

Not All the Past Needs To Be Used: Features of Fidesz's Politics of Memory

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Abstract

Since the 2010 elections, the current Hungarian government has proven to be a very active and restless “memory warrior” (Bernard and Kubik 2014). The ruling party, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz, shows both a neat understanding of national history and the ability to transmit it by the adoption of different tools. This politics of memory is instrumental in granting the government political legitimacy. By ruling out oppositional actors and their historical narratives from the public sphere, Fidesz presents itself as the primary champion of Hungarian national sovereignty. Hungarians is, then, portrayed as a nation that has long suffered from the yoke of external oppression in which the Ottomans, the Habsburgs, the Soviets and eventually the Europeans figure as the enemies of the Hungarians. Specific collective memories, including the Treaty of Trianon (1920), Nazi occupation (1944–5) and socialist period (1948–90), are targeted so as to enact a sense of national belonging and pride, as well as resentment against foreigners. Moreover, in its rejection of the pluralism of memories and yearn for the homogenization of national history by marginalizing unfitting elements, this politics of memory is consistent with the System of National Cooperation (Batory 2016) that Fidesz's administration has tried to establish in Hungary. This paper carries out an in-depth analysis of Fidesz's multilayered politics of memory by investigating both its internal and external dimensions separately. In the final section, conclusions are drawn up to summarize its key tenets. Official speeches, legislative acts, and four interviews with key historians of Hungary have been used as sources.

Keywords

politics of memory; Hungary; Fidesz; nationalism

Introduction

In cultivating its political project, Fidesz has always paid particular care to embed its proposals into an overarching historical narrative.¹ The inextricable link between Fidesz and memory is clearly epitomized by one of the first public speeches of its long-serving leader Viktor Orbán, delivered during the commemoration of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution on June 16, 1989. Orbán's brief statement, which called for the withdrawal of Soviet troops from

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¹ All quotations from French and Italian were translated into English by the author.

Hungary and for the end of the “communist dictatorship,” is considered as the dawn of his political career (Kovacs 2014). Therefore, ever since the right-wing party came to power for the second time in 2010, Fidesz has devoted particular concern as well as economic resources to implementing its own specific vision of history.

In order to fully comprehend the government’s politics of memory, the latter must be considered as a full-blown tool of political action. The ultimate goal here is to present Fidesz as the best legitimate political actor that can restore Hungary’s sovereignty, liberate the country from oppressive external encroachment, and carry out the nation’s will. History is adopted as an *instrumentum regni* to shape and spread the idea that the Hungarian national independence is definitively important, because it has been violated before and needs to be restored and protected.² The achievement of this goal drives the party’s construction of national history as a glorious fight against foreign invaders that culminated in 2010.

Western-styled liberalism is the primary target of this struggle, as “it had been clear since the beginning of the 2000s that, for Orbán, political liberalism was ‘anti-national’” (Shekhovtsov 2016a, 7). Therefore, the party strives to demonstrate that its rule, namely, a model of “illiberal democracy” (Mink 2016, 93; Orbán, 2014), is the only full-fledged Hungarian form of governance. Its politics of memory cannot be seen as independent and detached from this all-comprising political project, since it fosters legitimization for such a wide-reaching plan, namely, the implementation of “a work-based society” (Magyar 2016, 147).

Even though some similarities can be identified between Fidesz’s first mandate (1998–2002) and the second term, since 2010, the party has benefited from better conditions to elaborate its politics of memory. Two factors played a key role here. First, the ruling Fidesz–KDNP coalition won a large majority (52,73% of the vote and 67,88% of seats) in the 2010 elections (National Election Office 2010), soundly defeating the social democrats, whose credibility had been damaged by recurring scandals during the previous term (Balogh 2016). The electoral gains were repeated in 2014, when the ruling coalition got 66,83% of the seats (44,87% of the votes) (National Election Office 2014) under a reformed electoral system. These numbers have supplied Viktor Orbán’s party with enough popular legitimacy to undertake ambitious structural reforms, which also entailed constitutional changes. Second, whereas the first Fidesz’s administration ruled during the pre-accession period and consequently had to fulfill the strict criteria required by the European

2 Personal Skype interview with Ferenc Laczo, historian, conducted in April 2017.

Union, the party's second experience in power started when Hungary was already a member of the EU. The status of membership provided the government with a stronger leverage vis-à-vis the EU than before. In this scenario, Fidesz found itself in the best position to construct its own version of history with fewer obstacles. Moreover, it was also favored by the successful operation it undertook to "ensure the political homogeneity of public media" (Policy Solutions 2017).

