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Politicization of Collective Memory in Orbán’s Hungary: The Case of the Centenary of the Treaty of Trianon

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Abstract

In 2020 Hungary commemorated the centenary of the Treaty of Trianon which sealed the loss of two-thirds of the country’s territory in the aftermath of the World War I. According to the polls, it is seen by a vast majority of Hungarians as the biggest tragedy in the national history. The paper explores the approach of the Viktor Orbán’s government to the memory of Trianon since coming to power in 2010, with a particular focus at the 100th anniversary. It examines how the right-wing government builds its legitimacy and popularity by relying upon popular sense of injustice and victimhood, but also building the narratives of strength and perseverance, while at times not shining away from the irredentist rhetoric, hitherto restricted to the far-right parties and organizations. However, the paper also looks at the constraints that sometimes lead to mitigation the government’s discourses about the past, due to various domestic and foreign policy considerations, as well as influences of a variety of memory entrepreneurs within the ruling camp. It also seeks to position the discourses on Trianon into the wider context of the Orbán’s memory policies and identify their main premises. The paper is based on the fieldwork research conducted in Hungary in 2020, including the observation of the commemorative events and visits to the exhibitions and memorials pertaining to the memory of the treaty of Trianon. Equally important sources employed in the analysis are the major political speeches and declarations, delivered or adopted during the centenary. Therefore, the paper seeks to analyse the collective memory shaped by the current government in its various manifestations. All in all, the paper hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the politicization of memory under the populist rule of Orbán in Hungary, by looking at the ways in which the collective memory of the territorial losses is shaped at the round anniversary of Trianon.

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Introduction

Popularity of the right-wing Fidesz party in Hungary in the 2010s has been one of the most discussed political phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe. In spite of a wide criticism the party attracted both domestically and internationally, Viktor Orbán's party won two-third majority in parliament in three consecutive elections in 2010, 2014 and 2018. Even if the political playing field have been since the first victory distorted by Fidesz through, among others, the sweeping state capture and ever increasing control of the media, the party have retained a genuine popularity among Hungarian voters. The voters' support for Fidesz, and its illiberal turn, has been explained by many factors, including domestic and international, cultural and economic. Various authors pointed out to the paternalist populism (Enyedi, 2016) or ethnopopulism (Vachudova, 2020), to the plebiscitary political leadership (Körösenyi, 2019), to the transformation of the civil society (Greskovits, 2020), to the constraining, but also enabling and legitimizing role of the EU (Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018), and finally to a number of socio-economic factors (Schering, 2020; Scoggins, 2020).

This paper argues that cultural factors, even if not exhaustive to explain it, are essential to understand the political success of the Fidesz party. The focus of this paper is on the memory policies of the Orbán's government with the case of commemorations of the treaty of Trianon. The treaty that confirmed the loss of the two third of Hungary's territory in 1920 is commonly seen as the biggest tragedy in the nation's history. The public approach to it evolved throughout the past centenary: from the irredentism in the interwar period, through tabooisation under communist dictatorship to semi-private commemorations in post-1989 democratic Hungary. Since the 2010 landslide win of Fidesz, interpreted by the party as legitimation for the deep changes in the country including the adoption of a new constitution, the approach to Trianon has also changed. The treaty has got a much more prominent place in the official memory policies and the ruling party tried to tap to the potential of a still strongly persistent social emotions linked to the past. This, however, did not mean that the Orbán government resurrected in its entirety the interwar discourses on Trianon. The post-2010 official discourses were characterized by an eclectic, ambivalent, at times contradictory discourses on Trianon, combining historical grievance with a sense of pride and revisionist allusions with rhetoric of good neighbourly relations.

The paper explores, therefore, the ways how the memory of Trianon were shaped in Orbán's Hungary. It focuses on the centenary of the treaty, as this is the moment of an intensified attention put to the historical event and of the particularly strong engagement of the state institutions in commemorations. As for the structure of the paper, it firstly sketches the theoretical assumptions about the politics of memory, put the Hungarian case in a wider (Central and Eastern) European context and gives an outlook on the empirical material used for the analysis. Secondly, it demonstrates the importance of this topic for Hungarian society through a brief historical survey of the event itself and how memory of it evolved in the past 100 years. Thirdly, it gives a brief account of the approach of the Fidesz party to the treaty. Fourthly, the

paper presents the analysis of the various memory policies of the Orbán government during the Trianon commemorations and identifies the main narratives around it.

