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Historical Reconciliation: Hungarian Lessons

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Abstract: The article surveys attempts of historical reconciliation between Hungary and its neighbours after 1990. As Hungary's neighbours are also successor states of the Kingdom of Hungary dissolved in 1918, their entangled history, often marred by violence and mutual discrimination was an important and conflictual issue around the change of regime. EU integration efforts led to attempts to implement historical reconciliation following the German model of Vergangenheitsbewältigung and Aufarbeitung and the Franco-German reconciliation. I argue that the result was ambiguous at best. Political tensions abated with all neighbours but without historical reconciliation. One reason for this failure was the division within the historiographic field that made politics easy to instrumentalize or intervene. Tensions receded more because politics started to abandon a historical argumentation in bilateral relations and tha could be a model to follow for states like North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

History is usually a source of fascination and ever more entertainment for individuals and societies. However, anyone watching TV-shows or even TV-channels dedicated to history might find another persistent feature of history stunning: its role in conflicts between nations and states. Since February 2022, a war is raging which was justified by its initiator, Vladimir Putin, with a series of historical arguments and theses about how and why Ukrainians should not have a proper, sovereign statehood.[1] Putin's decision to attack his neighbour – while at a closer look certainly based on more complex considerations than historical narratives – demonstrates too palpably the power of history not only as an argument, but as a way of thinking about the place of people – states, communities, groups – in the world.

[1] Vladimir Putin: On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 (accessed on October 4, 2023.)

While this recent aggression, which is being justified with historical arguments, is extreme in light of Europe's history since 1945, the significance of history for the Russian-Ukrainian war is not peculiar. Conversely, it is indeed just another manifestation of a more general phenomenon of modern history and modern statehood, based on the idea of popular sovereignty and the self-determination of nations. The past was and is often a source of legitimization, acting as a well of claims for these entities used both internally and externally. Conflict is possible especially when readings of a common or overlapping past were and are different. While diplomacy and mediation may hinder a war and establish a *modus vivendi* in these cases, as long as history retains its role as the foundation of the community, it has the potential to become a dangerous tool again.

Based on the experience of the European Union, especially the Franco-German historical reconciliation and the explicit goal of the community to establish a peaceful Europe, many actors of the post-1989 transition did not shy away from addressing history and historical narratives. Especially before the accession of the post-Socialist countries, interventions into historical issues were commonplace and happened broadly. Moreover, elements of the accession criteria, like good neighbourly relations, served as an incentive for Central and Eastern European politicians to seek some form of agreement with their neighbours, including addressing historical issues. Hungary, which raised the issue of Hungarian minorities living in its neighbouring countries—on territories that were detached from Hungary just 80 years before the change of regime—to the level of official politics, was one of the champions of this process.

While it did not happen in a void, rather taking place within the context of bilateral reconciliation projects, especially around Germany, the Hungarian example is still instructive on its own. While it attempted to facilitate a transfer[2] of the Franco-German case, from a bilateral process to a case where problems of historical reconciliation were raised with all of the neighbours except Austria, and two of which (Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia) were to dissolve during the process, leaving Hungary with new "partners" for dealing with historical conflicts. Furthermore, the historical issues at the core of the discussion were different in all three cases (Romania being the third neighbour in 1990). Therefore, in this paper I offer a short overview of the historical reconciliation attempts of Hungary since 1990. I will focus on drawing from the lessons of this experience, one that was neither successful, nor – at least on the societal level – an outright failure. Hungarians and their neighbours do not actively dislike each other today, and there are even signs of sympathy.[3] However, the general growth of sympathy happened while the historical narratives that were supposed to keep them apart did not change much, and conflictual readings of history are still the mainstream. Thus, my question is: how did an unfinished reconciliation reconcile these societies?