It is argued herein that the politics of memory is usefully analyzed by pointing at two different, albeit interrelated, dimensions. Since its aim is to "play the conflictual past in today's political competitions" (Mink & Bonnard 2010, 7), this politics is weaponized for conflicts at both infra-national and international levels. Clearly, drawing a clear-cut border between these two aspects would be a rather quixotic task. However, although this is just an ideal-typical distinction, analyzing the internal and the external dimensions as two distinct layers that are affected by the politics of memory allows us to identify different patterns and narratives that collectively form the whole picture. Both dimensions coalesce into a cornerstone of the abovementioned global political project, which Fidesz has been carrying out. Consequently, the following two paragraphs deal with these two domains separately, while the third paragraph is devoted to a short recapitulation of the key features of Fidesz's engagement with memory and the scenario in which its action has developed.

The Internal Dimension

During the first phase of its political life, between its foundation in 1988 and Hungary's accession to the EU in 2004, Fidesz could develop its politics of memory almost in a void. Fidesz has always pursued a pragmatic politics, showing a high degree of adaptability. Whereas it started as a rather right-wing liberal and moderate party, it gradually acquired more conservative views, eventually conquering the political place, and the constituencies, of the Hungarian Democratic Forum (Fowler 2006; Oltay 2012). The right-wing party has proved to be very skilled in capitalizing on its adversaries' passivity, and this ability was also confirmed in the field of the politics of memory. When a pluralistic democracy was reestablished in Hungary, Fidesz's main opponents, i.e. the social democrats and the liberals, did not display any strong commitment to devise their own overall vision of history. By and large, they simply subscribed to the rhetoric of Central European states returning to Europe, a vision best epitomized by Kundera's concept of "Occident kidnapping" (1983). However, it must be noted that the Central European states

did not share the same rationale behind their similar stance towards history. Political calculus was the main reason for the post-communists' reluctance to deal with history: in a historical moment when this social system was being portrayed as a dictatorship that had oppressed its citizens for half a century, it was politically convenient to detach themselves from the communist heritage and to avoid any reference to the sensitive past. For the liberals, it was more a matter of ideological values. According to this interpretation, history needed to only be dealt with by professional historians. In their views, politics had to refrain from manipulating history, as it was common under the communist rule. As a result, during the 14 years of the pre-accession period both the post-communists and the liberals did not engage themselves in elaborating a coherent narrative to embed the Hungarian transition and its aftermath within a wider and appealing historical perspective.

It is useful to emphasize that their choice fitted comfortably in the *Zeitgeist* of the post-Cold War. After 1989, Europe was to celebrate the “end of history,” to borrow the often-quoted words of Fukuyama (1989). The general sentiment was that a historization of nations' political and social path was no longer needed due to the fact that the liberal model had finally turned out to be the most successful. The interrogation of the controversial events that occurred in the past was not required anymore. Gábor Egry identified this attitude as the “postmodern turn in historiography,” claiming that “some of the liberal politicians openly admitted that they understood history this way and, for example, they claimed that there was no need to establish the order dedicated to the memory of Imre Nagy, because there was no necessity to commemorate people, being history always just a human construction.”³ Thus, to reach a better future, it was enough to manage and supervise the smooth return to the West, embodied by the long sought membership in its institutions, the EU and NATO. As the economist János Kornai puts it, “In every respect, Central Eastern Europe tried to assimilate Western examples” (2006, 25).

Since their first steps in the Hungarian pluralist regime, Fidesz and its charismatic leader Viktor Orbán adhered to a substantially different interpretation of history. They claimed that Hungarian history did not end with the negotiated transition to liberal democracy. The latter was to be perceived only as an intermediary step. As noted by Fowler, during the pre-accession period, “Nationalist actors were not satisfied with the condition of the Hungarian nation and cultivated already dreams of national revival,” while socialists and liberals were “basically content with the condition of Hungarian nationhood and focus on the delivery of ‘progress’” by envisaging

3 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

a future in the EU (2004, 78). Unsurprisingly then, “At least since the Status Law [approved in 2002] the reparation of identity and the reorganization of the nation has been one of [Fidesz’s] goals” (Egry 2010, 27). Politics of memory was given a role within the plan that was conceived to reach this goal.

The public speeches that were delivered during the commemorations of key events of Hungarian history in the post-transition period embodied the contrast between opposed views on history and collective memory within the Hungarian political spectrum. The commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Revolutions of 1848 provided a good example (Brubaker and Feischmidt 2002). In 1998, the liberal president Árpád Göncz emphasized the “multiethnic” dimension of the rebellion against the Habsburg Empire and praised the European integration as the final remedy against further conflicts among European nations. As Hungary was on its way toward the EU, the president arguably intended to characterize such a pivotal landmark in the national history as the epitome of Hungarians’ fruitful cooperation with other European nations. Moreover, Göncz depicted 1848 Hungary as a full-blown European state by stressing the commonality of values between Hungarian revolutionaries and their coeval counterparts in the West. On this very occasion, Viktor Orbán, leader of the opposition back then, “interpreted twentieth-century history as a series of tragedies for the Hungarian nation” (Brubaker & Feischmidt 2002, 717). He argued that these tragedies had jeopardized the attainment of the emancipatory goals of the glorious 1848 rebellion against foreign rule. Bluntly, Orbán presented the revolt as a nationalist insurgence.