Politics of collective memory

It has been well-established in scholarly literature that collective memory is a valuable source for legitimizing the power. Political actors manipulate or instrumentalize the collective representations of the past in order to legitimize their power and attract the voters. This paper focuses on the agency of the state in shaping the discourses about the past, with acknowledging, however, that the political actors are not the only mnemonic actors and they are not completely free in this enterprise (Olick and Levy, 1997). They political actors have to take into account that “each audience cultivates a certain vision of the past that it considers valid” (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014: 9). The politicians – in this case acting as mnemonic actors or entrepreneurs – calibrates their discourses about the past so they are both credible to the public and serve their political interests. It has also been pointed out that the mnemonic actors themselves have their own views on the past and that collective memory both constrains and enable policies (Müller, 2002). Nevertheless, this paper does not look on how the historical developments impact the present, for instance how the outlook of the political elites is shaped or how the societies are prone to accept certain policies or political discourses due to specific experiences in the past. It adopts a moderately instrumentalist approach and focuses on the ways how the political actors make use of the past for their political ends.

In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe the debates about the past could not develop freely under the communist dictatorships and became particularly intense after the democratic transition (Pakier and Wawrzyniak, 2013). The sudden regime change brought the reformulation of collective identities and a change in the ways how power is legitimized. The “new” democracies are therefore particularly exposed to “turbulent mnemonic politics” (Bernhard and Kubik, 2014). The “frozen” perceptions of grievances or injustice resurfaced and have been employed and often bolstered for political aims mainly by the right-wing parties and largely neglected by the left and liberal parties. While Hungary shares a lot of characteristics with other countries of the region, its memory culture has some specific traits. Namely, apart from dealing with the memory of the Holocaust and communism – the defining issues across (Central-Eastern) European countries – Hungary has grappled after 1989 with the memory of losing the vast part of the country’s territory. Moreover, the memory of Trianon sets Hungary apart from most CEE countries – while they celebrated in 2018 the centenary of the independence (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia) or unification (Romania), Hungary was approaching the centenary of what has been often seen as the biggest trauma in the nation’s past.

The paper is based on the analysis of various manifestations of the official memory policies of the Hungarian government. As the prime minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán has a dominating position in the politics of the country, a particular attention is put on his discourses. This include both his speeches on Trianon commemorative events (6 June and 20 August 2020) and his other major appearances in which he referred to the centenary (e.g. first press conference of the year on 9

January 2020 and his yearly “State of the Nation” address on 16 February 2020). Furthermore, the paper looks at the official communication by the government and parliament, including declarations, press releases and announcements by major officials other than the prime minister. Various other undertakings, sponsored or co-sponsored by the government are also taken into account, such as the exhibitions, media campaigns etc. A particular focus is also put at the National Unity Memorial, the monument sponsored by the government and unveiled together by the president, prime minister and the speaker of the parliament during the centenary. The empirical material was collected through the observation of the commemorative events and visits to the commemoration sites and exhibitions, as well as was gathered from online sources, such as official websites and social media profiles. As for the latter, for the whole centenary year the Google Alert service was employed in order to monitor the news about the commemoration (search terms: *trianon békeszerződés, Trianon 100. évfordulója, békediktátum, nemzeti összetartozás*), as well as all major official accounts on social media were followed.

Treaty of Trianon and its afterlife

The treaty signed in Trianon on 4 June 1920 was one in the series of peace treaties concluded by victorious allied countries with the vanquished central powers, including the successor states of the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy. The treaty confirmed the losses of lands incurred by Hungary in the turbulent period after the dissolution of the Habsburg empire, during which the country went through subsequent political upheavals: the republican revolution, the communist revolution and the counterrevolution, resulting in restoration of the monarchy, albeit without the king. The loss of two third of the territory was particularly painful for Hungary, as since 1867 it had a large autonomy within the Habsburg monarchy and went through a fast modernization period. Although much of the lost lands was predominantly inhabited by other nationalities (only 54% of pre-war population declared Hungarian as its first language), about 3 million ethnic Hungarian found themselves outside the state borders (Romsics, 2002). Hungary lost some of the key cultural and industrial centres and was degraded from a status of “co-host” of one of the major European empires to an independent, but small state.

