

# Monumental Politics: the Symbolic Political Discourse in Postcommunist Hungary

Inna Livitz

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*Harvard University  
Cambridge, MA  
www.harvard.edu  
livitz@gmail.com*

*Vas County Archive  
9700 Szombathely  
www.vaml.hu  
Adviser: Dr. György Tilcsik*

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## **Abstract:**

*The problems of transition in postcommunist countries have been extensively studied in the past 17 years from countless perspectives – historical, anthropological, economical, sociological, political, to name just the most prominent fields. My original and ultimate interest within the broader question of transition is in the political function of historical monuments and museums in Hungary, and their presentation to foreign visitors. Thus my approach is necessarily rather broad and integrative, combining evidence and theories from various branches of the social sciences. Although Hungary experienced a calm transition to postcommunism in 1989-1990, the country's political scene has remained very polarized over the past seventeen years. In the following discussion I explore the Hungarian political discourse and the historical references it employs. I argue that the lack of trust in democratic institutions plays necessitates establishing a historical context that legitimizes the government. I then investigate monuments and*

*museums as creators of the discourse of signs in which political statements about history are made. In conclusion, I will take a closer look at the museums and monuments in the context of international tourism. The questions I pose, as well as the proposed conclusions, are open-ended. The research has been meant as an exploratory exercise, paving the way for more specific investigations.*

### **Politics of Hungary since 1989**

While countries in the former Soviet Bloc exhibit many general similarities in the transition from Communism to democracy, each country had its own unique combination of protests, negotiations, executions, and reburials in the late eighties and early nineties. The transition in Hungary (of the other countries, most similar to Poland) was extremely calm, and largely accomplished through the initiative of the opposition elite, rather than through the involvement of the whole population. Dubbed, the “negotiated” revolution, the transition involved the famous round-table negotiations between members of the opposition parties and the Communist Party. The Act of Association of 1988 allowed for the legal formation of political parties, and led to an explosion in the number of political parties in Hungary (Bozóki, 40). Nine of these were represented in the negotiations from March to October 1989 between the opposition and the Communist party. The negotiations did not resolve any major issues, since the Communist Party tried to make changes to the constitution

(which would allow them to have some influence over the transition process), while the opposition tried to prevent any constitutional changes from being made. By September few critical agreements were reached. The main issue that remained unresolved was whether the election of the president would be decided by popular vote or by the new parliament. The negotiations came to a close after the moderate opposition made a pact with the moderate Communists, agreeing on a popular election of the president (which never took place). Within the next several months, at the October Congress, the Communist Party officially changed its name to the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSzP), on October 23 the new Hungarian Republic was proclaimed, and on March 25 of the following year the first democratic elections were held.

Thus in a way it is difficult to pinpoint the official end of the Communist era. What many consider to be the symbolic end of the regime – the one event that is most commonly cited as the signaling that four decades of Communist rule were drawing to a close – was the reburial on June 16, 1989 of Imre Nagy and other executed leaders of the 1956 uprising, who had been kept in obscurity by the government for 30 years. The privately-organized funeral was attended by hundreds of thousands of Hungarians, as well as foreign officials. The funeral was sanctioned by the Communist Party, and indeed there were several party members standing by the catafalque. The fact that the government had agreed to the rehabilitation of the Prime Minister of

the “counter-revolution” signaled the changing times, although it was unclear at the time how radical the changes would be. Many scholars have pointed to the symbolic importance of the reburial of Imre Nagy, as well as symbolic importance of reburials in general. Katherine Verdery proposes that perhaps the event was so symbolic, because each party could bring its own meaning to the reburial, and thus display outward unity, even though the actual event might result in a number of reinterpretations in the future (Verdery, 29-30).

The reburial of Imre Nagy highlights the importance of a symbolically created historical context for political discourse. Although following the reburial the Hungarian Communist Party could stress Imre Nagy’s dedication to the Communist ideals, they could no longer refer to the uprising of 1956 as a counter-revolution. They were forced to admit by condoning the reburial of the executed Prime Minister to having played the part of unjust executioners in the popular uprising, the leaders of which they were forced to honor at the reburial. This was a striking blow to any remnant of Communist Party’s superficial claims to ideological superiority.