In the same year, Fidesz won the elections for the first time, and this “meant some serious changes for the politics of memory” (Ungváry 2015). The party was keen on portraying itself as a staunch anti-communist and pro-Europe conservative party. It placed a strong emphasis on claiming that the communist period was a painful past to be rejected as a whole. Leftovers of this past needed to be erased completely, both in terms of ideological values and concrete symbols, such as monuments, buildings and street name. The conservative party had always craved for “a presentation of national identity as a community of suffering and an anti-pluralist understanding of the collective” (Pető 2016, 3), within which the “memory of communism and the leftist tradition are omitted, forgotten,” and in 1998, it had the first opportunity to implement this politics.

Similar to other post-socialist states (Neumayer 2015), the strategy that Fidesz embraced to strengthen the legitimacy of its historical claims was the

equalization of the Nazi dictatorship with the communist rule. However, it has been argued that behind an apparently transversal condemnation of each form of totalitarianism laid a much narrower concern. Even if the conservative party “claimed to be a safeguard of ‘civic’ values and adopted an anti-totalitarian rhetoric,” a selective approach was actually adopted, in which “the voice of the party was highly anti-communist, while anti-fascist issues were simply ignored” (Ungváry 2015). The action that most exemplified the claim that communism and Nazism were in essence the same thing was the establishment of the House of Terror museum (*Terror Háza Múzeum*) in February 2002, almost at the end of Fidesz’s first term. The House of Terror is located on the Andrásy Avenue in Budapest, in a building where both the Arrow Cross Party (the Hungarian national socialist party led by Ferenc Szálasi) and afterward the State Protection Authority (the communist secret police from 1948 to 1956) tortured and killed many of their political opponents. According to its official website, the museum’s mission rests on a specific conception of the nation’s history: Hungary had to fight against “the two cruelest systems of the 20th century,” i.e., Nazism and socialism, to regain “freedom and independence,” thanks to the sacrifice of freedom fighters. Historian Mária Schmidt, who is widely acknowledged as the most prominent pundit among the government-friendly historians, has led the museum since its establishment. Gábor Gyáni underlines that Schmidt has been “entitled to pursue the most diverse various memory political campaigns.”⁴ What is more, Schmidt also holds the chair of the Public Foundation for the Research of Central and East European History and Society. In the opinion of Eva Balogh, Schmidt not only acts as the “court historian of Viktor Orbán” (Balogh 2015) but can also be considered as the “chief ideologist of the current government’s very controversial views on history” due to her active promotion of a revisionist interpretation of the Second World War and the Holocaust (Balogh 2014a). Besides running different institutions, publishing and influencing Fidesz officials’ statements on history, Schmidt has also been put in charge of the organization of the most important history-related events, such as the multiple celebrations of the First World War, the 70th anniversary of the Holocaust and the official commemoration of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in 2016.

The demonization of the communist past is accompanied by the glorification of the Admiral Miklos Horthy’s interwar rule, the latter being increasingly portrayed as a patriotic (and only mildly authoritarian) regime. The topicality of the interwar period within Fidesz’s politics of memory is hardly debatable.

4 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Gyáni, historian, conducted in April 2017.

Being considered the last fully sovereign Hungarian regime before the communist take-over, it became a reference for Fidesz. Portraying the interwar Horthy regime in a more positive light has been instrumental for Fidesz, since, as Egry claims, “reconstructing a never existing Hungarian past could serve as a point of continuity somewhere in the past before the end of the Second World War; and could be a point of connection for the present regime in Hungary.”⁵

Nonetheless, embracing Horthy’s legacy has also been a controversial choice for Fidesz, given the overt antisemitism of the 1930s. Hence, attempts have been made to downsize Horthy’s role in persecuting the Jews of Hungary, maintaining that the government played no active role in crafting and implementing anti-Jewish policies. In reality, the legislation targeting Jews was approved well before the outbreak of the Second World War. The attempted rehabilitation of Horthy has triggered heated debates among historians within Hungary and abroad. For instance, Deborah Cornelius argues that Horthy was actually a savior of the Jews of Budapest, and that this was also why Horthy was not indicted in the Nuremberg war-crimes trials (2011, 393). Such claims “should be considered as part of the Horthy myth” (Pastor 2012, 20), namely, the white-washing operation aiming at cleaning the image of Hungarian interwar élites by covering their active collaboration with Nazi officials and arguing that they were victims of the German occupation that began on March 19, 1944, and most assuredly not their allies. According to Fidesz, Hungary was occupied and the majority of the Hungarian population did not collaborate with the Nazis, neither before nor after the German invasion. In line with this, a new monument was erected in Budapest at the Szabadság Square to crystallize this interpretation of the Nazi occupation of Hungary. Two bronze statues compose the monument: an eagle, which stands for Nazi Germany, attacks Archangel Gabriel, embodying the innocent Hungary, holding an orb as a symbol of the state power. When the statue was unveiled on July 20, 2014, protests broke out.

