

Shadow Memorial Diplomacy: The Ronald Reagan Centennial Year in Central and Eastern Europe

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Abstract

This article examines the use of the memorialization of Reagan in transatlantic relations – specifically in the commemorations of the Ronald Reagan Centennial Year in 2011 in Central and Eastern Europe. Extrapolating from the case of Hungary, the article argues that because of the contemporary political status of its drivers and its oblique message, the Reagan Centennial’s campaign in Central Europe can be called “shadow” memorial diplomacy, which in 2011 used the former president’s memory to articulate and strengthen a model of U.S. leadership and foreign policy parallel to and ready to replace those of the then Obama administration. This study can serve as an international extension of previous scholarship on the politics of the memory of Ronald Reagan within the United States, as well as a case study of the use of memory in international relations.

Keywords

diplomacy; Ronald Reagan; memorialization; transatlantic relations

Introduction

Despite the great volume of scholarship written about the 40th president of the United States, few scholars have concentrated exclusively on the memorialization of Ronald Reagan. Policy-focused studies have tended to evaluate Ronald Reagan’s legacy as president (Schaller 2011; Hecla 2008). Other scholars have measured the rhetoric about Reagan as a symbol of U.S. conservative ideology and policy by comparing it with the president’s actual record in politics and policy (Longley et al. 2007). Closer to the topic, a number of studies of Reagan and memory have focused on the man’s use of memorialization and commemoration during his presidency (Bates 2011; Raphael 1999, 2007). Even fewer investigations exist of the memorialization of Reagan as such.

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One of the foremost of the latter is Niels Bjerre-Poulsen's 2008 paper "The Road to Mount Rushmore", in which the author investigates what he calls the "conservative commemoration crusade" regarding Ronald Reagan (Bjerre-Poulsen 2008). As a central plank of conservatives' narrative of the triumph of their ideology in the United States, Bjerre-Poulsen argues that conservatives have been championing the memorialization of Reagan in order to "canonize him as *the* role model for future American presidents" (Bjerre-Poulsen 2008, 209). According to the author, the U.S. conservative campaigns to enshrine Reagan in the national pantheon of public memory have propagated the following claims: 1) Reagan stood on principle and, with decisive and strong leadership, won the Cold War; 2) his "Reagan Revolution" profoundly changed U.S. politics and society for the better; and 3) his personality-driven leadership provided a model for the presidency (Bjerre-Poulsen 2008, 209, 220). Spearheading the memorialization campaign since 1997, Grover Norquist's Ronald Reagan Legacy Project has managed to have a national airport and the capital's largest office building named after the president, as well as to get most state governors issue annual proclamations for Ronald Reagan Day (February 6). Besides the ambitious goals of having a memorial erected in all 50 states and having something named after Reagan in all (>3,000!) U.S. counties, the Legacy Project has also launched or supported initiatives that have been so far unsuccessful in the following: including Reagan in the presidential pantheon of Mount Rushmore; building a memorial to him on the National Mall in Washington, District of Columbia (DC); and putting his face on the U.S. legal tender (Bjerre-Poulsen 2008, 213–214, 217).

Bjerre-Poulsen observed that after making a mark on the nation's public memory with Reagan's 2004 official state funeral, the campaign entered a quieter phase (Bjerre-Poulsen 2008, 220) – he noted the efforts to (after his own publication, successfully) replace another statue in the U.S. Capitol with a figure of Reagan donated by California in 2009 (Architect of the Capitol). In truth, the functions and meanings of Reagan's funeral and the 100th anniversary of his birth were in part dictated by the vagaries of U.S. political history. The nation's goodbye in 2004 to the former president was fortuitous for the Republican Party's reelection campaign of George W. Bush. In turn, the Reagan Centennial of 2011 likely served to hold up a model for Republican political candidates to measure themselves to as leaders, as well as to begin inspiring the Grand Old Party's base and independents in the tradition of the "Reagan Democrats", to prepare to challenge Barack Obama in the presidential contest that was due to take place in the following year.

A largely unexamined dimension of the politics of the memory of Ronald Reagan is the transatlantic realm. In 2011, the Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission conducted a major campaign in Europe, reaching as far as the Caucasus, memorializing the late Cold War U.S. president in a variety of ways. How and what for did this cohort of conservative activists use their version of Ronald Reagan in their transatlantic memory diplomacy? Who were their partners and critics in this endeavor? How did their efforts play out in their host governments and societies? This article aims to answer these questions, primarily focusing on the U.S.-led public memorialization¹ of Reagan in Hungary in 2011. My study is based on interviews with participants, official public reports, media coverage, ceremonial speeches, and analysis of commemorative statuary and memorial environments. This article can serve as an international extension of scholarship on the politics of the memory of Ronald Reagan within the United States, as well as a case study of the use of memory in international relations (Edwards 2015; Langenbacher and Yossi 2010; Keren and Herwig 2009; Kozák et al. 2019).

Like the U.S. State Department's traveling exhibition of photographs of 9/11 before (Kennedy 2003), the Ronald Reagan Centennial celebrations were used to shore up the American alliance in Central and Eastern Europe. Unlike that display, the Centennial was not driven by current U.S. government officials, and it articulated responses to threats beyond terrorism. Ostensibly a year's worth of programming to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Reagan's birth in 2011, the Centennial's message was a transatlantic call for standing firm against not only terrorism but also Russian encroachment on the region. This article argues that because of the status of its drivers and its oblique message, the Reagan Centennial's campaign in Central Europe can be called "shadow" memorial diplomacy, using the former president's memory to articulate and strengthen a model of U.S. leadership and foreign policy parallel to and ready to replace those of the then Obama administration. In this sense, although the Centennial was presented as a unified celebration of selected values and characteristics of leadership by the late Republican president, it actually functioned as a reassertion of conservative U.S. power through memory diplomacy in Central–Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the Caucasus.

