditions, new elements, and memorials – some recalling prewar predecessors – also appear in the composition. An example of this is the 33-meter-tall flagpole that was placed opposite to the main entrance of the Parliament. It may evoke the National Flagpole (see Figure 2) that stood at Liberty Square in the interwar era as a central piece of the irredentist monument described above.

Another example for a new but not unprecedented composition is the Memorial of National Unity. Completed for the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon it is often referred to as the Trianon memorial (primarily in opposition) media.[13] The Memorial occupies a 300-meter-long section of the pavement of the wide Alkotmány Street, opposite to the Parliament. The Memorial itself is a sloping ramp. While walking down, the visitors can read the 12,485 toponyms appearing in Hungary's municipal registry in 1913, inscribed in black granite. The aesthetic of the memorial, especially in comparison to the memorial at Liberty Square, features a more modern design. However, the message it transmits is controversial: by displaying only the Hungarian version of the municipalities' names that belong to the neighboring countries since 1920 recalls the arrogance of the Hungarian political elite from the period of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and can be understood as

[13] Available at: https://24.hu/kozelet/2020/05/11/trianon-emlekmu-atadas/, accessed on: 22 Dec. 2021; https://index.hu/kultur/epiteszet/2020/04/24/eleg_latvanyos_lesz_az_uj_trianoni_emlekmu_az_orszaghaz_elott/, accessed on: 22 Dec. 2021; https://ma7.sk/hethatar/kepeken-a-budapesti-trianon-emlekmu-lenyugozo-lesz, accessed on: 22 Dec. 2021.

a symbol of revisionism today.[14] Even more so, as a great portion of those Hungarian sounding names were fabricated as part of forced Hungarianisation during the Monarchy (Szarka, 2020). Additionally, enlisting the names of municipalities that once belonged to Hungary might recall the National Flagpole monument stood on Liberty Square between 1928-1945, whose base was compiled of soil transported from all 72 counties of the pre-Trianon Hungary (see above). Although the name itself (Memorial of National Unity) might convey a genuinely positive message, calling for bonding, the memorial's negative form, the dark and cold black granite material it is composed of, the ghost of the interwar irredentist monuments in the nearby Liberty Square, and the long list of names of the municipalities of "Great Hungary" carved on the walls rather emphasize separation than unity, mourning over the once existing empire than celebration of togetherness. Noteworthy, the word "unity" recalls the Fidesz' kin-state policy activism, which aims for the symbolic reunification of the nation. While its name and aesthetic suggest a (rhetoric) shift, the message of the Memorial of National Unity feeds on the irredentist symbolic politics of the interwar Horthy era. The spatial position of the Memorial, the way it melts into the renovated Kossuth square, accentuates the relationship fabricated between the post 2010 Fidesz governments and its chosen "relevant past", the interwar era. In sum, the renovation of the Kossuth Square and its surrounding (Martyr's Square, Alkotmány Street) can be perceived as a grandiose spatial representation, a palimpsest of the Fidesz rule.

Final considerations

Hungary was once an eminent post-transition CEE country, pioneering in democratic political changes. Following 2010, it entered the news due to the maneuvers of the Fidesz governments rapid shift of the political, social, and economic realms of the country, pointing to a more authoritarian, 'illiberal' direction. In the last decade numerous studies analyzed the nature of the post-2010 Orbán regime, identifying its populism and illiberalism as key factors enabling the Fidesz party to keep power.

Both its populist and self-proclaimed revolutionary character have instigated the regime's active engagement in memory politics. The shifts in memory politics are reflected in the populist logic of othering (Palonen, 2018) and is determined by the illiberal appropriation of recognition politics (Csigó and Zombory, 2021). In some respects, the regime identifies its symbolic predecessor in the interwar Horthy era. The connection is

[14] Available at: https://hungarianspectrum.org/2019/04/15/the-trianon-memorial-a-monument-to-hungarian-revisionism/. Accessed on: 22 Dec. 2021.

fabricated by drawing a comparison between the situation in 1919 (when Governor Horthy gained power by replacing a Communist regime in Hungary) and 2010 (when Fidesz defeated a Socialist-liberal coalition government) and entails the reevaluation of the Horthy era according to the illiberal memory politics: by distorting the facts and creating post-truth (Pető, 2021). Nevertheless, beyond establishing the new narratives and dominating the discourse about memory, the creation of the regime's own symbolic landscape is of equally prime importance.

Conceived in 2014, the Memorial to the Victims of the German Occupation can be perceived as an attempt on behalf of the government to appropriate a space in the symbolically meaningful Liberty Square. It is also a spatial illustration of the wording of the new Fundamental Law, which states that Hungary lost its sovereignty in 1944 with the country's occupation by Nazi Germany and only gained it back in 1990. This narrative not only distances Hungary's responsibility in the Holocaust, but delegitimizes the post WWII period of the country, thus contributing to the distortion of the legacy of the 1956 Uprising.

The long-awaited renovation of the nearby Kossuth Square on the one hand demonstrates how the memory of 1956 is erased or set aside from the new "main square of the nation" (e.g. the memorial to Imre Nagy). On the other hand, as the analysis of the rearrangement of statues and other architectural elements illustrated, the past is employed in the present to rephrase the nation and reinstall its boundaries between "us" and "them". The revival of the aesthetics of a past regime contributes to the rehabilitation of the interwar Horthy era, without initiating public discussion about it. In sum, the renovation of the Kossuth square points to one direction: to establish the grandiose spatial representation of Fidesz rule including their narrative about state, nation, and importantly, who belongs in the national pantheon.

Finally, the realization of these spatial projects and interventions in the urban tissue, are not only in line with the populist character of the regime, but were executed pursuant to the logic of an illiberal regime striving for hegemony and domination.

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