In the same year, the war on public spaces gained momentum, and according to Gábor Egry, “huge reconstructions in Budapest and the plans to erect different monuments” amount to “the most palpable results of Fidesz’s politics of memory.”⁶ As conspicuous amount of academic research has shown (Nora 1984–1992; Umbelino 2015), space cannot be but intertwined with memory, thus becoming a battlefield for opposed memory actors. The building of new monuments is just a part of the rehabilitation campaign of the Horthy

5 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

6 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

regime, which has involved in the restoration of the urban landscape, the architecture of towns and cities. Signs and symbols of the interwar period have been disseminated all over Budapest; many public places have been named after prominent figures of the time, and one of the main squares of the city, Kossuth Square, has been restored to its pre-Second World War form. In addition, in 2011, Fidesz approved a new law on street names that banned the use of names of organizations, persons or institutions or symbols associated with totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. As summarized by Gwen Jones, “today’s Budapest is the site of extreme inequality, centrally-funded revisionist building projects and memorials” (2016). Outside the capital, however, public space has not undergone such a frenzied metamorphosis. Budapest and its restyling have attracted so far more attention than minor cities and the countryside. Here, memory practices often acquire a different form, since lesser effort and resources are allocated to scarcely inhabited areas.

In addition, key figures of the interwar period have been elected as national intellectuals worth studying in education curricula. Clearly, education is a key domain for memory, and the government can easily influence its policies through the Minister of Human Capacities. As Gábor Gyáni frames it, the authority is “rigorously controlling the history curricula at schools through re-writing the school textbooks, and denying the right of the teachers to choose among the available alternative textbooks.”⁷ Fidesz carefully selects historical figures to be remembered, as well as the reasons for doing so. The case of Cécile Tormay is emblematic for the selection process (Kurimay 2016). Tormay was a well-known novelist and a respected social theorist. Ideologically, she was both a conservative feminist and a fierce antisemite. Although Tormay eulogized the respect of traditional gender roles emphasizing that women ought not to claim gender equality with men, she was not married, had no children and was lesbian. When Tormay was sued for sleeping with the wife of an Italian nobleman and her sexual orientation became a matter of public domain, her popular standing among the Hungarian population was so high that she was eventually released. While in the subsequent rehabilitation of Tormay’s thought, historians close to Fidesz emphasized the strong nationalist component of her life, they covered up her sexual identity as well as her overt antisemitism.

In the interpretation that views the year 1944 as the beginning of foreign rule in Hungary, this subjugation came to an end in 1989. On April 25, 2011, the overwhelmingly pro-Fidesz parliament inscribed its historical vision in

7 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Gyáni, historian, conducted in April 2017.

the Hungarian constitution, approving the introduction of the following preamble:

We date the restoration of our country's self-determination, lost on the nineteenth day of March 1944, to the second day of May 1990, when the first freely elected body of popular representation was formed. We shall consider this date to be the beginning of our country's new democracy and constitutional order.

(Hungary's constitution of 2011)

According to Gábor Egry, this preamble marks “the discontinuity of the Hungarian constitutional life and, thus, to the Hungarian national existence.”⁸ In the opinion of judge Andras Varga of the Constitutional Court of Hungary, “the new Basic law – with great emphasis on its Preamble, the National Avowal [...] definitely broke – at least in a legislative and symbolic manner – with the totalitarian past” (Varga 2015, 5). The legal effects of this law are assumed to be rather symbolic, with no actual effects envisioned. However, the choice on March 1990, when the first parliamentary elections were held, seems to have little historiographic grounds. Ferenc Laczo notes that dating the regaining of independence in March 1990 is historically incorrect, as, even if one accepts the narrative of the lost independence in 1944, the most appropriate date should be 1989 or 1991, when Soviet troops withdrew, not 1990.⁹

In the list of top priorities of Fidesz's politics of memory, the rehabilitation of the Horthy regime is comparable only with the “reconsideration” of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. The different meanings and interpretations of this event have been already studied and debated by scholars (Györkei & Horváth, 1999; James, 2005; Fejtő, 2006; Sebestyen, 2006). Given its importance, historical research on the 1956 Hungarian Revolution gained momentum immediately after the fall of communism, as at that time, there was a social need to put an end soon to that “long period of ‘collective amnesia’ regarding 1956” (Cox 2006, 14). This oblivion had been bargained by the Kádarian regime when it was negotiated with the limited market reforms introduced with the New Economic Mechanism, which had helped improve standards of living after 1968. Fidesz has proposed a “reconsideration of the 1956 revolution,” mainly because “it is so much embedded into the legitimacy of the post-1989 regime that it cannot be erased from history.”¹⁰

8 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

9 Personal Skype interview with Ferenc Laczo, historian, conducted in April 2017.

10 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

The authorities are persuaded that the memory of the 1956 revolution ought to emphasize the heroism of the Hungarians, which is perceived as an essential trait of Magyar citizens, soldiers and warriors. The ruling party adopts “a reduced interpretation that looks upon ’56 as one more expression of this almost essential trait of Hungarians, that they are not just freedom loving people, but also freedom loving warriors, who recurrently are ready to make sacrifice for freedom and liberty.”¹¹ To impose this narrow interpretative focus, the official narrative portrays the insurrection as a fully nationalist insurgency against the illegitimate rule of communists.