History and Politics: historical Reconciliation

To answer the question as to 'why history wars – conflicts between states over the interpretation of history – occur,' we must go back to the question of 'why does history hold such significance for politics, including bi and multilateral relations?' The starting point could be how history is related to the community, especially to the modern nation. The idea of nation has always been situated in time, and intellectuals were eagerly looking for its roots. National languages were traced back in time, looking at topographic names, vocabulary and written texts as part of a more general, but still allegedly national, cultural production. Events from the past were integrated into and narrated through a story that postulated the uninterrupted existence of the nation way back in time. These national histories sought to define the space in which the nation was to find its home, while customs of the ordinary people – subjects of ethnography and *Volkskunde* – get revered as reservoirs of an authentic national character that was – due to the lack of sources – inaccessible for literary history and historiography. Even natural sciences joined the club of national (or better nationalized) sciences when they made an attempt to discover, and insist on, the biological foundations of national and racial difference as the source of cultural diversity.[4]

Within the national sciences, history held a special place for two reasons. First, stories related to the respective pasts of communities are a genre that resonates well with the ways in which humans are socialized through fables, stories, the social imaginary, as well as real lived experiences. Thus, identification with history comes naturally, especially when it is used to highlight values that are supposed to be held in common. Second, history is an important means of claim making, a crucial way of asserting rights for the community. However, this legal use of history is not merely legalistic , although references to old and past laws were favoured tools of argumentation for the legal specialists who contended statehood for their nations.[5] The fact of the past existence of legal foundations and categorizations, in itself, was turned into a tool of claim making in the face of assertions that one or the other nation did not truly exist, or was not mature enough for statehood. Thus, historians eagerly sought traces of past cultures, civilizations and statehood, and political subjectivity to demonstrate that their nation had a right to self-determination.[6]

Not surprisingly, history became one of the tools that effectively fostered identifications with the community and mobilized people into action. The legacy of the past became present, something people felt tangibly—even the material heritage that was supposed to testify to the maturity of the nation became part of the idea of community. The notion of the Hungarian, Romanian or Serbian city or clothing seeped into the present again, providing grounds for the emergence of national styles in applied and fine arts alike.

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[4] Stefan Berger: "Introduction Historical Writing and Civic Engagement: A Symbiotic Relationship," in *The Engaged Historian: Perspectives on the Intersections of Politics, Activism and the Historical Profession* ed. Stefan Berger (Berghahn, 2019), 1–33.

[5] Natasha Wheatly, *The Life and Death of States. Central Europe and the Transfromation of Modern Sovereignty* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

[6] Thomas Maissen, "National History and New Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century Introductory Remarks," in *National History and New Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: A Global Comparison* eds. Niels F. May and Thomas Maissen (Routledge, 2021), 1–22.

Finally, history became a place where one could find clues to decipher national character, a dominant idea of the 19th and 20th centuries.[7] Everything was deemed helpful, regardless of how minute, in drawing such conclusions; from the form of houses to the size of windows and the way in which vineyards were cultivated all offered something about how melancholic, energetic, communitarian or individualist etc., nations and their members were.[8] The alleged persistence of such traits, that were therefore also in the present, was proof that not only history, but the result of historical inquiries that brought to light these characteristics was significant too.

Increasingly after WWII another aspect of historical identification emerged and came to the fore by the end of the 20th century: historical responsibility and historical trauma/victimhood. While collective guilt was legally refuted, the wrongs (and obviously the goods) of the past, together with the sufferings, were somehow made into a common "property" of the community, something that it must face in the present. Be it the Holocaust, colonial rule and violence, as perpetrator or as sufferer, it was treated as a collective psychological issue that must be overcome before a community can face its future.[9] The most import-

ant in this regard was the process of *Vergangenhaitsbewältigung* (coming to terms) and *Aufarbeitung* in Germany. In this long process, historiography first identified racist-colonialist plans of global domination within German policy, thus refuting any claim that Germans had no, or just a shared, responsibility for the two world wars, with the society later going through a process of subsequent revelations about how much even ordinary Germans were involved with Nazism and the Holocaust. It led to a peculiar historical culture that is still the basis of rejecting nationalism as a viable political idea. After 1990, a similar process was envisaged for dealing with the Communist German state.[10]

While the German example is perceived as a specific and unique case, it is still an often-cited model and elements of it are always invoked, especially after political transitions. Very often *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was linked to the Franco-German historical reconciliation process as they overlapped not only chronologically but also in important historical aspects too. As a part of the political process of European integration with the emergence of what is called the Franco-German axis, German-French relations were tense due to the memory of a past filled with conflicts since 1871 or maybe even since Napoleon. Even after WWII it was feared that the rivalry and an accidental war between the two countries could destroy Europe again. In order to avoid it, a process of entangling the two societies in order to find and bolster common ground and understanding started. German and French historians worked together on writing a history of entanglements between

[7] Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of "National Character": A Study in Interwar East European Thought*. (London–New York: Routledge, 2012).