The Hungarian public regarded the treaty therefore as injustice and humiliation (Zeidler, 2007). There was little space for self-reflection, as the pre-war elite, led by the regent Miklós Horthy, was not interested in critically assessing the Hungarian policies of assimilation at the turn of the 19th and 20th century which aggravated the minorities. Instead, the regime pointed out to the culprits in the country (among them particularly the liberal republican and communist politicians) and outside (the great power and international networks of Jewry and Freemasonry). The state and various societies propagated irredentist ideas through monuments, slogans or songs. Driven by the revisionist goals Hungary entered into the alliance with Nazi Germany, which resulted in the temporary recovery of about half of the lost lands. However, after the Second World War the “Trianon borders” were restored and pre-war territorial revisionism discredited. Under communist dictatorship the issue of Trianon has been largely a taboo. It started to change with the liberalization of the regime when Hungarian historiography dealt quite extensively with the

topic (Krizmanics, 2020: 102) and both the liberal and conservative opposition took the issue of the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring states on its agenda.

In the post-1989 Hungarian democracy the state asserted its responsibility for the Hungarian communities abroad and supported their cultural activities, however it strongly rejected any revisionist claims and confirmed the inviolability of borders with the neighbouring countries (Bardi, Fedinec and Szarka, 2011). The official commemorations of Trianon were kept low profile. The issue of Trianon and revisionist postulates became restricted to the far-right parties, in particular the Hungarian Justice and Life Party, and then, to a lesser extent, the Jobbik (Romsics, 2010). The revisionist discourse developed mainly outside the mainstream media, publishing houses or academia. A peculiar historical subculture and a memory industry emerged around Trianon, including non-academic, amateur historical journals, semi-private museums and sites of memory (Gyáni, 2012). In 2000s the memory of Trianon became a part of the wave of a “new nationalism” which manifested itself in such phenomena as the national Rock (*nemzeti rock*) (Feischmidt, 2014).

The memory of Trianon persists strongly until today. In the public debates, the memory of the dissolution of the pre-First World War Hungary is often referred to as a collective trauma or neurosis (Kovács, 2016). According to a poll from February 2020, 83% of Hungarians consider the Treaty of Trianon to have been the greatest tragedy in their country’s history. However, the surveyed are divided in terms of how to approach the issue today: 54% believe that decisions taken in Trianon should never be accepted (against 41% thinking otherwise) and 46% believe that this issue is no longer relevant today (against 51%)¹. In the survey covering the approach of several countries to the lost territories, even if the variations in how the questions were formulated in particular languages might have affected the result, Hungary appeared to be a country with the biggest percentage (63%) of respondents who agreed that “there are parts of the neighbouring countries that really belong to us”². An important factor for the persistence of the memory of the treaty of Trianon is that the consequences of the detachment of the territories are visible until today. Although their numbers decreased throughout the years, in the neighbouring countries still live a sizable ethnic Hungarian population, accounting altogether to about 2,2 million people (Hungary itself has population of 9,9 mln).

Fidesz approach to Trianon

The Fidesz’s approach to Trianon has evolved quite significantly, as the party’s ideological stances as such changed a lot in the past three decades. Being a party of young, forward-looking liberals,

¹ Telephone survey on a representative sample of 1009 respondents. Source: A magyarok viszonyulása a trianoni békeszerződéshez és az ezzel összefüggő kormányzati politikához, 4.03.2020, <https://publicus.hu/blog/a-magyarok-viszonyulasa-a-trianoni-bekeszerzodeshez-es-az-ezzel-osszefuggo-kormanyzati-politikahoz/> (accessed 13.04.2021)