Aiming at emphasizing the victimization of the Hungarian nation, a gender dimension is underlined in the historical accounts of the revolt. As Andrea Pető explains, “Freedom fighters [...] are mostly represented as private individuals, who are women and therefore are vulnerable, bodily, spiritually and psychologically. They are the victims of Communism” (Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2016). Women’s sorrow thus sublimates the nation’s tragedy. Pető also adds that “this memory [of the revolution] now is only focusing on anti-Communist resistance and created this imagined national unity, which was, of course, never the case”; this uprising was mostly triggered by social demands, indeed, and it is best understood as “a third way and socialist attempt.”¹² Gyáni noted that Fidesz had devised a mythical vision of 1956 already in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the party’s interpretation, there is a linear development in Hungary, beginning as early as 1956 and moving in the direction of the ostensibly bourgeois government they now embody. So in this view, the specific sense and the real significance of 1956 lay only in its anticipation of the day when Fidesz would eventually come to power. This view followed logically from their firm belief that they alone could continue and restore the legacy of 1956, which had been neglected even after 1989 (2006, 1204).

The emphasis on the nationalist and bourgeois features of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution rules out its leftist dimension, and the contemporary left faces obstacles in claiming any linkage to it. Such a presentation of the events of 1956 is instrumental for Fidesz to turn “an image of the past into a reflection [of the] future” (Gyáni 2006, 1204). This removal appeared evidently in 2016, during the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution, when the name of the primary symbol of that revolution, Imre Nagy, the then-executed chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Hungarian People’s

11 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

12 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

Republic, was not mentioned at all by Orbán in his speech (2016b) and, more broadly, in any other official commemorations.

Before moving to the external dimension of Fidesz's politics of memory, a final important element needs to be discussed. Fidesz has often complained about the lack of a satisfying pluralism among Hungarian historians, sustaining that key themes and events, such as the Treaty of Trianon, the interwar period and the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, have been depicted only from one perspective so far. This hegemony, it is lamented, would be a legacy of the communist period when only historians who were loyal to the regime could allegedly attend the university and publish on a limited number of issues. Therefore, Fidesz claimed that the Hungarian historiography should undergo a process of rebalancing, giving voice and public relevance to opinions that have been long marginalized. The most visible example of this aspiration was the foundation of the Veritas Institute on January 2, 2014. This institution can be considered as the quintessence of Fidesz's politics of memory. The online self-presentation of the institute very limpidly speaks about the necessity to establish historical truth. It is explained therein that the government founded this institute with "the explicit goal of studying and reevaluating the historical research of Hungary's past one hundred fifty years, especially of those historical events generating much debate but never having reached a consensus understanding." The institute contemplates three main themes: the post-compromise Hungary; the Treaty of Trianon, which is identified as "20th-century Hungary's greatest tragedy, the wounds of which remain unhealed even today" and the interwar age; and the post-war epoch, trying to assess "whether the Hungarian people passively accepted their plight [Communism] without a word of protest or was there resistance." Besides these three subjects, also the transition period is mentioned as "those four years" that have been "adequately shrouded", and there are many who wish it to remain so." This short presentation could properly serve as an appropriate summa of Fidesz's politics of memory. The goal of the latter's internal dimension is precisely "to relativize the importance of the change of regime in order to connect the 2010 elections with this restoration of national history, so bringing back the nation to its true destiny, true historical direction."¹³

The External Dimension

Evolutions in foreign policy bring about evolutions in the politics of memory. Petsinis describes this pattern as "the intersection among geopolitics, memory and identity-politics" (2015, 76). When analyzing Fidesz's recurrent use of

¹³ Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

memory in foreign policy, two elements come to the fore: the “Russian factor” and the memory of the Treaty of Trianon.

In particular since 2014, Fidesz has tried to lead the rapprochement between the EU and Russia in an attempt to benefit from this clever triangulation in foreign policy and while also gaining Russia’s support for those projects that the EU opposes. The best example of such a triangulation was the controversy about the expansion of the Paks Nuclear Power Plant, which Hungary will eventually realize with Russian funds, despite the initial opposition by the European Commission (2017).