1 Instead of attempting to prove or disprove the existence of any discrete and independent "memory", its establishment, generation, or maintenance, I investigate the *uses* of official commemorations to publicly perform the actors' interpretations of the past. These forms of memorialization often work with what (after Jan Assmann 1995) Wulf Kansteiner has called *cultural memory*: "objectified culture - that is, the texts, rites, images, buildings and monuments which are designed to recall fateful events in the history of the collective. As the officially sanctioned heritage of a society, they are intended for the *longue durée*" (Kansteiner 2002, 182). Yet, I emphasize that the values and categories of cultural memory are deployed, challenged, or (re)defined in the performance of commemorations.

As established by Punnett's (1973) study, in British politics, the main opposition party usually tasks its selected members of parliament with holding the cabinet portfolios of those actually in power, calling this group and its members the "shadow" cabinet and "shadow" secretaries, respectively. In such political parlance, "shadow" means not sinister, dark, or shadowy but "shadowing", i.e., observing or studying the person in power, in effect serving as their "understudy" for the next general election. In the most immediate political sense, this serves to remind both the governing party and the public that the opposition has the expertise, the passion, and the readiness to lead the country at least as much as the actual cabinet (Punnett 1973, 71). Since several of the orchestrators of the Reagan Centennial were members of former U.S. Republican administrations, as opposed to the then cabinet of Democrat President Barack Obama, their transatlantic campaign can be called *shadow memorial diplomacy*. As maintaining a shadow cadre of politicians in the largest opposition party serves the purpose of standing by for the eventuality of early elections, it is in the short term that this political tactic can be best interpreted – and I will do the same with Reagan Centennial Year's European events.

While, in public, the Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission was portrayed as a bipartisan entity (The Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission's *Final Report to the United States Congress and the American People* [hereafter, *Final Report*] n.d., 3; Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission Act 2009, 1767–1768), some of its key members and its European celebrations' figurehead, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, had actually served in the Reagan administration. Of the members of the Centennial Commission, Senator James Webb (D-Virginia) had served as a Republican under Reagan as Secretary of the Navy and Assistant Secretary of Defense; Congressman Elton Gallegly (R-California) had known the president and had had a role in locating the Reagan Library & Museum at Simi Valley, the town in which he had served as mayor (Willer-Alfred 2013); Peggy Noonan had been speechwriter and special assistant to President Reagan (Reagan Presidential Library on Youtube.com April 16, August 28, 2009); and Commission Chairman Frederick J. Ryan had been Reagan's Assistant in the White House and his postpresidency chief of staff. Replacing Senator Bob Bennett (R-Utah), Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) had served in the Senate under Reagan. Thus, of the 12 members of the Centennial Commission (*Final Report* n.d., 3–4), five either served in the Reagan administrations or in Congress as Republicans. With former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who had served as special assistant to the director of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Reagan, it was this group of people who formed the U.S. core for the Centennial's memory diplomacy.

Importantly, the Reagan Centennial Commission had on its board a person who had experience in transatlantic memory diplomacy. Peggy Noonan had written President Ronald Reagan's famous speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Allied landing at Normandy in World War II. Delivered at the Pointe du Hoc Memorial in 1984, the address came to be canonized as the "Boys of Pointe du Hoc" speech. Noonan's text became known among veterans and analysts as the speech that rehabilitated the honor of both American war veterans and U.S. military interventions overseas from the depressive memory of the Vietnam War (Edwards 2015; Brinkley 2005; McMahon 2002, 168–169). In this speech, however, Noonan had also written the script for an overture of reconciliation with the Soviet Union.

But we try always to be prepared for peace, prepared to deter aggression, prepared to negotiate the reduction of arms, and yes, prepared to reach out again in the spirit of reconciliation. In truth, there is no reconciliation; we would welcome more than a reconciliation with the Soviet Union, so, together, we can lessen the risks of war, now and forever.

It's fitting to remember here the great losses also suffered by the Russian people during World War II. Twenty million perished, a terrible price that testifies to all the world the necessity of ending war. I tell you from my heart that we in the United States do not want war. We want to wipe from the face of the earth the terrible weapons that man now has in his hands. And I tell you, we are ready to seize that beachhead. We look for some sign from the Soviet Union that they are willing to move forward, that they share our desire and love for peace, and that they will give up the ways of conquest. There must be a changing there that will allow us to turn our hope into action.

We will pray forever that someday that changing will come. (Reagan Presidential Library 2018)

Here, 3 whole years before Reagan's much-vaunted "Tear down this wall" speech in West Berlin, Noonan's words from the lips of this hard-line anticommunist American president reached out to the Soviet leadership in hopes of thawing the recently refrozen Cold War. Noonan's rhetoric proved to be prescient for U.S.–Soviet relations, which – in the second half of the 1980s – moved into intense summitry and the eventual dismantling of the Eastern Bloc. With Noonan on board, the Centennial Commission had a veteran civil servant and an expert in memory diplomacy, who ironically had helped signal Reagan's conciliatory approach to relations with the Soviet Union at a time when he was widely perceived as a hard-liner.