² Europeans divided over whether parts of neighboring countries belong to them, Pew Research, 6.11.2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/09/nato-seen-favorably-across-member-states/pg_2020-02-09_nato_0-18/ (accessed 8.06.2020)

right after the first free election in 1990, its members boycotted the minute of silence during the commemorations of the 70th anniversary of the treaty in parliament. Later, the party underwent a programmatic change with a growingly conservative profile, however on the 80th anniversaries of Trianon in 2000 the first Orbán government decided to put emphasis on celebrations of the millennium of the Hungarian statehood instead of commemorating the treaty. In the 2000s the party again turned into a more nationalist direction and put a bigger emphasis on Trianon and its consequences. This has been partly caused by the 2004 referendum on the introduction of dual citizenship for non-resident ethnic Hungarians in the neighbouring countries (Pogonyi, 2011), as well as the growing competition with the far-right Jobbik.

The transformation of Fidesz’s approach to Trianon has translated into the changes in state policies and official discourse after the take-over of power by the party in 2010. As one of the first decisions after the sweeping election victory, Fidesz made the 4 June (anniversary of signature of the treaty of Trianon) a day of national remembrance. The narratives of grievance and injustice gained prominence in the official narratives. Nevertheless, the irredentist rhetoric was avoided and the government promoted instead the concept of “national unity” of all Hungarians in the country and beyond the borders. This, in turn, had practical consequences in distributing Hungarian citizenship to the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries (about one million new citizens in 2011-2020) and warding them voting rights.

It was, however, not until the centenary of the treaty of Trianon that the Orbán government assigned a major role of the treaty of Trianon in its memory policies. Before, the emphasis was rather on other major events from Hungary’s past. It included mainly the 1848 and 1956 revolutions which are commemorated on national holidays of the 15 March and 23 October respectively, when Orbán regularly holds his major, agenda-setting speeches. Big importance was also assigned to the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust and in this area the government’s policies provoked particularly large controversies. In the years leading to the centenary, however, the treaty of Trianon got bigger prominence in official memory policies: in 2018 the parliament held a special session to commemorate the treaty, while in 2019 Orbán himself hold a speech on this occasion. Although Fidesz voted down two initiatives by Jobbik to call in 2020 a “Trianon year”, it passed through the parliament his own bill that announce for 2020 the “Year of National Unity”³. In the justification it was emphasised that the year will commemorate the centenary of the “Trianon peace dictate”, as the peace treaty is often called in the right-wing narratives. The government also decided to build the first since Second World War official monument to commemorate Trianon in Budapest – a large underground ramp with inscriptions of all the pre-Trianon towns and cities of the Kingdom of Hungary, unveiled in August 2020. Moreover, the government assigned 10 billion forints to various smaller commemorations⁴, which partly has to be postponed or restructured due to the Covid-19

³ 18/2019. (VI. 18.) OGY határozat a 2020. év nemzeti összetartozás évének nyilvánításáról, 18.06.2019, <https://mkogy.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=A19H0018.OGY>

⁴ A Kormány 1064/2020. (II. 28.) Korm. Határozata [in:] Magyar Közlöny 2020. évi 31. Szám, <https://magyarkozlony.hu/dokumentumok/105b39a01845f852aa09c2079ca4869d636c95cd/megtekintes>

sanitary restrictions. Finally, the parliament held an extraordinary session on 4 June with speeches by the president and the speaker of the house on 4 June 2020, while the prime minister delivered two major anniversary speeches on 6 June 2020 in front of a Trianon memorial in Sátoraljaújhely and on 20 August 2020 on Kussuth Square in Budapest.

Trianon centenary: analysis

In the official commemorations of the centenary of the treaty of Trianon the Fidesz government seems to navigate between various expectations, opportunities and constraints. Firstly, as earlier demonstrated the dissolution of pre-IWW Hungary is seen by vast majority of population as one of the most important historical events in the national history. Secondly, for the right-wing and more nationalistically-oriented part of the society the attachment to these issues is particularly high and this is the electorate Fidesz particularly seeks to attract. However, for a large part of the society, the treaty is also a thing of the past and there is no large support for irredentist slogans. Moreover, territorial revisionism is rejected in principle in the post-Second World War order, in particular in the European Union and NATO that Hungary is part of. The neighbouring countries with whom Hungary shares vast economic and political interest, are particularly sensitive to any display of irredentist rhetoric (Sadecki, 2020). Finally, Fidesz has based its political discourses on the idea of defence of a strong and independent country against various threats coming from abroad, and the historical defeat of Trianon and the grief and grievance related to it does not necessarily concur with this narrative.