There are many proofs about the tight liaison between Budapest and Moscow (Baev 2016; Krekó 2016), and it has gradually been noted how Viktor Orbán and the Russian President Vladimir Putin share similar views both in terms of internal politics and geopolitics (McNamara 2014). Furthermore, Hungary heavily relies on Russia for its energy supplies. Unsurprisingly, Fidesz’s politics of memory adapted to this situation, progressively mitigating its anti-Russian attributes when speaking about the communist period. This translated into a growing ambivalence vis-à-vis the communist past: what can be labeled as “a circumscribed de-Russification” has been undertaken. As Ferenc Laczo summarizes it, “You can’t be anti-Communist the same way, if you are pro-Russia.”¹⁴ In this aspect, the comparison between Fidesz’s first government (1998–2002) and the second term shows a sharp difference. Although it cannot be claimed that Fidesz is now trying to shed a positive light on the communist past, being that its staunch anti-communism has long been the source of its legitimacy, the reference to the Russians as creators and propagators of the communist oppressive system, as well as invaders who smashed the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, has gradually dissolved. In her comparison of Orbán’s speeches while at the opposition and once in power, Erin Jenne remarks that “after coming to power in 2010, his 1956 commemorative speeches dropped the east-west distinction and associated demonization of Russia” (2017).

While references to Russia as the main enemy of the Hungarian nation have gradually decreased in his commemorative speeches, Orbán’s attacks to the EU, and “Western Europe” as a whole, have become more common, following a path already undertaken by pre-Brexit United Kingdom (Daddow 2006, 321). Some key events of Hungary’s recent past can easily be recalled and turned into rhetoric arms, against those Western Europeans who allegedly showed no interest in saving Hungarians from communism. The commemorations of the 1956 freedom fighters have thus become the occasion to blame Western Europe for its inaction during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Policy makers

14 Personal Skype interview with Ferenc Laczo, historian, conducted in April 2017.

in the Western world are blamed for not having rescued the Hungarians and for having sacrificed them so that the fragile balance of the Cold War was not threatened. For example, during a speech that Viktor Orbán delivered on February 25, 2017, a date established by his government as “Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism” in 2010, he declared that

the ideas that led to oppression in the 20th century came into being in Western minds. Both communism and national socialism emerged as intellectual products of the West [...] it was we Central Europeans who were forced to live under this originally Western idea. (2017)

On the same occasion, the Minister of Human Capacities Zoltán Balog even maintained that an effective and constructive dialog between post-socialist states and Western Europe could be established only if the latter “is willing and able to look upon the sins of both Communism and Nazism as the shame of Europe” (Balogh 2017).

These claims are connected with the enforcement of the abovementioned project of setting up an illiberal democracy. Claims such as “today the task of Europe’s freedom-loving peoples is to save Brussels from sovietisation” (Orbán 2016b) aim to establish a comparison between the communist nomenklatura and the EU officials in the attempt of granting more room for Fidesz’s authorities to maneuver and strengthen their internal legitimacy. This Janus-faced pattern of de-Russification and stigmatization of the West through memory in foreign policy appears to be only embryonal, and it may be more appropriately considered as a device of populist politics rather than as a full-blown ideological turn.

Conversely, the second fundamental historical event that continues to play a role in Hungary’s foreign policy – the 1920 Treaty of Trianon – is much more deeply rooted in Fidesz’s ideological and historiographic background. Labeled as “defeated state” at the end of the First World War, Hungary was dismembered, losing almost two-thirds of the territory it had under the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Along with that, a considerable portion of its population now found itself in one of the successor states (most notably Czechoslovakia and Romania). Ever since then, the issue of Hungarian minorities abroad has been perceived as a living and fundamental subject deserving full interest, and it is demonstrated by the very powerful role played by the deputy prime minister for Hungarian communities abroad.

Much has been written on the Treaty of Trianon and its consequences (Romsics 1999, 2002; Macartney 2001), as well as on the political relevance of the issue of Hungarian minorities abroad (Toth 2006). However, for the purposes of the present research, the focus is on the role that this transnational memory

is given within Fidesz's politics of memory. Still, it strengthens the narrative of common suffering and self-victimization in a manner that resembles the abovementioned interpretation of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956.

Fidesz has drastically changed the official approach to the Hungarian minorities abroad from the one adopted by previous governments. As was made visible on many occasions, the government in Budapest now perceives them as full-fledged Hungarian citizens. The major move of this strategy has been the grant of citizenship to these minorities. On May 26, 2010, the Hungarian Parliament approved a new law that removed a residence requirement for naturalization, allowing thereby citizens in neighboring countries who had Hungarian ancestors before 1920 or between 1938 and 1945 to apply for Hungarian citizenship (Tóth 2011). This action was heavily criticized by the EU and neighboring countries (Bauböck 2010), especially Slovakia, where the Prime Minister Robert Fico threatened to strip whoever applied for the Hungarian citizenship of their Slovakian citizenship. His reaction derived, however, mostly from internal matters, namely, the political struggle between Fico's party, SMER and its nationalistic opponents (Slovak National Party and the People's Party – Our Slovakia). Today, Fico and Orbán agree on many positions in foreign policy, especially on how to respond to the migration crisis, although Fico has recently distanced himself from Orbán's harsh criticism of the EU (Jancarikova 2017).