While the Commission's original mission statement is not readily available, its goals and focus can be reconstructed from its establishment and its final

report of activities. The Reagan Centennial Commission was established in 2009 by Public Law 111-25 of the United States Congress to –

- (1) plan, develop, and carry out such activities as the Commission considers fitting and proper to honor Ronald Reagan on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth;
- (2) provide advice and assistance to Federal, State, and local governmental agencies, as well as civic groups to carry out activities to honor Ronald Reagan on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth;
- (3) develop activities that may be carried out by the Federal Government to determine whether the activities are fitting and proper to honor Ronald Reagan on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth [...]. (Ronald Reagan Centennial Commission Act 2009, 1767)

In its final public report of 2011–2012, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation Centennial Celebration was described as aiming to commemorate Reagan “not only by reflecting on his life and his Presidency, but also through exploring the relevance and evidence of his legacy still today[,] and its importance for the next generation” (*Final Report* n.d., 6). Thus, the Foundation boldly and explicitly aimed to apply Reagan’s ideology and approaches to issues during the Cold War for the challenges of the early 21st century and discussions of the future. In this, the Foundation evidenced a major function of commemorative activities – to fight the struggles of the present with the apparatus of public memory. This gave the Commission’s activities a character of overt memory activism.

The Reagan Centennial Commission’s focus and constituencies can be deduced not only from its membership but also from its activities. By Congressional decree, the Commission counted as its members the Secretary of the Interior and the Archivist of the United States (*ex-officio*), but no one from the State Department. From the \$128,000 acquired through its own fundraising and partnership building (they were prohibited from using any federal funds), the Reagan Centennial Commission conducted a number of high-profile events across the United States. Programming at various levels of government included Congressional speeches and resolutions, events held by the Reagan Presidential Foundation, celebrations by the National Archives and Records Administration, as well as ceremonies in the city of Dixon and the states of Illinois and California. The variety of celebrations included events held at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California, and the Reagan Building in Washington, DC; the Reagan Centennial National Coin Toss at sports events across the nation; an educational conference for high school students in Washington; exhibitions and other programming at the National

Archives; and commemorations at Reagan's alma mater, Eureka College in Illinois. The Reagan Centennial Commission primarily catered to U.S. domestic populations, among them, veterans of the military and Cold War government service, conservatives as a political force, as well as the general public.

The Reagan Centennial Commission accomplished some remarkable international programming. According to their public final report, the Commission's members led Congressional delegations in two major campaigns in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe. Between June 27 and July 4, and again between November 20 and 25, 2011, they held celebrations in the United States, London, Prague, Budapest, Krakow, Warsaw, Vilnius, and Tbilisi. Thus, the Commission managed to commemorate Ronald Reagan at the national governmental level in the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia (*Final Report* n.d., 19). Even when factoring in the likely overstatement inherent in the nature of all such reports, the Commission conducted a veritable memory diplomacy blitz across Europe, all the way to the Caucasus.

The international events of the Reagan Centennial Commission were elite affairs that "carved in stone" a transatlantic memory of the president. In Krakow, Poland, a special mass was celebrated by the city's archbishop, also lifelong private secretary to the late Pope John Paul II. The mass was sandwiched between a reception headlined by former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's speechwriter John O'Sullivan, and a dinner for officials at the city hall, where the late pope's biographer George Weigel discussed how the pontiff and Reagan played a role in the defeat of Communism and the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc. In Hungary, the Commission and the Congressional delegation attended a special session of Parliament, followed by a dinner by the Commission's Hungarian counterpart, featuring Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén (KDNP) and former Reagan Attorney General Edwin Meese III. The following day's ceremonies saw Dr. Condoleezza Rice, Semjén, the U.S. ambassador, and the city's mayor unveil a Ronald Reagan statue in Budapest's Liberty Square, across from the U.S. Embassy and the memorial to the city's Russian liberation in World War II (*Final Report* n.d., 20). The celebrations continued in Prague with a conference on Reagan's achievements in foreign policy in the region, with the Czech president, foreign minister, the U.S. ambassador, and Dr. Rice all in attendance. The day was concluded by a dinner featuring the Czech prime minister. Next day, some of the same dignitaries, the mayor of Prague, and Reagan Foundation board member and former California Governor Pete Wilson presided over the

renaming of the street of the U.S. embassy after Ronald Reagan (*Final Report* n.d., 21).

This renaming initiative had been originally proposed by the Czech NGO *Opona*, meaning “curtain”, whose main purpose was to publicize the memory of communist atrocities and to prevent a political comeback of the Communist Party, which in the early 21st century regularly received around 10% of votes in parliamentary elections. Ronald Reagan served as a key figure for *Opona* and their political sympathizers, as his staunch anticommunist stance was perceived as instrumental in ending the totalitarian régime. For the Reagan centennial, *Opona* first suggested renaming the Prague airport after him. This effort ultimately failed, but only because of possible confusion with the Ronald Reagan Airport in Washington, DC. The airport was later officially renamed after Václav Havel, whose figure had also been a symbol of close transatlantic ties and a shared struggle against communism (Anyz 2011).

While the Reagan Centennial projected a consensual view by Czech politicians on the official level, it also generated controversies within Czech society. Reagan’s virulent anticommunism and his aggressive pursuit of neoliberal policies had served as inspiration for right-wing political parties and thinkers, whereas the left was less enthusiastic about Reagan’s glorification, similar to the dynamics of the U.S. domestic debate (Pehe 2011). A major conference related to the Centennial had been organized by the conservative CEVRO Institute, and its main purpose was to lionize and extol Reagan and promote a vision of a future transatlantic partnership based on shared anticommunism, neoliberal policies, and military cooperation aimed primarily at deterring Russia (Sokol 2005).

On their European memory diplomacy tour, the Commission and Congressional delegation celebrated Independence Day with a crowd of 2,000 in London’s Grosvenor Square, unveiling another Reagan statue, predictably in front of the U.S. Embassy. Dignitaries included British Foreign Secretary William Hague, one former and the current U.S. ambassador to the UK, Dr. Rice, Congressman Kevin McCarthy, the Archdeacon of the British Royal Forces, and Reagan Foundation board member Fred Ryan. The following dinner for a small circle of 200 guests also featured former British Secretary of Defense Liam Fox and former Prime Minister John Major (*Final Report* n.d., 21).