[8] Gyula Szekfű: A magyar bortermelő lelki alkata. Történelmi tanulmány. [The Psychology of the Hungarian Winemaker. A Historical Study] Budapest, 1922.; Károly Kós: Erdély. Történelmi vázlat. [TRansylvania. A Sketch of its History] Kolozsvár, Erdélyi Szépmíves Céh, 1930.

[9] Jan-Werner Müller, "Germany's Two Processes of "Coming to Terms with the Past" —Failures, After All?," in *Remberance, History and Justice: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies* eds. Vladimir Tsmaneanu and Bogdan Iacob (CEU Press, 2015), 213–237; Máté Zombory: "The Anti-Communist Moment: Competitive Victimhood in European Politics," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 51 (2020), 2-3, 21–54.

[10] Jan-Werner Müller, Germany's Two Proocesses

the two countries, instead of the container-like national narratives, history textbooks were revised, content that justified conflict and war was removed, a common one prepared, and regular youth exchanges started leading to increased interactions. Together with the political rapprochement and institutionalized close cooperation, it certainly created an atmosphere in which a war between the two was no longer imaginable .[11] In 1990, it seemed ready to offer as a template for post-Socialist countries on how to overcome their symbolic conflict over their histories.

Hungary and its Neighbours: Entangled Histories of the 20th Century

Hungary had a number of such conflicts around 1990. Although the concrete issues at stake were the situations of Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries, it was entangled with several questions of history. Hungarian minorities emerged after WWI, when about two thirds of the country was annexed to Czechoslovakia, Romania, the South Slav State and Austria. About 30% of the inhabitants of these provinces were Hungarian speakers, according to the 1910 census, and they constituted a sizeable minority in all of these countries, except Austria, making up between 4-8% of the population as a whole and between 20-33% regionally, on the detached territories. In some regions – along the borders and in the so-called Székelyföld, the easternmost part of Transylvania–Hungarian speakers were the majority.

Interwar Hungary wanted territorial revision – the return of most or all of the territories, regardless of ethnic composition – while its neighbours considered minority rights as a breach of their sovereignty and the Hungarian minority as a security threat (still, Czechoslovakia granted relatively broad language and cultural rights, and here, at the local level, Hungarian parties had influence due to the democratic political structure). The result was a long diplomatic struggle around Hungarian minorities, permanent claims of oppression of Hungarians from the Hungarian side and the accusation of irredentist designs (or warmongering) from the other. None of these issues were unfounded, but neither brought about any solution.[12]

A curious part of these rhetorical battles was the use of historical arguments. Hungarians always insisted on two, interlinked specificities of the Hungarian nation: its unique capability of forming and leading a state in the Carpathian Basin. As such, they claimed that none of the other nationalities ever proved capable of doing it, while the 1000 years existence of Hungary demonstrated a Hungarian historical destiny – and their civilizational/cultural superiority, at least vis-á-vis Romanians and Serbians.[13] According to this line of argumentation, the historically revealed incapacity of the other nations was the reason as to why their nation states were so dysfunctional (Romania), threatened with dissolution (Yugoslavia), or simply constituted a colonizing state in its less developed areas (Czechoslovakia) that did not take into account the local specificities the way

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[11] See: *Agonistic Memory and the Legacy of 20th Century Wars in Europe* eds. Stefan Berger and Wulf Kansteiner (Palgrave, 2021), 1-12.

[12] *Hungarian Minorities in the 20th Century* eds. Nándor Bárdi et al. (Boulder Co, 2012).
[13] Gábor Egry, "New Horizons from Prague to Bucharest: Ethnonational Stereotypes and Regionalist Self-Perceptions in Interwar Slovakia and Transylvania," *Historie-Otázky-Problémy* 8, (2016), 47-58.