Therefore, Fidesz discourses on Trianon, in spite of an apparent coherence, have been rather eclectic and heterogeneous. Although the basic idea of the “national unity beyond the borders” became prevalent since 2010, the memory of Trianon has been often reinterpreted in various ways. Moreover, Orbán seems to employ a discursive strategy, described sometimes as “calculated ambivalence” (Wodak and Forchtner, 2014). He often alludes to certain topics which are taboo in the public sphere, in a way that the message can be understandable to his supporters, but more elusive to a wider audience. For instance, in his speeches during the Trianon centenary, he referred to some slogans from interwar irredentist vocabulary or photographs himself with the map of the Greater Hungary in the background, but in the same time officially renounces any revisionist claims and promotes the idea of the cooperation of CEE states. In this way he could satisfy his right-wing electorate, but in the same time avoid both domestic and foreign controversies.

Nevertheless, it would be an overstatement to assume that all the narrative directed at various audiences are pragmatically calculated and part of a bigger strategy. It seems that it is also a result of the varied approaches to Trianon within the ruling elite. This way, for instance, there is a significant difference between the narratives about Trianon propagated by the state-funded Institute of the studies of Hungarianness which does not shy from revisionist ideas, and a network of institutions supervised by Mária Schmidt, a close advisor of the prime minister, which has a more tone down approach to the centenary. This is also true for various media outlets linked to

Fidesz which address various audiences and demands, but are also linked with different circles within the party.

The analysis of the empirical material allowed to distinguish three main narratives on Trianon that coexisted in the official memory policies of the Fidesz government. The following part of the paper examines them in detail and scrutinizes the eclectic character of the message that Orbán's government sent about Trianon on its centenary.

Trianon as victimhood and injustice

The traditional narrative about the treaty of Trianon and loss of the territory is one of victimhood, grievance and injustice. A term often used in the public discourse about Trianon is one of collective or historical trauma, even if, contrary to most other historical events defined as trauma, the treaty did not result in mass violence or loss of human life. The detachment of territories has been seen by some as a defining feature of the Hungarian national identity, captured by a popular slogan: "A Hungarian is someone who grieves Trianon"⁵. However, the treaty of Trianon is sometimes also inscribed into a larger philosophy of Hungarian history. As Egry observes, in the right-wing narrative the catastrophes of Trianon, the Holocaust and the communist rule were presented as the chain of Hungarian victimhood (although the extreme right also counterpose Trianon and Holocaust, as "our" vs. "their" experience). In this way, in Hungary "suffering became the common thread of national history" (Egry, 2020: 128-129).

The memorial unveiled in Budapest for the centenary echoes to a large extent the narrative about a national trauma. Its very form - the underground stone ramp - suggests an analogy with a tomb or a sepulchre. Putting the memorial below the ground level may signify, that we deal with something dead, bygone, below the living. Other elements of the memorial bring even more mortuary symbolic. The tables with names of towns and villages look like commemorative plates of the deceased. The eternal flame placed at the lowest point of the memorial builds into the commemorative message of the memorial. Finally, inside the granite tomb, where the eternal flame is located, the soil from the 64 countries (*vármegye*) of the pre-Trianon Hungary was inserted⁶. This, again, contributes to the analogy with the tomb, with the soil symbolizing the ashes of the „dead body” of the Greater Hungary.

Orbán in his discourses around the centenary alluded to the unprecedented character of catastrophe that Trianon was: "the verdict was obviously a death sentence. History has not

⁵ The quote is often falsely attributed to a Hungarian writer Gyula Illyés (1902-1983), while it was most probably first used around 2000 by a politician turned activist. More: Magyar az, akinek fáj Trianon – hirtelen felindulásból jött, 8.06.2017, <https://24.hu/tudomany/2017/06/08/magyar-az-akinek-faj-trianon-hirtelen-felindulasbol-jott/> (20.04.2021)