The figurative memorialization of Ronald Reagan made the Commission’s European campaign a veritable “statue diplomacy” program. Next, Warsaw saw the unveiling of another statue of the U.S. president, with the U.S. ambassador, former Polish President Lech Walesa, the city’s mayor, and

representatives of the Polish president in attendance. Tbilisi, Georgia, held a similar unveiling ceremony, with President Mikheil Saakashvili speaking. Finally, the memory diplomacy blitz culminated in yet another international conference, this one held in Lithuania's Seimas assembly in Vilnius, with government representatives from Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, and the European Parliament (*Final Report* n.d., 22).

Taken together, the Reagan Foundation and Centennial Commission's international activities planted statues and renamed streets in five countries across Western, Central, and Eastern Europe, as well as the Caucasus. Three of these were close to the U.S. embassies in the host country. This proximity of the symbolic inscription of Reagan's memory in the actual infrastructure of U.S. diplomatic presence indicates an effort to culturally support or influence American foreign policy in the specific country and region. Such memorialization can be interpreted to serve a number of purposes. On one level, it enshrined in bronze and stone the memory of a specific period of transatlantic relations, marked by U.S. President Ronald Reagan's leadership and alliances – the late phase and end of the Cold War. This unique historical era had not been memorialized transatlantically in such a consistent and permanent manner. This period was characterized by the hardening of anticommunism on the U.S. side and their arms buildup – but also by intense summitry, and the eventual thawing of relations and the dismantling of the Eastern Bloc. Hence, the potential guidance that could be derived from Reagan's past for Obama's and Europe's present could be multiple, and even contradictory.

On another level, this memorial diplomacy blitz may have served to symbolically strengthen American presence and convey a sense of alliance in a region that some of the former and current U.S. leadership saw as slipping in its commitment to democracy. For example, the recently elected Hungarian center-right government of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán had embarked on campaigns to solidify its power by rewriting the country's media law in 2010, its constitution in 2011, and would also soon launch a new program of memorialization to enshrine its own interpretation of Hungarian history. More importantly, the Caucasus post-Soviet state of Georgia had fought an actual war against the Russian Federation over its own breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia just 3 years earlier, in the summer of 2008.² The unveiling ceremony of the Reagan statue in the Georgian capital Tbilisi was addressed by the same President Mikheil Saakashvili who in the mid-1990s

² This was arguably a trial/prelude to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the continuing unrest in Eastern Ukraine.

had earned a graduate degree in the United States on the State Department's Edmund S. Muskie Fellowship Program (U.S. Department of State Archive 2002; Powell 2004, 2) and who had led his country in the conflict against the Russian Federation 3 years before. For the Georgians, Reagan's symbolic presence likely served as reassurance of the United States' commitment to the success of their transition to democracy and capitalism, in addition to giving some sense of protection against further moves by Russia. For the Americans, it was likely an issue of prestige as well as diplomacy to stand by their long-time ally.

The Reagan Centennial's European memorialization campaign can also be interpreted in the context of the former versus current United States governments in 2011. If the State Department tends to attract liberal and progressive Americans, and the then Obama administration was the first Democratic cabinet in the 21st century, the conservative and Republican establishment may have had something to prove with their shadow memorial diplomacy. In the first instance, the Reagan and Bush (41st and 43rd) cohorts wanted to memorialize the Republican foreign policy which, for them, had "won" the Cold War. Especially in the light of many ambassadorships being political appointments, the installation of Reagan statues near each U.S. embassy in these European countries may have also served as a permanent (if for security, likely odious) reminder to embassy personnel that American conservatives had not only left their mark on the region and its history, but that they were watching the Democrats' foreign policy and would return to take over – as they since have done with the presidency of Donald Trump (Hirschfeld Davis 2017). Yet, such an interpretation may have also reminded those of the region's national governments who had been turning toward nationalism and/or Russia, that the United States' foreign policy establishment also had a strand of people who were sympathetic to European conservatism (as Reagan was to Thatcher's) but averse to Russian influence.

How did the Reagan Foundation and the Centennial Commission manage to conduct such an impressive campaign of transatlantic memory diplomacy? One can cautiously extrapolate from the Hungarian case. According to Dr. Zoltán Fehér, who during the Reagan Centennial Year worked as a career diplomat for the Hungarian Foreign Ministry, the U.S. coordinators of the Commission's European campaign were Linda Bond and John Heubusch (Fehér 2017). Bond had served on the president-elect's transition team, then on Reagan's reelection campaign, married Senator Christopher "Kit" Bond (R-Missouri) in 2002, and worked as fundraiser for the Reagan Library (Shesgreen 2008; CBS Radio, St. Louis, MO, USA 2016). Heubusch had

had a long career in government, information technology (IT) business, and philanthropy, as well as from having served as congressional staff in the 1980s, as chief of staff and senior adviser to Secretary of Labor Elizabeth Dole from 1989 to 1991, and as executive director of the National Republican Senatorial Committee during the 1995–1996 elections, before becoming executive director of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute (Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute 2018).

Bond and Heubusch facilitated the arrangement of the Centennial Commission's European trips by liaising with the members of the various national commissions, who planned national government participation in each country. In Hungary, this began when the Hungarian Reagan Centennial Commission's Chair, Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén, and its Vice Chair Dr. Marcel Szabó asked Foreign Ministry career diplomat Senior U.S. Desk Officer Zoltán Fehér to be the Commission's secretary. This position entailed the coordination of all the events of the memorial year in Hungary and, through liaising, also harmonizing the various ideas, approaches, and implementation processes by various agencies in and beyond the government, including the Prime Minister's and Deputy Prime Minister's offices, protocol, Foreign Ministry, communications, the Hungarian military, the House of Terror Museum of Communism, the U.S. Embassy, and the Reagan Foundation (Fehér 2017).