Hungary allegedly did before 1918. The other side had their own historical arguments too. They invoked the Hungarian oppression of minorities in the 19th century and how they sought to assimilate them. They even used it to justify measures restricting the rights of minorities, stating, for example, that the Romanianization of Hungarian language schools was only the reversal of assimilationist measures, a salvation of threatened Romanians, or, at the very least, they could compare the restrictive measures of these new states favourably with the discriminative acts of dualist Hungary.[14]

Between 1938 and 1941 Hungary re-annexed about one third of the lost territories from all directions, creating a new bone of historical contention. Although verbally well disposed towards its newly enlarged minorities (about a million Romanians, 100, 000 Slovaks, and 200,000 Serbs and Croats), actual policies were again restrictive and discriminative. There was an exodus from both sides of the new borders, migration amounted to hundreds of thousands, which was especially the case for educated non-Hungarians who left the country. Furthermore, Hungarian troops committed mass murders, either during the reoccupation (in 1940 in Transylvania) or afterwards (the infamous mass killings in Novi Sad in 1942), further aggravating the situation. Where the Hungarian governments faced a similarly disposed national government as its counterpart (Jozef Tiso's Slovak Republic and Ion Antonescu's Romania) a mutual propaganda war started highlighting everyday oppressive acts and broader discrimina-

tive measures, fostering and reinforcing irredentism on all sides.[15]

At the end of the war all of the territories were returned to Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, without granting them minority rights or autonomy, while the last phase of the war saw extensive violence from the new states. The least intense of this violence was found in Romania, whereby paramilitaries killed hundreds of Hungarians, but the Soviet army took over administration of the disputed territory for half a year, effectively stalling the evolution of a vicious cycle of atrocities and reprisals. Nevertheless, even with Soviet intervention, thousands of Hungarians were kept in internment camps among appalling conditions in the southern part of Transylvania. In Yugoslavia, Tito's troops killed Germans and Hungarians as an act of retribution; the number of Hungarian victims was around 15, 000. In Czechoslovakia, Hungarians were deprived of their citizenship, their property confiscated, and the state planned their deportation. Tens of thousands were brought to the Czech lands, the bulk were planned to be sent to Hungary. Although unilateral action was blocked by the Allies, a population exchange agreement was signed and about 180, 000 Hungarians were sent to Hungary from where about 70, 000 Slovaks left for Czechoslovakia.

After the Communist takeover, "normalization" of the situation started, although in Czechoslovakia it only meant the restoration of their citizenship, not their property, and they could now organize a Hungarian cultural association. Minority rights mostly comprised language rights, and the sphere of the Hungarian language, especially in the educa-

[14] Miklós Zeidler, "The Leauge of Nations and Hungarian Minority Petitions. In Czech and Hungarian Minority Policy in Central Europe 1918-1938" / Eiler, Ferenc et al, Praha : Masarykův ústav AV ČR 2009, 85-115.

[15] Bárdi-Fedinec-Szarka, *Hungarian Minorities*

tional sector, was gradually shrinking. The violent oppression and discrimination between 1944 and 1948 could not be discussed publicly. In Yugoslavia, Hungarians enjoyed the benefits of multicultural federalism too, but the historical events remained taboo here as well. In Romania, the minority policy took sudden turns. In the first years, Romania generously established a Hungarian language university with education in Hungarian at all levels, and granted broad language rights. In 1952, even an autonomous Hungarian region was established, although it signalled the start of curbing back those rights in other areas. After 1956, fearing Hungarian irredentism that was allegedly manifested in the 1956 Uprising in Budapest, which generated widespread sympathy among Romanians too, Romania reversed course and started to reduce the accessibility of Hungarian language education and the use of Hungarian in public services, although the situation became really dire only around the late 1970s.[16]

Furthermore, Nicolae Ceauşescu set on a radical nationalizing course, together with building a neo-Stalinist power structure, with a part of these measures being ethnic engineering; firstly by bringing Romanians to majority Hungarian cities through rapid industrialization, and later with the plan of so-called systematization. According to the latter, small rural settlements were to be erased and replaced by larger, semi-urban ones, centralizing the population of the previous settlements. While the plan itself was generally devised and applied to all of Romania and not only to its

areas inhabited by ethnic minorities,-Hungarians on both sides of the border saw it as thinly veiled effort to destroy the Hungarian minority (still almost 2 million people) and its cultural heritage; artificially creating majority Romanian localities where all public services were soon Romanianized.[17]