⁶ Curiously, the fact about the soil inside the memorial is not indicated anywhere at the memorial, so the visitors are largely unaware of it. The information about it was revealed in an interview with the Speaker of the Parliament László Kövér, who is considered as one of the main inspirers of the memorial. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8VXu22MdyI>

recorded a nation that could survive such a loss of blood.”⁷ However, his speeches more than on trauma and suffering, focused on the sense of injustice and betrayal that is connected to Trianon. On the 99th anniversary of Trianon he pointed to the short-sightedness of the allies: “the victors’ decisions were arrogant and they punished entire nations; and they did not sow the seeds of freedom or peace in Europe, but those of renewed enmity, dictatorships and further wars”⁸. During the centenary he was much more explicit by saying that the allies dictated the border without considering the will of the people and in doing so “the West raped the thousand-year-old borders and history of Central Europe.”⁹

This can be, on the one hand, connected to the long tradition in Hungarian thinking on Trianon, in which the focus is often not so much on the nation-states (or their successors) that benefitted territorially from the treaty, but on the empires (or their successors) that had shaped the post-WWI European order. Alike other countries coping with the defeat, as described by Schivelbusch, the vanquished prefer to focus on the large powerful coalition of states, rather than single belligerent country (Schivelbusch, 2004). On the other hand, though, Orbán’s emphases on the blame of the empires at the Paris peace conference have to do with current politics. In order to counter the criticism coming from other European Union’s countries or the US, the Fidesz government itself embarked upon heavy critique of the West, often by counterposing the national Hungarian interests against the globalized elites, symbolized by “Brussels” (Mos, 2020; Csehi and Zgut, 2021). Therefore, the motif of the betrayal of the West has been in Orbán’s Trianon speeches became employed to make claim in the current narratives of his government.

Trianon as source of strength and perseverance

Nevertheless, the official narratives on Trianon during the centenary did not focus only the traumatic experience and sense of injustice. Surprisingly, perhaps, an emphasis was often put by the Fidesz officials on seeing Trianon and the ensuing period of 100 years as a source of national strength and pride. As Enyedi argues “historical grievances vis-a-vis the West have a long tradition in the political and cultural discourse of Eastern Europe” and they has some objective basis (Enyedi, 2020). However, as he further contains, one of the key innovations of the populist right-wingers in CEE was to complement these narratives with a sense of optimism and to insert “self-confidence into the otherwise gloomy traditional mentality.” (2020: 3)

This was visible already on the first Orbán’s appearance on the Trianon centenary year when he emphasized that one of the key consequences of treaty was that the country became isolated and a century later “the biggest achievement is that we put an end to the 100 years of solitude”

⁷ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s “State of the Nation” address, 16 February 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-4/> (accessed 5.03.2021)

⁸ Speech by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán on the Hungarian Day of National Cohesion, 4 June 2019, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-on-the-hungarian-day-of-national-cohesion/> (accessed 5.03.2021)

⁹ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s commemoration speech, 6 June 2020, <https://miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-commemoration-speech/> (accessed 5.03.2021)

¹⁰. He elaborated that the close cooperation in the Visegrad Group (apart from Hungary including the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia) and some neighbouring countries, such as Croatia and Serbia. Orbán actually caution against focusing too much on past antagonisms: “we should not isolate ourselves, but strive to cooperate and build up the Central Europe. I hope that the commemorations will not set us back, but take us forward on this path, I would like to us everyone to show a smart restrain in this context.”¹¹ He, somewhat in contrast to the traditional right-wing narratives on Trianon, advocated for a more forward-looking approach: “Historical memory and anniversaries are important, the truth has to be told, but it is not enough to build the future on.”¹²

This idea not to submerge oneself into grief have also characterized the less radical circles of Fidesz. In one of the leading publications of this circle, the author advocated that “each representative of the Hungarian national conservative thinking should not only restore Hungarian self-esteem, but also play a initiating role in emancipation of the whole Central Europe”¹³. This does not mean that the official memory policies encourage self-critical reflection about the reasons why Hungary lost the territory or the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire. To the contrary, these critical reflections are suppressed and the historians that examine them often vilified in the pro-government press.