The ideas for the Reagan memorial programming in Hungary were “inspired by” the U.S. Reagan Foundation's plans for the Centennial and were hatched in a meeting between Fehér and Szabó in February or March 2011. According to its final public report, “The theme of the Reagan Foundation Centennial Celebration was ‘Ronald Reagan. Inspired freedom. Changed the world.’” (*Final Report* n.d., 6). This slogan and its messages were clearly communicated in the European celebrations (Dési 2011b). According to Fehér, for the Hungarians – as likely for the Americans – the memorialization of Reagan as U.S. president and his work to end communism in their country and region also served to “thereby facilitate U.S.–Hungarian and transatlantic relations” (Fehér 2017).

The celebrations began on June 28, 2011, with a commemorative ceremony in the upper chamber of the Hungarian Parliament. Here, following a video presentation on Reagan's role in bringing freedom to the region, the assembled members were addressed by Deputy Prime Minister Semjén, Congressman and House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-California), Member and Doyen of Parliament János Horváth (Fidesz), Congressman Cliff Stearns (R-Florida), and Reagan Federation Executive Director John Heubusch. The

gala dinner that followed in Parliament's Hunter Hall featured a classical music performance, a keynote by U.S. guest of honor Former Attorney General Edwin Meese, and a toast by Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén. The next day's unveiling ceremony of the Reagan statue in Liberty Square was introduced by Zsolt Semjén, addressed by Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán (Fidesz), and, after an introduction by U.S. Ambassador to Hungary Eleni Tsakopoulos Kounalakis, addressed by former Secretary of State of the United States Dr. Condoleezza Rice (Fehér 2017).

The messages by the Hungarian and American celebrants of the Reagan Centennial interpreted Reagan's person and his work in bold assertions about the past's impact on the present. Jenő Megyesy, Senior Adviser to the Prime Minister, reminded his audience that Reagan was right not to yield to the advisers and the "European politicians" who wanted to dissuade him from giving his famous speech in Berlin (Nyitrai website video April 14, 2011). Speaking at a Reagan memorial conference staged by the KDNP, the Hungarian Reagan Commission, and Péter Pázmány Catholic University, party head Zsolt Semjén emphasized that the topic of the gathering was a historical figure whose work "determines our lives in the here and now". Without Reagan, there would not be a Catholic University in Hungary, there would not be freedom of the press nor a multiparty Parliament. According to Semjén, the end of communism should be attributed to the spiritual role of Pope John Paul II, the political and economic work of Ronald Reagan, and the recognition of the evil of this ideology and the deconstruction of the Eastern Bloc by Mikhail Gorbachev (Nyitrai website video April 14, 2011). Former Foreign Minister Géza Jeszenszky echoed this sentiment in his claim that "President Reagan truly did make history; if he had not said those few sentences and done those deeds, then most likely Communism would have lasted longer than our lifetime, if not forever" (Nyitrai website video April 14, 2011). Director of the House of Terror Museum Dr. Mária Schmidt described Reagan as someone who realized the American Dream, "an ideologue who stood by his principles, and whose genuine convictions helped him vanquish the evil empire of the Soviet Union" (kdnphu website video March 1, 2011; Nyitrai website video April 14, 2011). Congressman McCarthy characterized Reagan as someone who called for the "lighting of the torch of freedom so the rest could see and follow" and further wished that "may this statue symbolize the pledge that we re-burn that light to burn brighter for the rest of the world to see". Echoing some of the tropes of the 50th anniversary of the 1956 Uprising in 2006, Dr. Rice claimed that the Hungarian fighters of 1956 inspired Americans and people around the world never to abandon a freedom struggle. For her, "whenever we stand in this square and look at this statue,

let us pledge that their cause is not hopeless, they are not alone, we will stand with them” (U.S. Embassy Budapest videos July 1, 2011; Dési 2011b; Zord Gábor 2011).

Some speakers of the Hungarian Centennial events were more explicit than others about the lessons and guidance they derived from Reagan for current international relations, politics, and policy. Semjén took from Reagan the message that “some things that are bad cannot be reformed – they must be dismantled”. He also claimed that Reagan’s example showed that one could not compromise about human rights – “you cannot sleep at night thinking we have human rights in this country, while two doors down they are being violated”. When, in Berlin, Reagan called on Gorbachev to “tear down this wall”, he laid down the universality of human rights – including the right to free and fair elections, the freedom to worship, and the freedom of speech. “His commitment to these [principles] means that our governments must be committed to them as well.” Because of his relationship with the Hungarians exiled by communism to the United States, the KDNP launched a fundraising drive for a Reagan statue in Budapest, “which will be for us a guide post about the values derived from universal human rights and liberty, the values of our Christian Democratic politicians, and since the unveiling of the statue will take place on the last day of the Hungarian presidency of the European Union, it will give European cooperation an Atlantic dimension as well” (U.S. Embassy Budapest videos July 1, 2011).

The tearing down of walls was a theme that several Hungarian politicians applied from Reagan in the past to Central Europe in the present. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said that President Reagan “changed the world and created a new world for Central Europe. He tore down the walls which were erected in the path of freedom in the name of distorted and sick ideologies.” Orbán also observed that Reagan’s example should energize Hungarians, and that walls in Hungary today had yet to be dismantled in order to “free ourselves from the brace of our past mistakes and to become a strong, successful country which is proud of itself” (Hungarian Embassy in Washington website June 29, 2011).

