

A faded narrative of democracy: Legacies of 1956, 1989 and 2004 in Hungary

Standard approaches to memory and memorialization in East Central Europe usually reference the so-called post-communist memory complex, a phenomenon structuring mnemonic practices in the region. The term emphasized the frequent resistance in this part of the world to the canonical Western European patterns of remembrance. This European, transnational memory is organized around the memory of the Holocaust as a universal symbol of the potentiality of destruction and as a necessary Other against which a liberal European identity is being constructed.

Post-communist memory, the argument goes, reflects an ontological insecurity, meaning the fears of elements of society of remaining unrepresented or underrepresented, voiceless and with a historical identity plastered over by one size fits all European memory. As a result, memory entrepreneurs – often, but not always professional politicians – have been positioning themselves as representatives of a regional, post-communist memory culture that demands a place under the sun. Hallmarks of these efforts include but are not limited to demonstrating the victimhood suffered by societal majorities – rather than minorities, borrowing from the lexicon of post-colonial theory and instrumentalizing Hannah Arendt's concept of totalitarianism to argue for the validity of representing both World War II and the era of Soviet dominance together. Individual mixes may vary from country to country, but the general tenor of these political languages of memory points into the same direction: anchoring a conception of identity which can demand, from the moral high ground, different forms of compensation not so much from the perpetrators themselves, but rather of the community of the lucky, those Western European societies whose right to represent themselves as victims is often challenged with reference to colonialism, European imperialism or simply not having experienced totalitarian oppression for a sustained period of time.

A second general point I would like to make concerns the legacies of sociocultural cleavages that emerged with the collapse of the liberal hegemony of the 19th century. With the emergence of the New Right – a more radical, anti-parliamentarian variety ranging from neo-Catholic corporatism to militaristic movements calling for dictatorial leadership and a purification of society and of the New Left – arguing for a redistribution of property or at least opportunity in society with or without recourse to violence, a struggle for defining the emergent late modernity for the national societies of Europe unfolded across the continent. France, functioning as the laboratory for Europe, produced Boulangerism and the Action Française on the Right, and various parliamentary and revolutionary socialist parties on the Left. We often forget that even in France, this ideological rift was mended only once the memory of Vichy became stripped of nostalgia and French conservatives embraced the Left as

parties to the same republican consensus that they adopted – a process that lasted from the 1970s into, by some accounts, the mid 1990s.

These ideological struggles tended to be even more divisive and with a special agenda across the crescent of semi-periphery stretching from Portugal via Southern Italy and the Western Balkans, Hungary and Poland all the way to Finland. In these societies, cold and/or hot civil wars came to structure memory to an even greater extent, whether through imposed forgetting as in the case of conservative Finland or due to the emergence of parallel and mutually threatening memory cultures as for instance in Austria. In Hungary, this rift was exacerbated by a special kind of diachronic civil war fought against civilian populations in 1919-1920 by the terror troops of the Hungarian Soviet and the White National Army. Further burdened by the question of responsibility for the loss of Great Hungary, the political culture of Hungary was characterized for the better part of the 20th century by the winners of the last conflict persecuting sociopolitical elements deemed hostile to their rule. Due to the character and perhaps the size of post-Trianon Hungary, these conflicts were always appendages to international processes and shifts in the balance of power – in this sense, it is true that the formal imperial masters of the many nationalities under the crown of Saint Stephen came to experience the impositions of greater imperialist forces.

I argue that these two characteristics of Hungarian history that have a direct bearing on the dynamics of memory and memorialization today largely pre-define the memory struggles and, in some cases, the lack thereof concerning the three dates, 1956, 1989 and 2004. They also help understand why a narrative of European homecoming, the kind of return to Europe that united liberals and conservatives for a brief period of time after 1990 has not become widespread and even functional in the country. Let me briefly characterize each anniversary to make this point in greater detail.

1956, while tragic in its outcome, proved a very fortunate event for Hungarian mnemonic culture – or at least it should have. In 1956, as you will know, disenchanted workers, intellectuals and other city-dwellers inspired by Polish events as well as a faction of reform minded communists pushed events that unfolded parallel to each other towards a popular uprising against Soviet rule and the threat of the return of Stalinism. The uprising spread mainly to cities and towns, but villages also tended to support the revolutionaries at least with food and other necessities. It was more or less a broad event reaching across group boundaries within societies. While, as is well known, the uprising led by a coalition government, was put down by November 4, ongoing guerilla fighting, worker resistance and the subsequent reprisals helped cement its place in the collective memory of Hungarians as an event of exceptional importance.

The problem with 1956 from the perspective of right-wing Hungarian thinking has been mainly the rehabilitation, implicit in its celebration, of leaders and cadres of a totalitarian party. As a result, while always embraced by the right, it was incorporated into the conservative-sovereignist view of history in a highly selective fashion: canonizing almost exclusively the common folk who participated, whether anonymous or high profile such as Péter Mansfeld, the adolescent fighter executed during the wave of punitive trials in the wake of the revolution. The dynamic of memory became reconfigured so as to blot out the reform communists – many of whom continued as dissenters for decades after! – while creating the mythotopos of the *gamin* of Budapest, heavily modelled on the figure of Gavroche and serendipitously free of being tied to either Eastern or Western imperialism.