The Budapest memorial, in spite of its grave-like form, can also be seen in a more optimistic, forward-looking light. As the architect in charge of the project explained, “the main idea behind the memorial is not the death of the nation, but its resurrection”¹⁴. It is designed this way that the visitor first descends to the “tomb of historical Hungary”, then circle around in darkness around the granite structure with the eternal flame at its lowest point to finally return upward see the light again and finally emerging contours of the monumental building of the parliament. A somewhat similar reading, with future-oriented overtones, was put forward by the prime minister Viktor Orbán in his speech delivered upon the unveiling of the memorial. He emphasised the uniqueness of Hungarian nation which in spite of such blow as the “Trianon peace diktat”, manage to survive: “there is no other nation of the world that could have endured such a period of one hundred years”¹⁵. He also alluded to the idea that the centenary can be understood as a closure and new beginning, by announcing “the end of the one hundred years of Hungarian

¹⁰ Orbán Viktor tartja az év első kormányinfóját, 9.01.2020, <https://index.hu/belfold/2020/01/09/orban-viktor-sajotajekoztato-karmelita-kolostor-orbaninfo/> (accessed 9.04.2021)

¹¹ Ibidem

¹² Ibidem

¹³ Máthé Áron, Tíz Tézis Trianonról, Kommentár 2/2020, <http://kommentar.info.hu/cikk/2020/2/tiz-tezis-trianonrol>

¹⁴ Nem nemzethalál, hanem feltámadás – Wachsler Tamás az Összetartozás Emlékhelyéről, 10.09.2020, <https://vasarnap.hu/2020/09/10/nem-nemzethalal-feltamadas-wachsler-tamas-az-osszetartozas-emlekhelyerol/> (accessed 8.01.2021)

¹⁵ Address by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the inauguration of the Memorial to National Cohesion, 20 August 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/address-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-inauguration-of-the-memorial-to-national-cohesion/> (12.12.2020)

solitude brought about by Trianon”. Then, he underlined the difference between having hostile neighbourhood in the past and the cooperation of the Central European countries today.

The declaration adopted by the parliament on 4 June 2020 also emphasized the Central European cooperation and focused on Hungarian minority issue and the idea of the unity of the Hungarian nation beyond the border.¹⁶ The “virtual” reintegration of the nation became a leading proof of the vitality of the Hungarian nation and its unique perseverance. As Orbán said multiple times: “only the state has borders, the nation does not”. Thus, it is possible to reintegrate the nation without territorial revision. This narrative became visible in state-sponsored short videos that were launched on television and in online media for the centenary. They put the general idea about the national unity and reunification into the concrete and human dimension, by showing Hungarian families from various towns in the neighbouring countries reuniting with their relatives in Hungary¹⁷.

Trianon as call for revision or reconciliation?

The emphasis on the “survival” of Hungary does not mean that the official narratives on Trianon were free of traditional irredentist slogans and symbols. In fact, during the centenary, the reconciliatory rhetoric and revisionist allusions intertwined. In very speeches of Viktor Orbán the references, although not straightforward, to revisionism were recognizable. Orbán ended his meditations about Trianon in his yearly “state of the nation” speech by saying: “I believe in one homeland”, which is a quote from an interwar irredentist prayer “For the resurrection of Hungary”¹⁸. On many occasions state officials, including Orbán, appeared with the map or contours of the so-called Greater Hungary, a clear reminiscent of the interwar revisionism. For instance, referring to the final history exams in high schools in May 2020, Orbán posted a picture from his cabinet, with a globe on which the Greater Hungary is in a central position¹⁹.

The Trianon memorial in Budapest also has some revisionist elements. Although named as a Memorial of National Unity, along with the official emphasis on the national reintegration, it departs from a human dimension to a more space or geography-oriented one. It brings the memory not of the Hungarians that remained on the detached territories, but of the very concrete places, as it includes 1200 names of cities, towns or localities, currently located both in Hungary and in its neighbouring states. As some even argued, the memorial showed that

¹⁶ A Kormány 1322/2020. (VI. 16.) Korm. Határozata [in:] Magyar Közlöny 2020. évi 143. Szám, <https://magyarkozlony.hu/dokumentumok/b03370b69269d5c572ad3d88e0f786f4fe365d28/megtekintes>