The results of the first democratic elections in March of 1990 are not surprising. Over a dozen parties ran in the first round of the election, with some, like the Independent Smallholders Party, having been reorganized after 40 years of inactivity. the Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF) was the well-established moderate opposition, instrumental in the round-table negotiations the previous

summer, thus it’s not surprising that out of the seven parties elected to the National Assembly MDF won over 40% of the vote, while MSzP received only 10% (<http://www2.essex.ac.uk/elect/database/database.asp>). However, despite the natural and progression of Hungary’s transition, the political scene in Hungary has been rather unstable and polarized in the past 16 years.

Just four years later, in 1994, the Socialist Party made a comeback and won the elections with 32% of the vote. In a complete reversal of the results from four years ago, MDF received only 12% of the vote (<http://www2.essex.ac.uk/elect/database/database.asp>.) The economic problems associated with transition to a market economy, such as unemployment and inflation resulted in nostalgia for the “good old times” when prices were kept artificially low and everyone had a job at least on paper (Kitschelt et al, 1999). In order to reach the two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution, MSzP formed a coalition with SzDSz. This shows how much the lines had been blurred between the former Communists and the former radical opposition. However, another four years later, in 1998, the popular vote went to FIDESZ, the Federation of Young Democrats, originally a radical liberal party, turned center-right after doing poorly in the 1994 elections. They received 28% of the popular vote, up from 7% in the previous election. Part of the increase in popularity of FIDESZ came from a dissatisfaction with the stringent economic reforms of 1995. But their victory was short-lived,

and in the 2002 elections, MSzP won the elections in coalition SzDSz (<http://www.valasztas.hu/>). Thus in the span of 12 years, Hungary saw three different governing coalitions, but by the end of each term the public was dissatisfied with the government, and the popular vote swung in the opposite direction<sup>49</sup>. (This pattern was broken in the 2006 elections, when MSzP won a second term, but their success was cut short by the revelation of Ferenc Gyurcsanyi's inflammatory speech in September.)

### *History and Politics*

The reburial of Imre Nagy restored the historical truth about the uprising of 1956, namely that it was not a counter-revolution (more so a dubious claim, since there had been no revolution in the gradual and surreptitious takeover of the National Assembly by the Communist Party following WWII). The Communist party had manipulated the references to history in public discourse in order to justify the government's retaliation. The Communist Party focused on the acts of violence committed by the insurgents, such as the murder of Communist Party members sent out as negotiators on October 30<sup>th</sup>.

After the regime change, the government's manipulation of historical references did not subside, despite the fact that the reburial of Imre Nagy symbolized a re-interpretation of 1956.

Quite the opposite, the first bill passed by the new Parliament named 1956 a war of Independence. This legislation is not surprising, given that the former opposition wanted to make it difficult to reinterpret the uprising another time, regardless of which party comes to power. It was important to have an official statement about the meaning of the uprising, since Nagy's reburial was organized privately rather than by the State.

The debate about which coat of arms would replace the Soviet emblem provides an interesting contrast to the new regime's emphasis on the proper interpretation on 1956. The choice had to be made between adopting the Lajos Kossuth coat of arms, introduced during 1848 and used during the 1956 uprising, or the coat-of-arms with St. Istvan's crown, which refers back to the medieval Hungarian kingdom, but which was also used by the Miklós Horthy's right-wing government that had collaborated with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. MDF and the Smallholder party both supported the use of the coat of arms with St. Istvan's crown (which was finally selected as the coat-of-arms), while the Socialist party supported the use of the crownless Kossuth coat of arms, with the crowned coat of arms prevailing. Interestingly, the Smallholder party (the only historical party represented in the 1990 government), had rallied behind the Kossuth imagery four decades earlier. (Gerő, 58).