The one significant difference with the interwar period was the absence of rhetorical clashes at the level of Communist national governments. The issue of minorities did not become a major issue in bilateral relations for a very long time. Hungary's government refrained from reproducing interwar irredentism, not least because it also feared the eruption of Hungarian nationalism. It was also often powerless to do so in an international system where the countries Hungary had a dispute with belonged to the same block as Hungary did. Thus, the issue was publicly handled very carefully, although it has seeped back into historiography and public history from the 1970s onwards.[18]
The gradual reappearance of the topic in the public was done from Hungary with the effort to achieve a change of course from Romania – to no avail. The tense bilateral relations have spilled over to historiography since the late 1970s. Romanian politics looked at the production of Hungarian history on Transylvania with suspicion all the

[16] Stefano Bottoni, *Stalin's Legacy in Romania: The Hungarian Autonomous Region, 1952-1960* (Lexington Books, 2018); Csaba Zoltán Novák, Aranykorszak? A Ceauşescu-rendszer magyarságpolitikája: 1965-1974 [Golden Age? Minority Policy towards the Hungarians in the Ceauşescu-era 1964-1975] Csíkszereda, Pro Print 2011.

[17] Csaba Zoltán Novák, Holtvágányon. A Ceauşescu-rendszer magyarságpolitikája 1975-1989. [In a Dead End? Minority Policy towards the Hungarians in the Ceauşescu-era 1975-1989] Pro Print, Csíkszereda 2015.
[18] György Földes, Magyarország, Románia és a nemzeti kérdés (1956–1989). [Hungary, Romania and the National Question (1956-1989)]. Budapest, Napvilág 2008.; Réka Krizmanics, "Trianon in Popular History in Late-Socialist and Post-Transition Hungary: A Case Study," *East European Politics and Societies* 36:3 (2022), 1036-1060. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325421989411; Réka Krizmanics, "Addressing the Trianon Peace Treaty in Late Socialist Hungary: Societal Interest and Available Narratives," *Hungarian Historical Review* 9:1 (2020), 101–123.

time, and, since the end of the 1970s, they interpreted the Hungarian narrative as the denial of Romanian rights over the territory. When the Hungarian Academy of Sciences announced the preparation of a History of Transylvania, Romania immediately perceived it as a dangerous act. After the publication of the three-volume work, the Romanian government started an international campaign leading to a veritable 'history war' in which the Hungarian Academy was accused of irredentism and the deliberate falsification of history.[19] It was, however, the last act of the drama. Systematization was never realized, leaving Hungarian inhabited territories intact when Ceausescu fell in December 1989 as the last Communist ruler in Europe. But the baggage of history remained.

Hungary and its Neighbours: Overcoming History?

Although the level of tensions eased with the simultaneous change of regime and democratization, the basic perceptions about the potential conflict between Hungary and its neighbours remained for a long time after 1990. The asynchrony between the democratization process and Euro-Atlantic integration perspectives of Hungary on the one side, and Slovakia and Romania on the other, greatly fuelled fears that Hungary would use its advantageous position after accession—the theoretical possibility of blocking Slovakia and Romania from membership – to revive irredentism. This, not least, because Hungarian foreign policy was now vocal about minority rights and set as its goal the creation of an international framework that could, in an ideal case for them, lead to territorial or cultural autonomy.[20] Thus, bilateral and international negotiations dragged on in this regard, leading to several bilateral and international agreements that defined a set of individual minority rights that fell short of national autonomy as the minimum standard for Europe. As only the bare minimum of these agreements were often implemented, Hungary continuously claimed that Hungarian minorities were exposed to assimilation and discrimination.[21]

One of the factors facilitating a form of rapprochement was EU integration. This was because resolution of bilateral conflicts before accession – not to import them within the EU – was an explicit condition. Furthermore, an informal part of the package of conditions was a kind of European politics of memory. From the side of the EU, the focus was on the Holocaust, a sore point in the history for Central and Eastern Europe as collaborators with the Nazi regime, a not so insignificant phenomenon which was hardly talked about earlier. Moreover, in Romania anti-Communism brought about attempts of rehabilitating the radical-rightist ethnocratic Antonescu regime which had its own share in killing Jews in Transnistria. The changing politics of memory on the Holocaust was, however, less a bilateral matter than an EU led transnational effort,