It is important to point out that from the available features of the memory of Reagan, the Hungarian leadership latched on to and deployed only a few specific ones. The feature of Reagan’s character that provided guidance for Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén and others was his strength, his steadfastness in the face of pressure, and his unyielding stance on principles and ideology. They did not extol the American president’s pragmatism or his understanding of his negotiating

partners, which may have been just as much a key for the successful resolution of the Cold War as his other qualities. The Hungarian leaders' repeated use of the word "strong" for both Reagan and their country suggests that they selectively used Reagan's memory to derive authority from the past for their own political projects in the present.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the European Reagan Centennial celebrations were officially presented as a bipartisan affair. Semjén asserted that the esteem of Reagan was as much a matter of consensus between Democrats and Republicans in the United States as between Central European political forces (Dési 2011a) – "conservatives, Social Democrats, liberals, and Christian Democrats" (Zord Gábor 2011). The Hungarian Embassy in Washington, DC, explained as follows:

US Ambassador to Hungary Eleni Tsakopoulos-Kounalakis welcomed the former State Secretary [Dr. Condoleezza Rice] who served in the administration of President George W. Bush, as someone who, like President Reagan, had devoted her entire life to the cause of freedom. (Hungarian Embassy in Washington website June 29, 2011; Zord Gábor 2011)

For their own part, the United States Embassy in Hungary presented a seamless and logical explanation for both the celebration of Reagan and the Centennial's role in transatlantic relations. Ambassador Tsakopoulos Kounalakis explained that Reagan was an important figure in U.S. history and said that it was humbling for her to realize how significant he was still being seen by Hungarians for the gaining of liberty for their country (kdnphu video March 1, 2011; Nyitrai website video April 14, 2011). She then finessed the celebrations for her own mission:

I cannot wait for our friends in the United States to see Ronald Reagan on the special [Centennial] stamp in the mail coming from Hungary to the United States. It is very powerful and meaningful – and very much a testament to the strength of our relationship. (Nyitrai website video April 14, 2011)

Besides their professionalism in presenting a coherent line on U.S. foreign policy, the then Obama Administration's diplomatic outpost in Hungary may have been at peace with the Reagan Centennial's shadow memory campaign also because it was scheduled just before current Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to the country to open a new human rights institute named after the late Congressman Tom Lantos. Lantos was a Hungarian Jew who, after being educated in the United States, served as a federal Congressman (D-California) for 27 years before he passed away in 2008. The only survivor of the Holocaust to serve in the U.S. Congress, Lantos, in the early 1980s, established the Congressional Human Rights

Caucus, and for the last year of his life, he also headed the House Committee on International Relations. The ceremonial opening of the Lantos Institute, a think tank for “human and minority rights organisation with a particular focus on Jewish and Roma communities, Hungarian minorities, and other ethnic or national, linguistic and religious minorities” (Tom Lantos Institute 2018) was preceded by a conference on human rights (*Magyar Nemzet* July 9, 2011) and brought the current U.S. secretary of state and other Democrat politicians to Budapest (Körtvélyesi 2011, 1).

Viewed cynically, because of the fact that the Reagan celebrations and the Lantos Institute opening were compressed into one and the same “Transatlantic Week” – June 28–30, 2011 (Inotai 2011) – the Democrats in office and diplomatic service may have felt that the resulting news coverage would either balance out the two ideological sides, or that the Secretary of State’s visit may actually drown out the Reagan Centennial in the transatlantic news cycle. A more idealistic interpretation is that the Hungarian and U.S. politicians’ repeated emphasis on their “shared values” of human rights and the commitment to liberty was a gesture of domestic bipartisanship as much as a way of shoring up transatlantic relations between the two peoples and their governments (Körtvélyesi 2011). Besides being good political communication, this latter view may have been genuine, stemming from their convictions that both Reagan and Lantos were figures who united parties across ideological divides and the Atlantic Ocean. On the part of Democrats, this may have also echoed incumbent President Obama’s early rhetoric of bipartisanship.

For their part, the Hungarian diplomatic corps and government promoted this latter interpretation of the role of the Reagan Centennial in the Transatlantic Week. During the events, a public discussion featured both career diplomat Zoltán Fehér and Chief Adviser to the Foreign Minister Gabriella Kereszty. Here, Fehér pointed out that the visit by high-ranking U.S. diplomats, politicians, and congressional delegations was a sign of their reservoir of good will toward Hungary, and that the various elements of the Transatlantic Week – among them the unveiling of the Reagan statue and the opening of the Lantos Institute – had been designed and prepared for the previous 6 months to interlock and strengthen the whole initiative. Kereszty emphasized that these two elements focused on the theme of liberty – both Reagan and Lantos championed democracy and human rights. With these events, Hungary further demonstrated its commitment to excellent transatlantic, and, within it, bilateral relations. Holding the presidency of the European Union, the country now promoted transatlantic agendas also because this special relationship was based not only on shared interests but mutually cherished values (*Népszava* July 4, 2011).

According to Fehér, Hungarian response to the Reagan Centennial events was overwhelmingly positive, with ample and favorable reporting in the media. On the heels of the Transatlantic Week, his office held an extra publicity event at Budapest's Institute for International Affairs to reinforce their messages about U.S.–Hungarian cooperation. Indeed, there were few dissenting voices in the printed media, and there was no real debate about Reagan's role in the end of the Cold War. An April 2011 letter to the editor in the left-leaning daily *Népszabadság* criticized an earlier article for not discussing Reagan's role in the peaceful transitions from totalitarianism to democracy. According to the author, it was only due to the U.S. president's hard-line position and steadfastness that Gorbachev was forced into major concessions, and that the Hungarian socialist law enforcement did not crush the rallies of the country's underground opposition (Stirling 2011). Only more than a year later did the paper carry an article that can be regarded as a response to this conservative position: in August of 2012, Gábor Miklós took issue with U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romney's calls for his country to stand by its allies, as well as his designation of Russia as the greatest geopolitical threat for the United States. For Miklós the Reagan "cult" was based on too much credit to the president for his hard-line approach, which is believed to have "broken" the Soviet Union in the arms race. Instead, the author claimed that the Eastern Bloc imploded under its own weight, ideological exhaustion, and inability to reinstate Stalinism. Worse – like Reagan – Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán kept repeating such rhetoric until he himself believed it, basking in an image of the strong man who helped rid his country of Soviet troops. For Miklós Romney, Orbán, and their fellow Reagan-worshippers ignored the complexity of reality in the past and the present. Their kind of conservative politics "wave[d] the flag of liberty", while it cut taxes for the rich, raised them for the poor, and engaged in shady dealings in foreign policy (Miklós 2012).