This attempt by the former opposition to establish connection between St. Istvan's kingdom and contemporary

Hungary – and thereby also establishing a link with the pro-fascist interwar government – is not an isolated incident. In 1993 several right-wing parties repatriated the body of Miklós Horthy himself, who had died in 1957 in Portugal. Although privately organized, the funeral could be called pseudo-official, since the right-wing Prime Minister József Antall shortly before his death, and in fact the funeral of the prime minister a month later was very similar to that of Admiral Horthy (Verdery, 16).

Why would the new democratic regime choose to associate themselves with the pro-fascist government of Miklós Horthy, rather than symbols associated with the opposition during the Communist regime? The rejection of the Kossuth coat of arms may have been in part motivated by the fact that the Communists regime had tried to incorporate the uprising of 1848 into its official rhetoric (Gerő, 57), and there was a general reluctance on the part of the new government to associate themselves with any symbols of the Communist regime.

It is likewise revealing to examine at the historical references of the Socialist party in Hungary after 1989. In his essay "Imre Nagy, Martyr of the Nation: Contested Memory and Social Cohesion" Karl Benziger describes the conflict over the bill initiated by the Socialist Party once they were in power to make Imre Nagy the Martyred Prime Minister of the Hungarian Nation. The Socialists embraced Imre Nagy as a reform communist, who saw "the third way" between capitalism and communism.

They wanted to associate themselves with his name, establishing a link between a hero of the Hungarian nation and the inheritors of the Communist party. According to Benziger, "By introducing the Imre Nagy memory bill onto the floor of the Parliament, the Socialists were able to incorporate Nagy into their particular construction of history that would at once legitimize the Party and most importantly, disassociate themselves from the less palatable aspects of Communist rule," (178). Moreover, with this bill the Socialist party condemns the execution of Imre Nagy, once again distancing themselves from the Communist government. Ironically, the First Act of Parliament, which stated that the 1956 revolution was a war of independence, also originally named Imre Nagy as the symbolic leader of the revolution and included a list of perpetrators, but all names were removed just before the final vote. This omission now allowed the Socialists to appropriate Nagy, and free themselves of any symbolic blame.

The significance of this bill can be seen in the response of the opposition. Even MSzP's coalition partners, SzDSz opposed the bill. On the one hand there was opposition in general to passing of a bill that memorializes historical figures. On the other hand, the opposition protested the lack of inclusion of other martyrs of the 1956 revolution as well as the perpetrators. Either of the proposed solutions would implicate the Socialist party in the crimes committed by the Kadar regime. Each side wanted to appropriate Imre Nagy, the Socialists as

<sup>49</sup> It is important to note, however, that Hungary has a complex formula for determining the number of seats a party receives in Parliament, thus the results do not always reflect the popular vote.

a symbol of communism with a human face, and the opposition as a symbol of Hungarian independence from the Communist rule. Since the Socialists had a majority in Parliament, however, the bill passed in June 1996, following a rancorous exchange of accusations of collaboration with either fascists or communists (Benziger, 181).

The next center-right governing coalition, led by FIDESZ in 1998-2002, similar to the Horthy government espoused Count Széchenyi as their icon – the conservative 19<sup>th</sup> century proponent of reform who supported the Compromise of 1867 and opposed Kossuth. A film about Széchenyi was sponsored by the government during this period. The government was also extensively involved in planning the celebration of Hungary's Christian millennium in 2001 – 1000 years since St. Istvan brought Christianity to his kingdom, highlighting once again the connections of the new regime to the ancient realm of the Christian king. Another politicized historical reference of the right-wing government was the establishment and grand opening of the House of Terror museum six weeks before the next Parliamentary election. The Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, cut the ribbon in front of tens of thousands of supporters, many of whom had just come from a protest in front of the former Communist Party headquarters (Rév, 299). The museum was funded by tax-payer's money and had a much larger budget than any other museum in Hungary. The purported goal of the controversial museum inside the former Arrow-Cross

Party and ÁVO (Hungarian secret police) headquarters was to commemorate the victims of Fascist and Communist persecution. Critics of the museum have pointed out that it marginalizes the Holocaust, by focusing on the terror of the Communist regime. The staircase leading down to the basement has a wall of victimizers, the perpetrators of the crimes, a mix of Communist officials, ÁVO officers, and Arrow-Cross Party members. The grand opening of the museum right before the election was an attempt to implicate the current Socialist party with the victimizers, who brought four decades of terror to Hungary.