Narrating the Treaty of Trianon as a national catastrophe, though, is a consequential political operation, not one necessarily grounded in historiography. Gábor Egry has extensively researched the actual forms of the relationship between Hungarians of the mainland and Hungarian minorities abroad. He did so by analyzing, for instance, the writings of young Transylvanians visiting Hungary in the 1930s. They were often treated as backward foreigners and even mocked for their accent or their vulgar Hungarian (Egry 2014). Despite Hungarian nationalists' yearn to portray this catastrophic event as a national trauma, longing for the lost unity of the community, Egry stresses that

there was no such a thing as a common uniform experience of Trianon that could be understood as a traumatic one. Rather, there is a concept of cultural trauma, which postulates that traumas could develop by a conscious mediated effort by actors in the public sphere, who through repeated efforts and [...] can practically educate the population that there was something that was traumatic for them.¹⁵

15 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

The memory of the Treaty of Trianon as a narrative of common suffering could be created and disseminated only in a period where no living witnesses of that event would have questioned it with their own personal accounts, for the widely accepted claim that the partition of the country was immediately and solely experienced as a tragedy by the population. Such an interpretation supplies the government with a prolific mine of symbolic meanings to carry out its regional foreign policy as well as to divert public attention from internal matters by playing the nationalist card. However, whereas Fidesz now attaches great importance to commemorating the Treaty of Trianon as a national catastrophe whose disgraced consequences still haunt Hungarians today, this has not always been the case. In 1990, when the Speaker of the Parliament György Szabád asked the assembly to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, Fidesz's members even left the room in protest (Nyysönen 2002). Therefore, the instrumental use of the Treaty of Trianon further exemplifies Fidesz's pragmatic approach to collective memory.

Finally, a less visible treatment of the use of this memory by Fidesz is worth analyzing. The current ruling class shares with the Horthy regime the strong belief in an organic conception of society, within which different roles are assigned to different people according to their status, and the whole citizenry orderly works for the wellness of the community. This hierarchical model of social organization is rather elitist, thereby contradicting the generally accepted depiction of Fidesz being a populist party (Enyedi 2016). Therefore, the Horthy's era not only provides the current government with a general historical precedent to base its own legitimacy upon but also inspires certain policies of the present government that "resemble the 1930s, for instance in social policy or education, or the dominant corporativism."¹⁶ In this specific perspective, rehabilitating the Horthy regime means legitimizing Fidesz's rule.

Conclusions: The Necessary Pluralism of Memories

Fidesz has proven to be very talented in drawing up its politics of memory, demonstrating a high degree of adaptability to different audiences and contexts. As Krisztián Ungváry puts it, "From the outset Fidesz's national memory policy was based on the necessity to serve the needs of the far-right voters and meet the demands of the moderate right as well" (2015). It must be recalled that within Fidesz itself, there are also different stances, and thereby in the last two years "there are signs of this politics of memory losing its coherence and dissolving into private enterprises of some memory

¹⁶ Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

entrepreneurs.”¹⁷ As a result, not only is Fidesz’s engagement with memory rather fluid, but also it is shaped by private interests. The relative success of Fidesz’s politics of memory is additionally due to its high emotional potential, which sharply contrasts with the rather technical view of politics that other parties have mostly committed themselves to after 1989. Feelings play a key role in explaining support for Fidesz. As claimed by Maruška Svašek, in post-communist states, “After an initial period of optimism in the early 1990s, when many citizens believed that the political change to democracy would restore their faith in government politics, an increasing number of people began to lose confidence in their new political leaders” (2006, 15). This optimism had its most outspoken advocates in the Euro-friendly liberal politicians who believed democratization and the neo-liberal model would have raised living standards and developed a full-fledged open society. They fueled the expectation gap of the population, which was later disappointed by the way democracy and capitalism actually looked like. In this mounting disillusionment and resentment against both the post-socialist élites and the European Union, whose membership turned out to underperform when compared to the expectations, one can trace the roots of Fidesz’s popularity. The party capitalized on these feelings by giving the population an alternative and more palatable version of history, thus scapegoating external actors and their alleged fifth columns, i.e. liberals and social democrats, for keeping Hungarians still below the living standards of richer EU members.