Expert analysis of the Reagan Centennial celebrations in Hungary interpreted the events as mutual messages that U.S.–Hungarian relations needed continued cooperation. According to then Head of the Institute for Foreign Affairs Dr. Tamás Magyarics,³ faced with challenges rooted in other regions –

3 In at least one newspaper article, the Institute was characterized as "the background organ of Hungarian foreign policy". This suggests that, at this point, this think tank tended to study and analyze international relations from a position closer to the new Hungarian government than to its opposition. Yet, the fact that Magyarics had also worked for decades as Associate Professor of American Studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest also positioned him as an objective scholar and analyst. "Az Egyesült Államok nem hanyagolja el Közép-Európát." [The United States Is Not Neglecting Central Europe.] (From MTI Hungarian News Agency Corporation) *Népszava* daily online July 4, 2011. Online. <http://nepszava.hu/cikk/446774-az-egyedul-allamok-nem-hanyagolja-el-kozep-europat> . Accessed March 11, 2018. Tamás Magyarics. Faculty. Department of American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University. Online. <http://das.elte.hu/content/faculty/magyarics/> . Accessed September 18, 2018.

economics in the Far East, terrorism from Central Asia, and the Arab Spring in North Africa – the U.S. government was aiming to shore up its alliances also in Europe. He conceded that Washington’s “resetting” of its relations with Russia in a more pragmatic manner may have riled some Central European sensibilities. He explained that the bipartisanship of the U.S. delegations of the “Transatlantic Week” was based on values shared across the U.S. ideological spectrum: the protection of liberty and human rights; and the fight against dictatorships. He also recalled that, as a candidate, Barack Obama had exposed himself to criticism from his own party when he praised Reagan (Inotai 2011; *Népszava* July 4, 2011) – a clue to the seemingly smooth establishment and programming by the Reagan Centennial Commission.

Magyarics dismissed Budapest’s renaming of the city’s Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) Square just weeks before the Reagan Centennial as an ill-timed measure, a faux pas due to the Hungarians’ lack of understanding of FDR’s home reputation as a Democratic icon (Inotai 2011; *Népszava* July 4, 2011). On June 1, 2011, the Budapest City Assembly had voted to rename one of the capital’s squares from Franklin Roosevelt to István Széchenyi Square. The decision was preceded by some debate. Socialist Party faction leader Csaba Horváth extolled Roosevelt’s legacy and warned that the renaming could have diplomatic implications. Mayor István Tarlós explained that the original initiative came from the president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and had aimed to recognize Széchenyi’s major achievements (including his establishment of the Academy and his advocacy of the building of the Chain Bridge, adjoining the square). To smooth the passage of the resolution, Mayor Tarlós explained that he had communicated with the U.S. ambassador and assured her that the renaming was not trying to tarnish Roosevelt’s legacy, and that another part of the city could yet be named after the president. Mayor of the 5th District of Budapest Antal Rogán suggested that Roosevelt’s name be given to the part of Liberty Square that features the U.S. Embassy (origo.hu website, April 6, 2011). The vote was carried with affirmatives from the governing conservative and Christian Fidesz and KDNP parties, was joined by Jobbik on the right, and the “green” LMP on the left – with the socialists refusing to cast their ballot.

From the perspective of the U.S. domestic politics of memory, this event takes on a more deliberate aspect. Bjerre-Poulsen argued that the greatest rival of the conservative campaigns to memorialize Reagan has been the memory of FDR because of their polar opposite ideas about the role of government in society and economics, as enshrined in U.S. cultural memory. In 2003, U.S. conservatives even attempted to replace the image of FDR with that of Reagan on the 10-

cent coin – without success (Bjerre-Poulsen 2008, 217). Beyond being a logical symbolic gesture in and of itself, the replacement of Roosevelt with a Hungarian patriot and economic reformer may reveal a mutual realignment of conservative memory politics across the Atlantic or could have been a calculated move by Hungarians to do their part in shoring up the conservative alliance in transatlantic relations. As career diplomat Fehér pointed out, for the Hungarian government, it was good form not only to be on good terms with the governing U.S. Democrats but also to cultivate good relations with their Republican opposition (*Népszava* July 4, 2011). This politics also prepared the ground for the U.S. presidential elections, to be held the following year.

If there is any lasting legacy of the 2011 Ronald Reagan Centennial Year in the countries that celebrated it, it must lie in their interpretation of the statues erected and streets named after the man. In the case of Hungary, the readings are conflicting partly because the Reagan statue stands on a square that, already at its unveiling, was becoming a battleground for the politics of memory. Directly accessible from Parliament Square, Budapest's Liberty Square hosts a variety of memorials and current institutions. At the statue's unveiling, the Square had already been home to the building of the Hungarian Television, itself political because of the importance of the state media; the United States Embassy; a memorial to those executed after the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence of 1848; and the statue of U.S. Brigadier Harry Hill Bandholtz, who is said to have prevented Romanian troops from sacking the city's National Museum in 1919. According to Masha Gessen and István Rév, this latter memorial was unveiled in 1936, but was damaged during World War II and spent the Cold War in storage and in the care of the U.S. ambassador, who reinstated it in the year of transition, 1989. Meanwhile, the building of the U.S. Embassy was also made into a repository of memory in another sense: during the crushing of the 1956 uprising against communism, head of the Catholic Church in Hungary Cardinal József Mindszenty found refuge at the embassy, and he subsequently spent 15 years living there before leaving the country in 1971. Especially after 1989, the cardinal was regarded an anticommunist martyr by the Catholic conservative population of Hungary.