### *Transition and Legitimacy*

The relationship between politics and history is deeper than simply the rehabilitation of the 1956 revolution and its martyrs. These politicized references to history are indicative of larger problem with transition from Communism. In an established democracy (such as the US or UK), winning an election determines the legitimacy of the governing party to be in power (unless there exist suspicions that the elections were rigged or miscounted). Yet even after winning the election in 1994 MSzP saw the need to prove their legitimacy by appealing to the legacy of Imre Nagy. The right-wing parties, however, have established their legitimacy by referencing the legacy of St. Istvan and the divine right to rule associated with his crown.

A problem inherent in the transition from Communism to democracy is the change in the relationship between the

individual and the state, or the political culture. In the terms of Almond and Verba's *Civic Culture* (1963) the difference between the Communist system and a democratic system, is that the former has more of a subject-type political culture, where the individual has a passive role in relation to the State, while a democracy has a participant culture, where individuals have an interactive relationship with the governing institutions.

There is a clear difficulty that emerges in the transition from one of these political cultures to another – how can a new democratic regime instill faith in its institutions and recruit people to participate in the new political culture? While it is theoretically possible that citizens of postcommunist countries are ready for a participatory political system, evidence shows otherwise, however. For example, although voter turnout is very high for parliamentary elections (including the record-high turn out of 70.5% in 2002), local elections bring no more than 50% of the eligible population to the poll booths. There has been very little political initiative, especially on the local level; in the four years 1999-2002 only 56 local referenda were initiated in all of Hungary. Similarly, based on sample data from 2000, there's an average of .16 petitions per year per municipality, and 1 challenge to a decision made by the local legislature. (Soós, 10).

There are also more informal sources of evidence that a participant political culture has not yet evolved in Hungary. In her book *Imagining Postcommunism*, Beverly James mentions the persisting

distrust of official channels among average citizens. The owner of a private museum dedicated to the 1956 uprising describes his reluctance to apply for funding from the government, preferring to go through his unofficial connections (James, 123). The reliance of personal connections is very common phenomenon in postcommunist countries. Transparency International 2004 *Corruption Perceptions Index*, countries former Soviet Bloc countries are ranked well below their Western European in their levels of corruption – citizens in Eastern Europe seem to place little trust in going through official channels.

András Gerő equates faith in the government with a variety of nationalism he calls the nation-religion (Gerő, 1). The nation-religion is why so many postcommunist countries have returned to their traditional roots and resurrected many dormant customs. The funeral of József Antall with the State Folk Ensemble representing various ethnic groups certainly emphasized the cultural roots of the Hungarian nation.

Beverly Crawford and Arend Lijphart suggests, however, that one of the difficulties in the transition from Communism is that the Communist regime had interrupted the process of nation-building that had begun in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The concept of nation in Eastern Europe is based on a legacy of imperialism, where certain groups are not represented and marginalized in the political arena. At first sight this has little to do faith in democratic institutions, but it is a government that is often built

on “historic grudges that can easily be politically charged,” (p. 24).