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[19] Martin Mevius, Defending, "'Historical and Political Interest': Romanian-Hungarian Political Dipsutes and the *History of* Transylvania," in *Hungary and Romania Beyond National Narratives Comparisons and Entanglements* eds Anders Bloqmvist et al. (Peter Lang, 2013), 569–606.

[20] Balázs Vizi, "Does European Integration Support the Minority Quest for Autonomy?: Minority Claims for Self-Government and Devolution Processes in Europe, in *Autonomies in Europe: Solutions and Challenges* eds. Zoltán Kántor, Eszter Kovács (L'Harmattan-NPKI, Budapest). For cultural autonomy see: *Non-Territorial Autonomy: An Introduction* (Palgrave and Macmillan, 2023).

[21] Elisabeth Sándor-Szalay, "International Law in the Service of Minority Protection— Hard Law, Soft Law, and a Little Practice," in, *International Law From a Central European Perspective: Legal Studies on Central Europe* (Miskolc, Budapest: Central European Academic Publishing, 2022), 157-179.

bringing about the transfer of EU practices: establishing museums of the Holocaust and Jewry, memorial days and – if necessary – reports of special commissions on the Holocaust. These reports uniformly established the role and responsibility for the Holocaust of the respective national administrations and condemned the antisemitism of those societies.[22]

The flipside of this *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* process was a more local initiative, dealing with the memory of Communism. The post-1989 regimes positioned themselves against the Communist dictatorships and their security states (excessive in all cases but with very different visibilities) but it was harder to establish responsibility for so-called Communist crimes than for the Holocaust.[23] Communism was easier to shed as alien, and imposed on the region from the outside, because Communist parties – unlike antisemitic ones – were minuscule in the region before 1939, except in Czechoslovakia. However, due to the violent ethnic policies that were implemented immediately post-WWII, and which were condoned by Communists and non-Communists alike, and the later restrictive ones, facing Communism in Slovakia, Serbia or Romania meant taking stock of its minority policies as well.[24]

The thorniest, and partly still unresolved of these issues was the Czechoslovak case. The so-called Beneš decrees – the legal basis of expropriation in 1945 – were still in force, and while an otherwise fairly generous process of property restitution was started, it excluded minorities from its beneficiaries. Fear from Germans and Hungarians of property reclamation was strong enough to hinder meaningful concrete action, despite the symbolic condemnation of the decrees and tangible efforts of Czech-German historical reconciliation. In the Slovak-Hungarian case, such systematic efforts at a broader social scale were absent. The fate of Hungarians immediately after WWII is hardly a popular topic of Slovak historiography, although recently there has been some interest in it.[25]

In Romania the situation was similar in the sense that anti-Hungarian measures were exempted from the condemnation of Communism. It took more than a decade and explicit pressure from the EU to set up a presidential commission under the aegis of President Traian Basescu to study the crimes of communism. A separate section of it was dedicated to minority policies, among them of the Hungarians.[26] In this sense, at least symbolic compensation was provided, although the focus of the Romanian historiography is not one of these issues, and very often the history of Communism in Romania is a story of national victimhood. Beyond the issues of Communism, the Romanian state made some symbolic gestures regarding

[22] Timothy Snyder: "European Mass Killing and European Commemoration," in *Remberance, History and Justice: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies* eds. Vladimir Tismaneanu, Bogdan Iacob (CEU Press, 2015), 23 – 43.; Pakier, Małgorzata, and Bo Stråth, "Introduction: A European Memory?," in *A European Memory: Contested Histories and Politics of Remembrance* eds. Małgorzata Pakier and Bo Stråth (Berghahn Books, 2010), 1–20. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qd3kh.6.
[23] James Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
[24] Lavinia Stan, "Transitional justice in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Research Handbook on Transitional Justice: Research Handbooks in International Law Series* (2017) 508-530; *Post-Communist Transitional Justice: Lessons from Twenty-Five Years of Experience* eds, Lavinia Stan and Nadja Nedelsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

doi:10.1017/CBO9781107588516
[25] Csongor István Nagy, "Questions of Integrity: The Commission's "Founding Values" Policy and Ethnic Minorities," *VerfBlog*, (2021/12/06). https://verfassungsblog.de/questions-of-integrity/, DOI: 10.17176/20211207-022334-0 .
[26] See the thematic issue: A kommunizmus romániai öröksége. Heritage of Communism Magyar Kisebbség 13, 2008/1-2.