At the top center of Liberty Square stands a memorial to the liberation of Budapest from German occupation by the Soviet Red Army in the spring of 1945. Unveiled in the following year, this was a pillar of the official memory régime until the end of the Cold War. As many Hungarians had experienced the original event more as an invasion than a liberation, and because many considered the Soviet military's continued Cold War presence an occupation,

after the transition to democracy in 1989, the memorial became the subject of recurrent debate and a target of vandalism to such an extent that by the early 21st century, it had received a protective fence that – in effect – prevented a closer approach by visitors.

The various stakeholders of the Reagan Centennial events in Budapest were acutely aware of the significance of the positioning of the president's statue on the square. According to Fehér, these leaders all had their ideas of which way the figure should be facing within the designated space in the square's northwest corner. It was up to him to finally seal the deal. Fehér managed to convince those at the senior levels that Reagan should be facing toward the square – and the U.S. Embassy across it – with the Hungarian Parliament forming the backdrop to the figure. He justified this position with the scenery and, retroactively, with the popularity of the Reagan statue, especially with tourists (Fehér 2017).

The statue's positioning occasioned some reflection. Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén observed that Reagan may be now “spiritually communing with” Cardinal Mindszenty. Others noticed that within Reagan's line of sight and imagined walking path is the Soviet liberation memorial (Dési 2011b). Indeed, the president's swinging stride and half-extended hand together suggest a determination to keep walking toward the embassy. Perhaps, the Reagan statue has served to deflect the ire of the Hungarian anti-left forces: those wanting to do harm to the liberation memorial can now identify with Reagan instead, channeling their anticommunism into his symbolic representation, “his” performance of memory. For them, if Reagan ever reaches the Soviet memorial, he will surely knock it over.

A late, but perhaps telling, interpretation of the Reagan Centennial's European campaign came from John Heibusch, Executive Director of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute. In an opinion piece in *Forbes* magazine titled “As Europe Builds Statues To Reagan, Russia Rebuilds Its Empire” on December 15, 2011, Heibusch warned against Russian expansionism under Putin. Returning from the second memory diplomacy blitz in Europe – that of November 20–25, 2011, in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia – Heibusch claimed that these nations memorialized Reagan also because

there is a growing fear in these countries that the current U.S. foreign policy of “leading from behind” will have dangerous consequences for the region, threatening to undo the very victory won by Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and Margaret Thatcher twenty years ago. (Heibusch 2011)

For Heubusch, the memory of Reagan from the vantage point of Eastern Europe amounted to a criticism of the “soft” stance on Russia by the then Obama administration. He continued with a discussion of the suppression of anti-Russian dissent in Belarus, the presence of Russian troops in the separatist parts of Georgia, and threats against the life of its President Saakashvili, as well as lamenting the crackdown on the democratic opposition by pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Citing Russian threats against the U.S.-backed European missile shield, Putin and Medvedev’s attempts to establish a Eurasian Economic Union, and the ongoing crisis of the European Union, Heubusch warned that some countries in the region may feel forgotten by the United States to such an extent that they may seek protection from the Russian bear (Heubusch 2011).

It would be overestimating the importance of Heubusch’s article if one considered it to be a message from the U.S. foreign policy establishment – or even from its “shadow”, conservative-Republican wing. If this had been the case, the Reagan Centennial would have amounted to a game of diplomacy toward Russia and its halo, with incumbent President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and the Democrats playing the “good cop”, and Condoleezza Rice and the Republicans playing the “bad cop”. This was almost certainly not the case. However, due to Heubusch’s role as coordinator of the European celebrations, his approach to the meaning of Reagan’s memorialization for the here and now of transatlantic relations was still important. He may have overgeneralized the view from his vantage point in Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and the Caucasus as the uniform perspective of all Central European countries – it certainly was not true of the Czech Republic or Hungary. Yet, historical hindsight⁴ suggests that the suspicion he voiced may not have been completely unfounded. In 2011, after a summer of commemorating Reagan’s thawing of Cold War Europe, a long winter was beginning.

Conclusion

As an international extension of previous scholarship on the politics of the memory of Ronald Reagan within the United States, as well as a case study of the use of memory in international relations, this article has argued that the Reagan Centennial’s campaign in Central Europe in 2011 was a kind of

⁴ Events since 2011 show dramatic growth in Russian power and ambitions. They include the recurrent crisis and military conflict in eastern Ukraine, the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, Russia’s 2015 entry into the Syrian conflict, revelations of Russian attempts to interfere in the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States, and the Russian Federation’s 2018 attempt to assassinate their former agent in the United Kingdom.

“shadow” memorial diplomacy, which used the former president’s memory to articulate and strengthen a model of U.S. leadership and foreign policy parallel to and ready to replace those of the then Obama administration. Did the cohort of people behind Reagan’s memorialization tone down, retain, or reinvent their potentially anti-Russian message with the election of pro-Russian Donald Trump in 2016? Did Reagan’s transatlantic memorialization influence the populist rhetoric of the region’s national governments? What are the implications of the Reagan Centennial for the commemorations of the 30th anniversary of that auspicious year, 1989, in our respective societies? These are just some of the questions that scholars, analysts, and practitioners may consider as they embark on new projects in the transatlantic politics of memory.

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György Tóth
Shadow memorial diplomacy: Ronald Reagan Centennial

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György Tóth
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