Appealing to history is a way for a nascent regime to establish its legitimacy in the absence of trust from the population. Katherine Verdery argues that referencing history through events and monuments reconfigures time and space; punctuating time and space in a specific way establishes continuity and discontinuity with certain events and creates a historical context into which the present regime naturally fits (Verdery, 39). Ironically, this method was used extensively by the Communist party throughout its four-decade rule. One of the main foci of Communist historical revisionism was the creation of continuity throughout the entire twentieth century of the struggle of Communism. Thus the Soviet Republic established in Hungary in 1919 was made out to be a direct precursor to the Hungarian People’s Republic, although no such obvious connection existed in reality. The white terror that followed the overthrow of the Soviet Republic in 1919 by Miklós Horthy, was seen as the same “white terror” that was responsible for the deaths of Communists during the 1956 “counter-revolution”. New national holidays were established to highlight this continuity (e.g. March 21, anniversary of the first Soviet Republic; Rév, 156). Moreover, the Monument of the Working-Class Movement at the Kerepesi Cemetery tries very hard to memorialize the continuous struggle of communism and anticommunism, that it is forced to include names of Communists who died in Stalinist purges in the thirties (Rév, 121) . As Istvan

Rev argues in his book, by equating the struggle against Miklos Horthy and the Germans, the Communists in fact equated Communism with antifascism and fascism with anticommunism. The liberation of Budapest by the Soviet troops was liberation from anticommunists, and those who were against the communists, were by association fascists. In this way, the Communist party could symbolically establish its rule, and use this contrived context to make political statements.

In postcommunist times each successive government also appealed to history to establish its power as legitimate within a historical context. Thus it is no surprise that Socialist party would like to see itself as descended from heroic reform-Communists like Imre Nagy. Since many of the heroes of 1956 strongly believed in the ideals of Communism, there is no obligation for MSzP to associate themselves with the perpetrators.

The position of the right-wing governments of FIDESZ, and earlier MDF, is slightly more complicated. They have tried to establish continuity not with the reformers of 1848 and 1956, but with the Hungarian monarchy, which had the divine right to rule Hungary. The Horthy regime made the same historical references, and thus the connections established by the right-wing parties also create continuity with the Horthy regime. The funeral on Antall and the reburial of Horthy, one month apart, highlight this contrived continuity. Istvan Rév demonstrates that establishing continuity with the Horthy regime simply eliminates the Communist period from political

discourse as part of Hungarian history. “The continuity with the nation’s past was broken on March 19, 1944, the day the German occupation began. From then on Hungary was merely the plaything of external forces and not responsible for its history, for that was not really *Hungarian* history.” (p.44)

But in another sense these symbolic references to history subscribes to the two-way distinction created by the Communist Party, namely that the twentieth century was a struggle between the good and the bad, the communists and the anticommunists, except now the good and the evil are reversed. Thus establishing a link with the Horthy regime is also making anticommunist statement, but at the expense of adopting the Communist dichotomy with just two factions.

Symbolic references to 1956, however, remain a very important part of the politics discourse of all Hungarian political parties. For MSzP, that connection establishes them as inheritors of the victims who were devout Communists, and for their opponents it establishes them as the perpetrators and executioners, establishing their own legitimacy by delegitimizing MSzP. An interesting phenomenon could be observed during the protests in Budapest after Ferenc Gyurcsanyi’s inflammatory speech was leaked to the media, and subsequently during the celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1956. The coincidence of Gyurcsanyi’s blunder with the anniversary worked against MSzP, because it allowed protestors to provide historical legitimacy to their protests and place their protests

in historical and political context, relating it to 1956 and 1848. Perhaps the smooth transition is at fault here as well – there was no other precedent in the 16 year-old democratic regime where protests of this scale had taken place. It is particularly interesting that the continuity between 1848 and 1956 was needed to establish the legitimacy of the protest or the illegitimacy of the party in power, since it is very reminiscent of the connections made by the communists to connect 1956 to the white terror in 1919.

All of these symbolic debates over history do not in and of themselves lead to the rule of law and faith in democratic institutions. Instead of uniting the country in principle of a democratic future, they force people to choose sides and believe in individual governments. This is the reason for the highly polarized political scene in Hungary, with the Communist-anti-Communist divide still relevant sixteen years later. Many of those who oppose MSzP offer as one the main criticisms the fact that the Communist Party just changed its name and never officially disbanded. Going back to the beginning of this paper, the smooth transition, without any official end of the previous regime, is perhaps one of the causes for the difficulty in the transition.

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