Hungarian historical memory. Most importantly, it accepted that Hungarians could celebrate their national day, March 15th in public spaces, and it even became customary that the president send a greeting on that day. While it is seemingly just a small gesture, March 15th is a controversial issue, because Hungarians commemorate the unification of Transylvania with Hungary that day, knowing that the subsequent civil war between Romanians and Hungarians claimed tens of thousands of civilian victims too.

As regards to more salient historiographic issues, the model of Franco-German reconciliation was floated several times for both the Slovak-Hungarian and the Romanian-Hungarian relations. Interestingly, different elements of it were taken for the Slovak and the Romanian relations. For the latter, the institution of common government sessions was adopted,[27] while the idea of common textbooks remained only a desire. Hungarian and Romanian historians operated with a mixed historical commission (inherited from the Socialist era) but it rarely tackles sensitive issues, like March 15th, whose assessment in Romanian historiography has barely changed. While cooperation between Hungarian and Romanian historians is not infrequent, not least because the Romanian higher education system trains Hungarian minority historians, it is rarely elevated to the higher levels of the academic hierarchies. Quite to the contrary, an episode around the hundred year anniversary of the Trianon peace treaty showed how deeply seated the fears of the use of history for irredentist aims was.

The Hungarian centenary was preceded by the Romanian, the commemoration of the unification of Transylvania with Romania in 1918. Around this date, the Romanian Academy published some texts that tried to clarify the Romanian interpretation of the end of WWI, while accepting that this day can't be a day of celebration for Hungarians, it was silent about the nationalist aspects of interwar Romania. Around the same time, the Hungarian Academy of Sciences provided a research grant in a competitive selection process for a new research group that was to work on the history of the end of WWI, called Trianon100.[28] In 2017, however, the president of the Romanian Academy of Sciences, Ion Aurel Pop, attacked this research group, accusing it of being a governmental organization with the aim of falsifying history.[29] While the scandal died down in a few months, it was still proof of how sensitive historical issues could be for historians who – like the president of the Romanian Academy of Sciences – are adherents of the classic nationalist historical canon.

The Slovak-Hungarian reconciliation ran a different course that lead to the same place: nowhere. In this case, political gestures, like common government sessions, were absent, but the mixed historical commision agreed on the plan of a common textbook.[30] It was corroborated by politicians in 2007. Its structure was carefully planned, all chapters

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27 Közös magyar-román kormányülés [Hungarian-Romanian common government session] https://24.hu/belfold/2005/10/19/kozos_magyar_roman_kormanyules/ (accessed October 4, 2023.)

28 www.trianon100.hu
29 Trianon 100: visszautasítja a Romániában megjelent vádakat az MTA Lendület-kutatócsoportjának vezetője. [Trianon100: the leader of the reserach project refutes the allegations] https://mta.hu/mta_hirei/trianon-100-visszautasitja-a-romaniaban-megjelent-vadakat-az-mta-lendulet-kutatocsoportjanak-vezetoje-107661 (accessed October 4, 2023.)
30 Jakab György. A közös történelem széthordása. [Taking away the common history piecemeal] Történelemtanítás 2013/1. https://www.folyoirat.tortenelemtanitas.hu/2013/04/jakab-gyorgy-a-kozos-tortenelem-szethordasa-04-01-09/ (accessed October 4, 2023.)

were co-authored by one Slovak and one Hungarian historian who ought to have published a text they could both agree upon. In case of irreconcilable differences, both texts were to be published parallelly. Initially, publication was planned for 2010, but work slowed down after Fidesz came to government again in 2010. After several postponements, the government finally requested a review from a historian close to Fidesz, László Tőkéczky, who was anything but a specialist of Slovak history.[31] Nevertheless, Tökéczky derided the manuscript and attacked it in a nationalist manner, using typical nationalist tropes. Most importantly, he denied that a common textbook must cover the whole span of history. Instead, he argued, in line with Hungarian nationalist perceptions, that Slovaks did not have a history until the dissolution of Hungary. Even though experts from the mixed-commission tried to fight back, Tőkéczky's opinion had a decisive weight with the government and the plan was postponed *sine die*.