Fidesz’s multilayered politics of memory has been implemented through different kinds of actions, such as the transformation of the city landscape through the erection of monuments and the renaming of streets; the education policy, with a special focus on the selection of textbooks; events and public commemorations; the rhetoric of political discourse, namely, the speeches delivered by government officials such as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán; the legal provisions that “attempt to constitutionalize a history”¹⁸ and the establishment of historical institutions or museums dealing with topical historical events; and the selective funding of some and the demotion of others. These actions have been driven by a strong will to propagate specific views on Hungarian national history, namely, the equalization of Nazism and communism under the banner of “totalitarianism,” the self-victimization of the Hungarian nation, the ideal homogenization of the nation by covering subnational conflicts as well as the annihilation of the historical Left by erasing its legitimacy and the rehabilitation of the interwar period and

17 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

18 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

Hungarian figures of that era, linked to the belittlement of the Hungarian state's responsibilities for anti-Jews policies before and during the Second World War.

So far, Fidesz has been the only actor the analysis has taken into account. Thus, in this final section, it is then useful to outline the highly complex context where "memory games" (Mink & Neumayer 2013) are played in contemporary Hungary, where Fidesz is but just one, albeit the strongest, of many players. Its politics of memory did not develop in a vacuum, and it did not go uncontested. Overestimating its impact and perceiving public opinion as merely passive and prone to accept this instrumental vision of history would be misleading, even in a largely depoliticized society as the one in Hungarian. A living struggle between conflictual memories is ongoing, and it still deserves further inquiry.

Two other memory players challenge Fidesz. They are not considered as two institutionalized factions but rather two broad groups adhering to distinct historiographic perspectives and practices. The first group is composed of professional historians, who have been vocal in criticizing the government's politics of memory. They are mainly leftist and liberal scholars who fight to keep pluralism alive within Hungarian historiography. They constitute a niche and seem to lack the force to engage the public in historical debates that rarely overcome academic circles. According to Gábor Gyáni, these debates on key historical events "had some vitality only before the moment of Hungary's democratic transition," whereas conceptual conundrums such as the definition of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution "merit some interest only in academic discourse, and their discussion appears to be urgent as it is expected to inject new vigor even into the 'factual history' of the Revolution" (2008, 529). As the claims that these professionals put forward are not embraced by political groups willing to assimilate and defend them, only the civic society has actively fought the battle. However, Gyáni stresses that "the intellectual elite is rather divided on the one side, and looks to be not very militant on the other in struggling against the quasi-dictatorial political make-up of Orbán's rule. The civic society in Hungary is weak, one may even say that it barely exists."¹⁹ Therefore, the likelihood that these players may reverse the official politics of memory is rather low.

The second group is even more ill-defined and hazy. In a nutshell, Fidesz's hegemonic version of history is increasingly contested from the right, where Jobbik (a radical political party) aims to coalesce different far-right historians in

¹⁹ Personal Skype interview with Gábor Gyáni, historian, conducted in April 2017.

one sole powerful alternative front. It is what Egry identifies as “para-history,”²⁰ a blurred hybrid of conspiracy theory, eugenics and ultranationalism. Only rarely do amateur and professional historians belonging to this archipelago open official associations or establish structured networks. It is the case of activists that attempt to revitalize the Rune-writing (Maxwell 2004), who believe that the Hungarian language is not philologically linked to the Finnish and Estonian languages, as linguists argue, since this would not be “glorious enough; they want to create an alternative version, saying that it is connected to the Turkic languages.”²¹ As is the case for Fidesz’s action, the genesis of this para-history is also connected with the spread of post-modernist thought, according to which “everyone can be his or her own historian, in line with the democratization of the past, even if such a belief causes anxiety among the professionals who still hold a near-monopoly over the memory of the past” (Gyáni 2006, 1207). Given that Fidesz is a generational project and it is not very popular among young people, it may be argued that it is in this galaxy of alternative memories that more radical and potentially destabilizing counter histories are being forged.

Looking at the whole picture, an observer must be also very cautious in avoiding an “over-memorialization” of the Hungarian social life, as the majority of the Hungarian population does not engage in the political arena where these games are played. However, an aspect that clearly emerges from this research needs to be mentioned to complete this conclusive sketch of memory games in Hungary. Memory practices are not only produced and manipulated by institutional actors but also active among the entire society in the form of a galaxy of scattered individual memories that do not necessarily overlap with the more established historical accounts, nor aim to join any of them, as, for example, the issue of the extensive rape that the Red Army committed during its presence in Budapest in 1944–5. Memories of the systematic and unpunished sexual violence perpetrated by Soviet soldiers still persist in the collective memory; these memories have been mobilized against the myth of the “Soviet liberation” and may also be eventually weaponized against Russia, regardless of the official stance on the subject (Mark 2005). Despite its substantial financial effort and commitment, it does not seem that Fidesz’s action could ever aspire to erase the pluralism of memories present in Hungary. Collective memory can never be homogenous, as various reservoirs of personal memories keep on surviving among the population.

20 Personal Skype interview with Gábor Egry, historian, conducted in March 2017.

21 Personal Skype interview with Ferenc Laczo, historian, conducted in April 2017.

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