Without an explicit link to the creation of a new grass roots narrative featuring the *gamin* of Budapest, political actors have also largely adapted to the dualistic character of the anniversary. Since 2006, this has been exacerbated by the inscription, into the memory of the revolution, of the denial that left wing elites may pursue patriotic goals, as well. For those not familiar with recent Hungarian history, that year anti-government mobilization by Fidesz reached its apogee and resulted in the most serious street violence in Hungary since the fall of communism.

This has caused 1956 to become a very overdetermined signifier without a clear message. It references anti-imperialism and sovereignism for the dominant forces on the right, embodied by the figure of the freedom fighter, while it chiefly references the desire for basic rights and liberty, as well as the European self-image of the nation for the majority of those who identify as being on the left. For a large part of society, at the same time, it is merely another symbol of cold civil war. This is an impression that gained considerable reinforcement in 2019, when the statue of Imre Nagy the reform-communist and martyred prime minister of the revolution, previously a Stalinist minister of agriculture personally responsible for the repression especially of Hungarian peasantry, was removed from its place near Parliament building so as to restore an interwar memorial to the victims of the Hungarian Soviet of 1919. In this sense, 1956 has largely lost its self-identity, existing increasingly as an exchangeable receptacle for ideological representations.

1989 – in stark contrast to 1956 – represents the successful transformation of Hungary from a post-totalitarian autocracy into a democratic republic. For an extended period of time, 1989 did function as a fairly uncontroversial reminder of this transition, with the exception of fringe groups that either considered the transformation a defeat of their cause or believed that the real, cleansing revolution had been successfully pre-empted in 1989 by a transfer of power from communists to liberals – importantly both groups being connected by their perceived Jewishness. But these were fringe opinions. For most, two symbolic events – the reburial of Imre

Nagy on June 16 and the proclamation of the republic on October 23, the anniversary of 1956 – represented 1989, a year otherwise very rich in events. But these two seminal moments expressed the desired rupture with the past while also establishing a narrative linkage in a “democratic history” the country between the two revolutionary transformations.

Why was, in the end, 1989 not adopted as a central place of national memory? In part, this occurred because it overlapped, both in terms of personalities and anniversary days, with 1956 which literally blotted it out. This was achieved all the easier because for a considerable part of society, personal memory and experience during and after 1989 could hardly be harmonized with the official discourse of what was being celebrated. As memories of economic hardship of the post-transition recession waned and living standards rose, there was perhaps more room to reconceptualize the democratic transition as a memorable event, but by that time, it seemed there was no sufficiently powerful political-intellectual alliance with a vested interest in canonizing the memory of 1989.

This was largely due, again, to how political competition became inscribed into the memory text of 1989. The continuity theorem about 1989 – meaning the conspiracy theory about the transfer of power – represents one of the clearest instances of the continuing influence of Hungary’s cold civil war memory today. Were 1989 celebrated, this logic runs, the communists and liberals would not only be unmasked, but confirmed as genuine democrats with a claim to a place in national memory. Commemorating it as a noble, but at best half-successful venture due to compromises made with representatives of both old and new foreign – socialist and liberal internationalist – power networks has been more or less the prevailing interpretation except for two deliberately highlighted moments

One has been the opening of the Hungarian Austrian border to German refugees from the East, an accomplishment of the Socialist party then in power that was nevertheless instrumentalized as a lever in the often troubled Hungarian German relationship throughout the past decade. The trope of border opening has also come to incorporate the Pan-European Picnic as a Christian Democratic undertaking, more or less, orchestrated by Otto of Habsburg that highlighted the European party affiliations of the government.

The other, recently more important element removed from the otherwise ambiguous memory text of 1989 has been, of course, the speech made by Viktor Orbán in June 1989 at the reburial of Imre Nagy. Perhaps the single best know speech of 1989 to begin with, and of undoubted influence. the canonization and even cultlike devotion to this speech goes back at least a decade, but has become more and more intensified in an attempt of developing an alternative narrative of 1989. This

narrative, however, is used mainly around the anniversary, and during the rest of the year, references to the botched revolution abound on the right.

This is hardly balanced by any proposition by other political actors or by committed social groups. Fairly undeveloped alternative stories about the return to Europe, of Hungary and the other Eastern Bloc countries, have survived from the 1990s, but these really only command identification from segments of society as a rhetorical instrument deployed against the Eurosceptic turn of the government parties.