So far this is the last organized and politically officialized effort of historical reconciliation between Slovakia and Hungary, and Slovakia and Romania. Curiously, the nationalist Orbán government found one partner with whom it was possible to realize something that is usually part of historical reconciliation efforts elsewhere, namely mutual recognition of past crimes against the other nationality. The similarly autocratic Serbia of then-prime minister Aleksandar Vučić was a partner in an effort to recover the number and names of the victims of the massacres at the end of the WWII and to erect a monument to the victims. It was an effort of a mixed commission, based on the study of hitherto inaccessible files and documents and crowned by an event where the Hungarian and Serbian presidents, János Áder and Tomislav Nikolic apologized for the crimes committed and commemorated the victims.[32]

Historical Reconciliation: Politics of History without Politics?

While it is also true for the Hungarian-Serbian case that the broader historiography, not least because the topic of Serbians in Hungary and Hungarians in Serbia is not among the most popular ones, is not really changing with gestures like the joint commemoration of victims, these gestures signal the abating of tensions that were still important in the early 2000s. Social attitudes are more relaxed today, sometimes even positive, despite the absence of major historiographic revisions on either side. The history people learn about from textbooks, or from public history, has not changed much and Hungarians and their neighbors are most often portrayed as being on opposite sides of history. Thus, it is probably not premature to conclude that history seems to be losing its power.

One reason is the fact that history is not among the primary discursive means of politicians today. A new generation, socialized during the post-1989 period, talks a very different language, uses less or at least less concrete historical references. History in rhetoric is rather general and justifications of political claims are rarely based on historical arguments in the context of EU politics. The most likely exception is when a country objects to a policy of the

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[31] Szarka, László, A közös történelem nehéz öröksége. [The Heavy Burden of Common History] REGIO 22, 2014 (1). 156-192

[32] A szerb-magyar megbékélés napja a vajdasági Csúrogon. [The day of Serb-Hungarian reconciliation in Csúrog in Voivodina] https://ujszo.com/kulfold/a-szerb-magyar-megbekeles-napja-a-vajdasagi-csurogon (accessed on October 4, 2023.)

Community and uses its alleged historical traditions (or so-called constitutional identity) to make its case. History is not – at least for the present – a means of mobilization within countries, and it is only rarely used to raise passions against an external enemy. Moreover, the Orbán-government intended and still hopes to build a Central European alliance of support for its own politics and, out of this pragmatic reason, it is not prioritizing 'history wars' with neighbors.

Furthermore, the practical aspects of EU integration have had its positive effects too. More interactions, less inter-ethnic tensions within, and the experience of general out-migration to the West all could have contributed to the relaxation of social level relations between Hungarians and their neighbours without revising historical narratives. In a sense, the "Hungarian question" lost its salience in these countries, or was replaced by a "question of Europe," a new vision of the EU as a besieged continent defending its historically developed traditions.

But how much is this a ray of light for North Macedonia? The history of reconciliation efforts since 1990 rather shows that while history might have lost most of its power on the people, politicians are sometimes the exception, and it is enough to reignite 'history wars,' even if societal relations are changing. Historical reconciliation is very hard if historians do not make concerted efforts, and without the support and pressure from the political sphere, the internal divisions of the profession could lead to failure. While the Hungarian-Slovak reconciliation was "ambushed" by politicians against the will of the historians involved – but with help from a historian – the Hungarian–Romanian led

nowhere – despite the palpable disinterest of politicians to interfere with it. Historians, however, have very weak or no influence on this decision, either individually and/or collectively. Thus, if we want historical reconciliation, the process should rather be to find ahistorical argumentative strategies for politicians in conflict and leave historians to reconcile with history and each other.