¹⁷ E.g. Trianon 100 - Összetartoz(t)unk, összetartozunk!, 26.05.2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36E1EuYyZJI>

¹⁸ Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s “State of the Nation” address, 16 February 2020, <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-orbans-state-of-the-nation-address-4/> (accessed 6.03.2020)

¹⁹ See: <https://www.facebook.com/orbanviktor/photos/a.10151703698051093/10158178404511093/?type=3&theater>, <https://www.facebook.com/potapiarpad/videos/644629756377274/>

“Orbán’s regime brings its thus-far backhanded flirtation with irredentist fantasies out into the open.” (Berecz, 2021)

On the eve and during the centenary, the irredentist activists came out from the margins of the public discourse, often thanks to the public institutions and pro-government media. The most instructive is the case of Ernő Raffay, a former politician and historian, who is a leading figure calling for revision of the borders and has been also known for the antisemitic pronouncements. Not only he was invited to give interviews to the pro-government media, but also was employed by a state-funded institution and received from the president a state award in 2020²⁰. The media outlets linked to Fidesz, such as the daily Magyar Nemzet also gave space to various conspiracy theories about Trianon, such as the one about the leading role of Freemasonry in the event.

The presence of irredentist rhetoric and symbolic was noticed by the neighbouring countries and generated criticism in Romania in particular, being a country with largest Hungarian minority and deteriorating relations with Budapest in the past years, but also in other countries. Hungary tried to counteract these accusations by emphasizing the interest in Central European cooperation. Just before the centenary Hungary’s minister for foreign affairs met with his counterparts from Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine, that is four countries with largest Hungarian populations. By the by the end of the centenary year he emphasized that “Hungary works on deepening the relations with most of the countries that were formerly hostile, but now are allied”²¹.

Conclusions

As one of the most prominent Hungarian historians and public intellectuals put it, the problem with Trianon for the Hungarian society is the it can “neither accept it, nor not accept it, (...) neither swallow it, nor spit it out”²². A hundred years after the treaty, although most Hungarians see it as historical tragedy, there is no consensus how to approach it today, with attitudes varying from revisionism through accommodation to disinterest. The populist government of Viktor Orbán was the first since the interwar period that put such a big emphasis on the issue. By doing so, he could demonstrate to the public his initiative and decisiveness, and show a clear sense of direction. All the same, his narratives on Trianon reminded more of a patchwork, including some traditional sentiments of victimhood and injustice, revisionist allusions, and a sense of national strength and perseverance. The discourses about the past were calibrated to the visions of the past cultivated among the Hungarians, but also adjusted to the interests of today and its political narratives.

The official policies did not encourage debate, not to mention critical reflection on Trianon. Although many discussions on Trianon took place during the centenary year, they occurred

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²¹ Szijjártó: Magyarország a szövetségi viszony elmélyítésén dolgozik a környező országokkal, 17.12.2021, <http://www.atv.hu/belfold/20201217-szijjarto-magyarorszag-a-szovetsegi-viszony-elmelyitesen-dolgozik-a-kornyezo-orzagokkal> (accessed: 18.12.2020)

²² Ungváry Krisztián Trianonról (Ökopódium 2015.06.04.), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyjMLDUSERk> (accessed 20.04.2021).

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mostly outside the official, Fidesz-controlled realm. Academically, this included for instance the projects conducted by the Trianon100 Research Group at the Hungarian Academy of Science or the research team at the Institute for Political History, both of them exploring new angles in Trianon historiography. A lot of debates were held in variety of independent media outlets or podcasts. However, given the domination of the Fidesz discourse in the public space, these were restricted to only a small part of the Hungarian society.

In the years following the centenary, it will be more visible what are the consequences of the Fidesz eclectic and at times contradictory memory policies around Trianon. On the one hand, the narratives emphasizing the strength and perseverance of Hungarians can somewhat change the gloomy if not depressive idiom of Hungarian identity discourse into a more positive and forward-looking. On the other hand, putting by Fidesz a much bigger emphasis on the memory of Trianon than his predecessors, coupled with allowing more irredentist rhetoric in the public space, might generate unfulfilled expectations in the society, which can, in turn, lead to a further radicalization of Hungarian politics.

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