2004 represent Hungary's accession to the EU. In interpreting this third symbolic historical moment, in proper historical fashion, we have to move beyond the idea that accession support has been astronomical in Hungary, society is pro-membership, hence the lack of festive commemoration represents a riddle for social scientists – something that was frequently argued in the past years. Support for accession did not remain constant in Hungary. Public opinion shifted in the 1990s from enthusiasm (for a rapid enlargement that would never happen) to neutrality and apathy. A clear pro-accession majority was only restored in 1997, as the public realized that actual negotiations were about to begin and perhaps not independently of the end of post-transition recession. At the same time, the political class and the expert community, as well as the most educated segments of society remained overwhelmingly committed to the project of integration. These elements demonstrated commitment throughout the 1990s, which likely had an important role in keeping the process on track. In the end, the referendum on accession confirmed this commitment, as 84% of the votes were cast in support of joining the European Union. The 45% participation rate was low (compared to parliamentary elections achieving between 60 and 70% turnout in the period), but this figure was at least in part due to the result being considered a foregone conclusion by many voters.

After accession, ambiguities continued due to the coincidence of Hungarian membership and the end of the era of self-sustaining, dynamic reform and a drive for ever more Europe that had characterized the year prior to the EU constitution fiascos, a distinct feeling of having joined a political community at best inefficient at solving problems and at worst at a loss about its own future has left its mark on citizens and politicians alike. Finally, it has to be pointed out that the first years of membership coincided with a long period of political malaise in Hungary which reinforced the effects of the great economic crisis of 2007-2009. This opened up the Hungarian political arena to a wave of radical changes advocated by the incoming conservative-nationalist government and also a gradual reinterpretation of Hungary as a purely "widening" and integration-weary member state, much as the traditional role of Czechia, Sweden, etc.

Accession to the European Union coincided with the gradually emerging new bipolar structure of Hungarian politics. The large Hungarian Socialist Party supported by the

liberals (the Free Democrats) was to spend the next decade engaged in a highly charged struggle for prominence with Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) which had emerged as the dominant centre-right force as a result of its successful period in government between 1998 and 2002. In this struggle, the Hungarian centre-left parties consistently positioned themselves as norm-following and community-minded “good Europeans”, while the Young Democrats were balancing their own European commitments against the political gains of filling the niche of a larger Eurosceptic and nationalist formation.

As new member states tend to have lower awareness of European politics, domestic political discourse tends to be organised more around issues related to family economics and national interest than is the case in the majority of old member states, where macroeconomics command more public interest and thinking in terms of Europe is more embedded into society. This contributed to and amplified the pre-existing unfortunate tendency in public discourse to view EU accession as in fact gaining access to a cash cow rather than entering a complex system of coordinated policy optimisation. As a result, the single most salient issue concerning EU membership remained the question of net transfers.

The only other efficient argument to define the meaning and importance of Hungarian membership prior to 2010 has been the country’s European identity. In the 1990s, in the wake of state socialism, this argument had great clout and expressed an intense feeling on the part of broad social strata. The post-accession years, however, have seen the argument lose much of its significance, with some segments of the population increasingly turning towards the nation-state and others retreating from considering identity questions in the traditional sense. Overall, this turn of events has meant that merely being reminded that Hungary belongs to or has a mission in Europe affects few enthusiasts (largely intellectuals), and broader strata of society either would like to gain a better understanding of policy processes or have altogether given up on investing in forming an opinion about EU politics.

These ambiguities together with the Europessimistic discourse of the Fidesz government in power for over a decade have prevented the canonization of 2004 as the terminus of the series of Hungarian revolutions, from 1848 onwards that sought, in every single case, to restore the country’s sovereignty and promote its accession to some conception of Europe. In 1848, it was a peaceful Europe of republican nation states that we know never materialized. In 1918, a democratic Europe again of nation states united in a security community. In 1945, similar ideas prevailed in the democratic parties while the resemblance of these ideas to 1989 needs no demonstration.

In reality, none of these events has become integrated into a European homecoming story for the simple reason that no such story of greater than occasional appeal has

been constructed. Politician entrepreneurs of memory, occasional or professional alike, tend to reference 2004 in overtly political contexts either claiming that European promises of 2004 have not been honored vis a vis Hungary or accusing the government of betraying the spirit of 2004. In either case, however, the instrumentalization of the event is so clear as to prevent any meaningful institutionalization and dissemination of a positive accession narrative across broader strata of society.

All of the above have meant that a conspicuous lack of a history of Hungarian democracy has characterized national mnemonic practices in the country. What could have functioned as the cornerstones of such a memory narrative, have served as sites of ideational conflict for polarizing political actors and/or remained relegated to secondary or tertiary importance in the construction of memory. While not without parallel in the region, the Hungarian case ranks as one characterized by a form of democratic amnesia. A way out would likely involve a strong civilian-political alliance of conscious norm-entrepreneurs intent on constructing a memory of democratic community, carefully avoiding triggering traumas associated with the long history of the cold civil war in Hungary. In such a memory, these anniversaries would align into a natural pattern, yielding a national story of struggle for liberties. While historians are and will remain aware of the immanently ahistorical (or even anti-historical) character of such narratives, from a normative perspective, the benefits of a hitherto missing “useful past” of Hungarian democracy could hardly be more obvious.